



Speech by

Jann Stuckey

MEMBER FOR CURRUMBIN

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CHILD SAFETY

Mrs STUCKEY (Currumbin—Lib) (12.02 pm): I rise to illuminate ongoing concerns in regard to Child Safety in Queensland in my capacity as shadow minister for this critical portfolio. Even though the government is throwing money at this department like never before, and I congratulate it for that, there are unacceptable backlogs and high rates of staff burnout due to work overloads. These can lead to poor judgements being made that further place the life of a child in danger.

Stories of children having as many as five caseworkers in one month do not auger well for any child. The alarming number of child deaths in care shed a very sorry light on the Department of Child Safety. My office frequently receives calls highlighting avoidable deficiencies in some of the processes which have been applied by the Department of Child Safety. Anyone who has worked in this field knows too well the heartbreaking stories that are part and parcel of child abuse and neglect.

It is not my intention to identify any names related to specific cases or any particular departmental worker because that is not appropriate, nor would it progress the ultimate goal of protecting children. Furthermore, I wish to acknowledge departmental workers for the dedication they bring to their difficult jobs. However, there are many workers within the department today who were not part of it under its previous banner and therefore lack extensive knowledge of the Child Protection Act and all of its interpretations.

Families have expressed concern about babies who are days old being moved from their mothers at the determination of someone who is not long out of university and who has never been a parent. Similarly, child safety workers state that there still remains an internal culture of intimidation against workers who speak out to protect children from returning to a detrimental situation. It is appalling to know that a child safety worker who spoke out to protect a child not only was hung out to dry by the department but also had to endure her husband being falsely accused. A decade after the Ombudsman's recommendation, the family is still being subjected to a settlement run-around by this state government despite promises by the Deputy Premier, who was families minister, to resolve this matter. What encouragement does this give to anyone who wants to speak out to protect the innocent and vulnerable victims of child abuse?

A more determined effort to get the right staff in the right positions and the provision of support systems to keep them must be a priority. I note that there has been a massive recruitment drive, yet some entrenched problems are still continuing as a result of good staff leaving and poor practices continuing. Is it any wonder the QPSU describes the staff turnover as horrifically high.

Outcomes for children could be vastly improved with better communication between parties. Parents often say that Child Safety staff do not understand what they are telling them and will not explain why they are undertaking certain actions. One family was placed in fear of their lives because, despite being given assurances that the location of a subject child would remain completely confidential, it was revealed to the very person the family was to be protected from. A combination of inexperience and lack of thoroughness by certain officers has understandably caused a great deal of grief for the family concerned.

On 25 September 2006 the minister wrote an article for the *Courier-Mail* in response to a public outcry over the death of a three-year-old girl. Along with her three older sisters, aged five, seven and eight,

this little girl was returned by the department to her mother who was a prostitute and a drug addict. In this article the minister stated—

'Whenever a child dies who is known to the department an internal review by an independent expert is completed. The outcomes of such reviews have not previously been made public but they should be'.

Yet on 23 February 2007 this case once again hit the pages of the *Courier-Mail* because the police are still awaiting vital evidence. Our police need close cooperation from the department to ensure that prosecutions can occur. I ask the minister if she intends to make the review of this case and others public once they have been finalised.

As we approach the third anniversary of the blueprint for reform, it is vital that we address issues relating to child safety as a matter of urgency and focus our determined attention on protecting children and, where possible, family units in an equitable, impartial and compassionate way. There have been eight and a half months of excuses and delays and we still have not seen the full introduction of the integrated client management system. Children are too precious and vulnerable to use for political gain, yet here we have a Premier who pats himself on the back and grandstands on this issue by announcing further spending while thousands of Queensland children are still suffering in miserable circumstances. At every level we must be committed to developing a better system which will proactively protect children in need in Queensland and restore some public confidence in a once-neglected department.