



Speech by

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Hansard 18 April 2002

RESIDENTIAL SERVICES [ACCREDITATION] BILL

Ms PHILLIPS (Thuringowa—ALP) (6.55 p.m.): I rise to applaud the minister on the introduction of the Residential Services (Accreditation) Bill 2002. Its purpose is to establish a regulatory framework to mandate the standards and conditions under which residents of the residential services live. I have had extensive personal and professional experience of the sometimes appalling conditions under which many of these places of accommodation—usually boarding houses—operate. Even the public or common areas are sometimes dirty and in need of repairs and maintenance. I have experienced flea-infested stairways, filthy bathrooms, and where there is carpet, it is threadbare and whatever has stained it over the years has left odious smells and dirty stains, and it sticks to your shoes as you walk through.

The bill aims to protect the health, safety and basic freedoms of residents, to encourage service providers to continually improve the way they conduct residential services and to support fair trading in the residential services industry. This industry is one of the few within the broader residential rental market that has been without consumer protection until the introduction of this legislation.

The residents of many of these places experience poor conditions, with little or no protection of their rights, and are open to exploitation, neglect and abuse. These people are often some of the most vulnerable in our community, with limited incomes, and they experience a range of other disadvantages such as intellectual and/or psychiatric disability, drug and alcohol problems, brain injury, problems associated with ageing, social and economic disadvantage and social isolation. Many have been victims of our progressive social policies that decided that large institutions were not appropriate places in which to incarcerate people for all of their lives. Unfortunately, many of those who have been freed to live a 'normal' life in the community are not able to adjust, to care for themselves, and they gravitate to the only accommodation that is available to them on their low income, or maybe it is the only place that will tolerate their sometimes unpredictable and antisocial behaviour.

Others have never lived in institutions. Some come from loving homes like mine and yours. For a vast range of reasons, they are now part of society's down-and-outs, battling to survive, drifting from place to place, living a life just a step above that of the homeless. They are powerless and disenfranchised. Others are temporarily living in boarding houses, newly arrived in a city without work, or having been evicted from a house because of rent arrears caused by financial problems. Whatever the reasons, these people are women and men who quickly learn that they have to accept whatever they can find to live in.

As there are many types of people who are the consumers of residential services, there are equally diverse people who will provide such accommodation. Some providers are genuine in their attempts to house these unfortunate people. Others are out to make a quick buck. This bill will require that residential service operators will not be able to conduct a service in future without being registered and accredited to the required level. At last this gives some surety that boarding houses and similar places will meet some reasonable standards in future. Registration will be the first step towards accreditation for residential service providers. To become registered, they must demonstrate compliance with a number of minimum standards. Following registration, a residential service provider will be required to apply for accreditation. The accreditation scheme aims to ensure that the service complies with industry standards while encouraging continuous quality improvement.

The bill not only requires standards for providers; it also includes protection for residents. All too often I have heard from residents of these type of boarding houses that they are forced to tolerate unacceptable standards of care, neglect and abuse because they are often too afraid to complain. Many residents are one step away from homelessness and cannot risk making a complaint for fear of eviction or other reprisals. This legislation provides important protection for those residents by creating offences with stiff penalties for anybody who causes detriment to another because they have made a complaint or provided information about a residential service for the purpose of having it investigated. The vulnerable, powerless people who are often the residents of this type of accommodation should not have to live in fear, and it is essential that service providers who operate under these principles are brought to task.

This bill is an excellent example of the Beattie Labor government's ongoing and all-pervasive commitment to social justice. It proves that we are concerned for everyone in our society—not just those who are articulate and who loudly ask for their issues to be addressed but also those who have no voice, who for whatever reason are pushed around and unable to speak. This bill speaks for them in an impressively clear and deliberate manner. Our government's actions contrast so extremely with the mean-spirited policy of the Howard federal government. I know that the minister consulted with a very wide range of industry groups and consumer representatives to ensure that the bill considered all of their issues. Once again, I applaud the Hon. Merri Rose and her staff for developing this bill and I commend it to the House.