



Speech by

**DESLEY SCOTT**

**MEMBER FOR WOODRIDGE**

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Hansard 22 August 2002

**CORRECTIVE SERVICES AMENDMENT BILL**

**Mrs DESLEY SCOTT** (Woodridge—ALP) (4.05 p.m.): It is my pleasure to speak in support of the Corrective Services Amendment Bill 2002. There are times when good things are borne out of tough times and disasters. Such is the case with the Work Outreach Camps program. It had its inception in 1990 when the western town of Charleville was deluged and experienced devastating floods. The Goss government was one year old. Eighteen correctional officers and 101 prisoners from the then Wacol Correctional Centre volunteered to travel to Charleville to assist with the clean-up, restoring the town and outlying properties. The rest is history. Out of that very sad event, which we all witnessed on our television screens, was borne the WORC program.

On 1 July 2001 the WORC program was accorded specific legislative recognition with the commencement of the Corrective Services Act 2000. The act prescribes the eligibility criteria for prisoners participating in the program and requires prisoners participating in the program to perform community service. Furthermore, it provides for the establishment of work sites where prisoners are accommodated by notification in the *Queensland Government Gazette*. There are now 12 WORC sites or camps operating throughout Queensland, most of them in western centres. I had the great privilege of visiting a number of these in April with the minister, Tony McGrady, the Police Commissioner, the Deputy Director-General of Corrections, Mr Peter Severin, and the member for Mount Ommaney, Julie Attwood. Camps are located at Charleville, Yuleba, Mitchell, Blackall, St George, Winton, Clermont, Boulia, Springsure, Dirranbandi, Julia Creek and at Warwick, where women prisoners have been undertaking some challenging and rewarding projects.

It takes 10 or 15 minutes to drive from one end of my electorate of Woodridge to the other. For me it was an incredible experience to fly over our vast outback and visit the towns of Boulia, Blackall, Winton and Julia Creek. In each town we were met by the mayor and a number of councillors, local police and WORC camp supervisors. We visited the WORC camp, usually 10 kilometres or so out of town, and then inspected a lot of the projects that had been either completed or were under way in the town. These were diverse and gave us a wonderful idea of the wide scope of the skills that the men acquired and the wonderful benefit that it was to each town. In Boulia the camp is located close to the camel racetrack. These facilities had been recently painted and upgraded. A tour of the tiny town revealed that many buildings had been painted, the cemetery was surrounded by a new fence and an attractive garden, and the town looked very neat and tidy. Similarly, in Blackall, where the camp is located near the wool scour tourist attraction, the public pool was surrounded by gardens, a well-kept lawn, the cemetery was neat and tidy, and an innovative feature was a post outside each home with a house number displayed prominently in iridescent paint facing both ways for the benefit of emergency vehicles.

In Winton, playgrounds, a skate park, churches and the RSL war cemetery all showed signs of being well cared for. Julia Creek had some unique features, with paved footpaths and flowers blooming in raised beds made from rocks, which looked most attractive. The grounds of the hospital, schools and council were all looking great thanks to this wonderful program. Believe me, the men who work on these projects are so proud of what they have done. I recently had the good fortune to return to a number of these towns and heard a delightful story that a number of these men, on release from our Corrective Services facilities, have returned to these towns and settled with their families. They have become respected citizens and are happily enjoying life in the outback.

In Julia Creek we had the pleasure of meeting the Local Community Advisory Committee made up of volunteers. We were able to enjoy a very fruitful discussion on a number of issues relevant to the future of the WORC camps and their operation, and it gave the minister an opportunity to thank each member for their valuable contribution. The WORC camps could be likened to community renewal in the bush. The prisoner learns valuable skills and is able to experience the feeling of accomplishment and enjoy the gratitude of the townspeople. The towns which benefit from this program are neatly maintained and have their facilities upgraded, while at the same time businesses and services gain a benefit financially with the additional workers in their town.

The local councils have shown great enthusiasm and they want to see the scheme expanded. It has tremendous benefits to the prisoners and helps to improve their skills. Many are encouraged to leave their offending behaviour in the past. Since the inception of the WORC program, almost \$13.5 million in assistance has been given to communities in the west. Additional flood relief has been provided to Longreach, Murrumbidgee and Winton by assisting farmers to reconstruct their fences.

Given all these wonderful outcomes, the program is suffering because of a scarcity of prisoners. Indeed, many of the WORC camps are operating at two-thirds capacity and, should numbers fall further, projects may have to be cancelled. Before prisoners are permitted to participate in the WORC program they must satisfy strict selection criteria. Even though a prisoner may meet that criteria, the chief executive of the department is required under section 57(2) of the act to be satisfied that the prisoner is a suitable candidate for inclusion in the WORC program. For example, a prisoner who has a history of escapes from custody would not be accepted. It should be emphasised that simply because a prisoner is not imprisoned for an offence mentioned in schedule 1 it does not mean that the prisoner would automatically be approved to participate in the program. Community safety issues are addressed through a number of avenues.

These measures, combined with the contribution that the WORC program makes to rural and regional Queensland, have helped to make it the successful program that it is. The program is a prime example of the government and western communities working together to provide meaningful work opportunities for prisoners. The Beattie government is committed to ensuring a safer community. It is vital that the corrective services system not only keeps dangerous offenders secured and away from the community but provides programs designed to break the crime cycle. The WORC program and the release to work program are just two examples of initiatives that provide offenders with gradual supervised release into the community and, importantly, into work situations.

The proportion of offenders returning to prison within two years is approximately 50 per cent less for those who have participated in the WORC program than it is for those who have not participated in the program and who have committed comparable offences. This bill proposes to expand the categories for prisoners to be eligible for the WORC program. It is designed to ensure the ongoing viability of this much-valued initiative without, as the minister has stated, compromising community safety.

I thank the minister, his Director-General Helen Ringrose, the Deputy Director-General Peter Severin and staff for their commitment to this program which has such wide benefits for all parties concerned. I commend the bill to the House.

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