



Speech by

Robert Messenger

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Hansard Tuesday, 28 March 2006

DISABILITY SERVICES BILL

Mr MESSENGER (Burnett—NPA) (8.46 pm): Once again, the Disability Services Bill gives me an opportunity to discuss on behalf of my electorate the very important and serious matter of disabilities. Once again I use this opportunity to ask the minister to review the funding and resourcing needs of two disabled children whom I have met in recent months and about whom I have made representations to the minister's department. Daniel and Zachary and their families desperately need more resourcing and assistance. I urge the minister to reconsider and review his department's approach to these profoundly disabled babies.

In recent days non-government disability service workers have drawn to my attention the fact that approximately 150 disabled people have applied for recurrent funding packages and approximately 10 have received that approval. That came as a bit of a shock to me, because it really puts into perspective the resourcing issue.

These workers have also brought to my attention the ACROD web site, which is the national industry association for disability services. The web site states that in March 2005 a concerned ACROD Queensland Division called a meeting of member organisations supporting more than 10,000 Queensland children with disabilities. At that meeting agreement was reached that there was a crisis pending in terms of the health and wellbeing of children with disabilities and their families unless the state government prioritises a whole-of-government injection of funding to support those children to achieve their maximum individual potential within their communities.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics conservatively indicates that there are 64,000 Queensland children aged between zero and 14 years with disabilities who require specialist services. Of those children, 52 per cent have a severe or profound activity restriction.

In 2003-04, only 3,978 Queensland children aged between zero and 14 years with a disability received funded services. That figure represents only 6.2 per cent of Queensland children with disabilities. That statistic agrees with the anecdotal evidence that I have received from the Wide Bay-Burnett region. The ABS data does not include children with mild disabilities in the zero- to five- and the 15- to 18-year-old population.

The main issues that need addressing according to ACROD are: the urgent and immediate increase in funding for Queensland children with disabilities, dedicated funding needs to be provided for therapy services throughout the child's continuum of care and to develop a children's services program that includes early intervention and a continuum of care as the child develops to adulthood. The recommendations according to ACROD are that the Queensland government makes an immediate commitment to increase the funding available to Queensland children with disabilities and their families and that this increased funding commences in the 2006-07 state budget.

I have managed to locate some research and a referencing brief from the Queensland Parliamentary Library—for example, the output funding of Disability Services Queensland for the years 2004-05. The total cost for 'Support for adults' was \$254.224 million; 'Support for children and families' was \$150.551 million; 'Community and infrastructure support' was \$49.964 million, bringing the total to

\$454.739 million. By way of comparison, in 1995-96 the total budget was \$158 million. I must acknowledge that it has climbed through the years to reach a total budget in 2005-06 of almost half a billion dollars.

Mr Shine: Extraordinary growth.

Mr MESSENGER: Not enough growth. I would say that we could do a lot better as a state. I would expect all members of this House to agree that we do need more funding in disabilities. We are one of the highest growth states. The Premier continually reminds us that we have 1,500 people per week coming into the state, and that places extraordinary pressures on our state and also on our disability services.

In relation to current state funding, funding for non-government disability services for children comes from the following sources. Disability Services Queensland provides funding to the non-government sector for the provision of family support and respite, with some historical funding for therapy and social work services. DSQ provides direct therapy services to very young children with predominantly intellectual disabilities. Queensland Health provides very limited funding to support children with disabilities. Most non-government organisations listed on the ACROD web site receive no health funding, although they provide some preventative services. Some of the non-government organisations provide direct acute health services—for example, specialist respiratory therapy for people with end stage muscular dystrophy, treatment for acute arthritis and intensive therapy following botox injections. Following school entry, most children do not have access to outpatient health funded therapy services. Health's recent reduction in service provision has directly resulted in huge increased demand within the non-government sector.

Education Queensland is a direct employer of therapists who have a brief narrowed to educational outcomes and are unable to meet the needs of the large number of children with disabilities in their education settings. Education therapists rely on their non-government organisations to provide general and specialist therapy support, especially in rural and remote settings. It has been my experience after talking with many constituents that the delay that children and their families experience in meeting with and being assessed by different therapists engaged by Education Queensland is outrageously long. I remember one case where a hearing impaired lad was getting speech therapy within the health system and as soon as he moved across to the education system he missed out on his weekly speech therapy. I remember his mother complaining to me that it was going to take six months to meet with a speech therapist in the Queensland education department and be assessed by that person. Consequently, his development was going downhill.

Queensland is a state which is well off. Everyone knows that. We are a rich state because we are awash with revenue from our mining industry, GST and stamp duty. We need to spend more money on our adults with disabilities. We need to spend more money on our children with disabilities. You can find no one who is more deserving of extra funding than the disabled people of our state.

Mr Pitt: I agree with you, but where are we going to get the money from?

Mr MESSENGER: That is quite a legitimate question and I would suggest that we first of all look at our administration costs. Are we doing things as efficiently as we can? Are we prioritising our budgets? Are we spending the money on the right things and getting back to basics?

Some disability services in the Burnett and Bundaberg region are: the Bundaberg Regional Access Advisory Committee Inc.; the Endeavour Foundation, Blue Care Respite Services; Carinbundi Burnett Respite Services; Community Lifestyle Support Inc.; and the YMCA disability program. There are many worthy community organisations within the Burnett-Wide Bay region that take care of disabled people and their families. I would briefly like to mention Community Lifestyle Support Inc. I would like to declare an interest here. I have a cousin who is being looked after by Community Lifestyle Support Inc.—young Bradley Stehbins. Bradley is a profoundly disabled man. He is about 42 years of age. He visited me at Parliament House. I have to pay tribute to his carer, Mo, who does a fantastic job and who has provided a far greater quality of life in many ways than he was getting at home. My Auntie Doris and Uncle George would freely admit that. They are a classic case of an older couple who have reached around 70 to 75 years of age and are physically unable to lift Bradley. Now, with Mo's care and Community Lifestyle Support's care, Bradley is able to go on train trips and go on the river cat and have many wonderful experiences which have added to his lifestyle and quality of care.

Community Lifestyle Support Inc. is offering a vital service to the community in and around my electorate. It is a state government funded disability service, servicing the Bundaberg-Burnett region, and was established in 1993 after numerous parents of children with disabilities raised concerns. The service was set up to assist, serve and educate people with disabilities in establishing a more productive and independent lifestyle.

The vision statement of the service is: 'Community Lifestyle Support Inc. will be a consumer directed service within a community equally which includes people with disabilities in all aspects of community life.' Some of the various lifestyle support programs the organisation runs include: attendant care program, facilitate in-home care, home respite, adult lifestyle support, recreational support, community access, after-

school support program, holiday respite, post school services, hydrotherapy and the early intervention program.

The early intervention program is currently being established and is aimed at children aged between zero and five who have severe physical and/or speech disabilities. I am told that there is not any program operating in Bundaberg and surrounding districts which meets the needs of families with a disabled child aged between zero and five years. So Community Lifestyle Support Inc. is proposing to establish the early intervention program which will enable families to access therapy on a daily basis to assist the developmental and coping strategies of families.

The project will be a mix of centre based and in-home support to allow families to choose a support mix that best meets the needs of their child. The aim is to take pressure off families and improve the quality of life for the children. Service manager, Mr Greg McMahon, believes that prevention is better than cure. While in some cases there may not be a cure, they can at least minimise the impact. Due to the high population growth in our region—the Burnett, Wide Bay and Bundaberg—the number of families who have children with disabilities is ever increasing and placing extra pressure on services. Mr McMahon believes it is very hard for families with children who have severe disabilities to obtain respite. There are approximately 80 families currently in the Bundaberg and Burnett district who have children with disabilities that do not have access to quality support such as that which Community Lifestyle Support Inc. is offering and would qualify for this particular program. Basically, Community Lifestyle Support Inc. is looking for funds which will go towards staff salaries to man the early intervention program. I hope the minister acknowledges that request.

While I and the shadow minister agree with the overall thrust of this legislation, which acknowledges the rights of people with a disability, provides a regulatory framework for services by DSQ, ensures that these services are safe and accountable to protect people with disabilities and gives clarity—

Time expired.