



Speech by

## Robert Messenger

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Hansard Tuesday, 4 September 2007

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### COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE AND CHILD GUARDIAN AMENDMENT BILL

**Mr MESSENGER** (Burnett—NPA) (3.13 pm): This bill amends the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian Act 2000 in order to clarify the employment screening requirements for individuals and businesses providing health, counselling and support services to those children. It is with pleasure that I rise to speak to this legislation and offer my support.

The health counselling and support services category includes a health service that, by its nature, requires or is likely to require physical contact with the child or that is provided or is likely to be provided where the person is physically present with the child when no-one else is present. I will speak to that issue a little later in my speech.

The bill covers a counselling service that involves or is likely to involve providing a service where the person is physically present with a child while no-one else is present or where the person is not physically present with the child, for example, the provision of a counselling service over the internet or telephone. On this point I will chat about the sexual abuse counselling service that is provided by Phoenix House in Bundaberg.

Under the bill, a support service involves or is likely to involve providing the service where the person is physically present with the child while no-one else is present or where the person is not physically present with the child.

Fundamentally, we need a blue card system in order to stop the abuse and sexual assault of children by paedophiles or, to put it another way, it provides another layer of protection, as the member for Cunningham so eloquently said. We cannot afford to let anyone slip through the cracks because if that happens children are abused. This is another layer of protection in that checking process. Because I believe the state government refuses to properly tag and monitor known and convicted child sex offenders, it is even more important that we have stronger blue cards rules. For that reason also I support the legislation.

While debating this legislation, I mention the extremely invaluable service to my community provided by Phoenix House. Phoenix House is a community based and managed charitable organisation where dedicated staff work towards preventing the sexual abuse of children. Recently my staff obtained from Phoenix House statistics that show that in Bundaberg more than 400 children who had been abused by paedophiles accessed their services. Obviously, that relates to my constituents who are covered by the Bundaberg-Burnett service district. That highlights the extent of the problem within the communities of Burnett and Bundaberg. Phoenix House coordinator Kathy Prentice revealed that throughout last year 85 per cent of the cases that the service dealt with were child sex abuse cases. Therefore, predominantly the people who are being abused and who are accessing the service are young people aged zero to 17 years of age.

Phoenix House provides a child and family focused program for children and young people who have sexually abusive behaviours or have been affected by domestic violence, and support for non-

offending families and carers. A comprehensive primary, secondary and tertiary sexual violence prevention program is also offered. Additionally, it should be noted that the organisation also provides a safe, supportive program for adult women who have been sexually assaulted, either recently or in the past, and an outreach program for adult males who have been sexually abused or who want to address abusive behaviours. Landmark stuff is happening in Bundaberg. I do not believe this is happening anywhere else in the country. I congratulate Kathy and her coworkers.

In June this year, Bundaberg's Phoenix House's BumbleBees Therapeutic Preschool, specifically designed for young victims of sexual assault, was forced to close down due to a lack of funding. The BumbleBees program had a waiting list of up to 30 to 40 children. I believe that the program took around 10 children, aged from three to six years old. They were getting good results from the BumbleBees program. The Bundaberg-Burnett community was dismayed that this invaluable day therapy program for children aged three to six years who have experienced sexual abuse or are at risk of harm had no choice but to close its doors and cease operations because this government was not prepared to continue and increase funding for the service in line with rents and wages. It is extremely disappointing that it took federal government intervention to guarantee funding for the service to continue because the state government would not come to the aid of the sexual abuse counselling services.

I mention that any donations to Phoenix House are gratefully welcomed. For further information on the organisation, members can go to the web site at [www.PhoenixHouse.com.au](http://www.PhoenixHouse.com.au).

Earlier today Phoenix House coordinator Kathy Prentice was asked about her opinion of the bill and I would like to share that opinion with the House. Kathy states—

In regards to Blue cards, I have not seen a measurable decrease locally of people accessing our services since its implementation—I am presuming that police stats would demonstrate same.

On a personal note, as the majority of sex offenders are never apprehended/charged then I do not believe that this legislation will make a significant difference, and that money would be more effectively utilised through other prevention strategies.

That is a direct quote from Kathy Prentice. If this state government were serious about protecting our children from dangerous child sex offenders, not only would it strengthen its blue card system, but also it would be listening to the people of Queensland who are crying out for some form of public child sex offender register to be introduced. At the moment many people in the Bundaberg-Burnett community are gathering signatures for a petition. The member for Bundaberg presented that petition to parliament last month. There were, I believe, 1,238 signatures. It is becoming quite well known in our community. There are volunteers sitting in malls getting signatures for this. We believe that something like 5,000 signatures will eventually come before this place. Stage two of this petition is expected to continue throughout this month with the aim of collecting 5,000 signatures. Judging by the passion within my community I think that that 5,000 mark is most certainly achievable. I hope that this government takes notice of the community's plight and seriously considers this public register.

The Queensland coalition has concerns about the need for there to be more of an opportunity to consult with stakeholders in relation to this bill. This bill seems to have been rushed through rather than the views of those at the forefront of this counselling delivery being seriously considered. I believe that there are also valid concerns that blue cards in general are open to fraudulent activity as they do not have photos of the cardholder.

A point of clarification that I would hope that the minister addresses is the issue of health service provision. I refer to page 11 clause 5(2) in relation to health counselling and support services. I would like to describe the situation which exists at the Bundaberg Base Hospital. I have spoken many times in this chamber about the services at the Bundaberg Base Hospital. I take this opportunity to congratulate the staff who are working there. Unfortunately, we do not have enough beds. Because of that lack of beds and resourcing at the Bundaberg Base Hospital adult patients—

**Mr O'BRIEN:** I rise to a point of order. My point of order is in relation to standing order 236 which is relevance. There is nothing in this bill concerning the number of beds at Bundaberg.

**Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER** (Mr Hoolihan): There is no point of order, but I would mention to the speaker that he—

**Mr MESSENGER:** He beat me by a millisecond. As far as the point of relevance goes, if the honourable member reads the bill it refers to a health service for a child. I would like to talk about the health service delivery to the children of the Burnett and Bundaberg areas because, as I was saying before I was interrupted, the children of the Burnett and Bundaberg, because of the lack of beds, are being mixed with adult patients in the paediatric ward—a ward that holds about 12 beds. Because we have a shortage of adult beds it then behoves the management and staff to move adult patients and have them located with children. Questions then arise—which relate back to this legislation—such as, first of all, is it appropriate for adult patients to be mixed with children and all the problems that could arise as a result of that and what liabilities does the state have if a child is assaulted by an adult patient while they are in hospital. Surely there must be times where that child and that adult, if they are both in the same ward, are together and there is no-one looking over them. Coming back to clause 5(2) on page 11, I would like to know whether

the Bundaberg Base Hospital—indeed any public hospital—is dealt with under this legislation. I understand that a licensed care service or a government service provider is not classified as a regulated business in the legislation. I think that is a problem that is not only happening at Bundaberg but also around the state. If the minister could address that in his speech in reply it would be much appreciated. I support the bill before the House.