



Speech by

ELISA ROBERTS

MEMBER FOR GYMPIE

Hansard 26 November 2003

DEPARTMENT OF FAMILIES

Miss ELISA ROBERTS (Gympie—Ind) (6.36 p.m.): I rise this evening to speak in support of the motion in regards to the need for increased funding to be allocated to the Department of Families. Recent discussions which were held between me, other Independents and the Department of Families staff confirmed the fact that there is a lack of adequately trained and experienced family support workers within the department. In supporting this motion, I am well aware of the stress associated with being employed as a support officer, and I understand that being continually exposed to alleged incidents of the abuse of vulnerable children within our society would be very difficult and emotionally draining.

Nobody could find it easy to work in such an environment, and this is why the government has to ensure that the conditions of the department staff are the very best that we can provide so some of the pressure from staff members is lifted. In order to increase retention rates of department employees, additional training and support need to be available to ensure that staff are experienced and capable to deal with the problems which arise as a part of their daily duties. Results of understaffing have led to the apparent use of university undergraduate students as assessors of suspected abuse. To place such a responsibility on an inexperienced student is unfair to both the victim and the accused when it comes to decisions which will ultimately affect a number of lives forever. It is a burden which should not be placed on these students, who are ill-equipped to deal with the complex and sensitive issues of child welfare.

Back in April 2002, media reports stated that, at around 880, our Premier had more staff than our Prime Minister. Whilst I am not aware of whether this was true or whether it is still even the case, if it was true then surely it is not unreasonable for us on behalf of the families whom we represent to request that a portion of the money allocated to the employment of so many be redirected to the Department of Families in an attempt to prop up the department and its most valuable resources, which is of much more consequence and value to people—particularly the children of Queensland.

This motion is not about making unreasonable demands upon the Premier, because we are realistic enough to appreciate that a Premier must have a requisite number of staff and advisers, but to have more staff than the Prime Minister is probably a little excessive. Recent media articles have not even scratched the surface of people who are suffering as a result of inadequate staffing levels. There are many who are falling between the cracks because they do not fit the criteria for Disability Services and go beyond the jurisdiction of the Department of Families.

The Minister for Families has emphasised that Queensland now has more money appropriated to the department than ever before and that 25 new child abuse workers have recently been employed. Whilst both initiatives are commendable, and I acknowledge that there are no quick-fix solutions or simple answers to these often trying and difficult circumstances, more work still needs to be done and money has to be found in order to address the shortfall in the department regarding staffing numbers.

Low staff levels make it difficult for case officers to handle each individual case to the best of their ability. More staff will allow for a reduction in case overload on the current members and a better outcome for all. The cases which have come to light via the media in recent times are really only the tip of iceberg. There are so many people out there who are in genuine need of respite services and assistance as well as advice and just day-to-day coping mechanisms.

I know of families who have children who have special needs which are difficult to address because in some cases these children are too much to handle for special education units at state schools. These same children are not disabled. When they are banned from school and day care centres, there is nowhere else for them to go.

The Department of Families is a diverse service as it oversees so many different circumstances relating to families' needs. None of us on this side of the House wants to see money taken from health or education or any other vital areas, but we wish to provide possible solutions to the current situation facing the department. The government could look at money saving devices such as perhaps the electronic distribution of annual reports and brochures on the Internet. People could download them should they wish to rather than wasting money on printing them when, in many cases, these types of reports up end in the bin and unread.

It is hoped that this motion is not viewed as an attack on the department and its hardworking staff but more as an attempt to highlight the real issue behind recent problems which have arisen within the department and brought to my attention by department staff themselves.