



Speech by

Mrs D. PRATT

MEMBER FOR NANANGO

Hansard 26 November 2003

DEPARTMENT OF FAMILIES

Mrs PRATT (Nanango—Ind) (6.10 p.m.): I rise to address the House on the notice of motion moved by the member for Gladstone—and I second it—that this House calls on the Queensland government to increase funding to the Department of Families from areas such as printed promotional material, the Premier's public relations department and media areas to enable an increase in the number of family support officers, an increase in training of young or inexperienced officers and an increase in response and monitoring of families with reported problems.

For the past few years the print media in particular has continued to report on families in crisis, which is mainly due to the lack of staffing numbers in the Department of Families. These problems have been highlighted and the number of mishandled cases increased, especially over the last few months, as the minister is well aware. We are not talking about a small problem here. We are talking about a major crisis within the Families Department relating to abuse cases. I have here just one year's media coverage in the *Courier-Mail* with regard to these abuse issues around the state. We are not talking about a little issue; it is a huge issue.

Most people should realise that governments must prioritise where their money goes. Governments have a responsibility to the people, first and foremost, not just to build monumental structures, which have perhaps been a benefit to the state; their primary purpose in being is to protect, look after and supply essential services to the community. As far as I am concerned, one of those essential services is the protection of our children.

The member for Gladstone has mentioned here previously the publications that have been released and the number of staff who assisted in their release. The figure was quoted of 140 to 180 staff. It is difficult to pinpoint the truth. It never seems to come out. I also tried to find out exactly how many publications have been put out as well as the quality and the cost of those publications. In the last two years the closest I could come to finding out was that there have been in excess of 500 at a cost of over \$2 million. I do not know about many people in this House, but quite frankly I think the majority of people would be happy to see a lower quality paper used. We do not need pearlised or embossed covers. That \$2 million would in fact go a long way to looking after our children.

No-one is going to argue that the minister's departmental workload is not enormous. Everyone accepts that, as the reports verify. It is horrendous. However, the truth is that staff are not trained as well as they could be and they are involved in situations that are way over their head. I know a lot of the staff in my own electorate. I have friends who are departmental staff. The truth is that a lot of them are very young. They have no experience of family situations and often lament the fact that they have had very little training before they are thrust into the coalface. That has also been mentioned by the member for Gladstone, who quoted from reports by people who gave evidence at the recent CMC inquiry. Also, the high turnover of staff is amazing. It needs to be realised that time and effort has to be invested in the staff so that they can cope and they do not leave.

The main thing that has to be emphasised is that this government must prioritise or it will soon have a new motto. There have been plenty of mottos associated with this government, but the one that it should be very careful not to be known by among the general public is 'self-promotion before protection'. That is a damning motto. Believe me, I think it is one that will stick—self-promotion before protection of our young children.

It is time that there was a reality check in regard to the frivolous extravagance of these publications. It is time that the government put the money where it belongs and carried out its responsibilities in the way a true government would, and that is by providing for the protection of our children.

Time expired.