



Speech by

Rosa Lee Long

MEMBER FOR TABLELANDS

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COMMUNITY SERVICES BILL

Ms LEE LONG (Tablelands—ONP) (4.47 pm): I rise to speak to the Community Services Bill 2007. This bill is about bringing the Family Services Act 1987 up to date. The Department of Communities funds approximately 860 community organisations under the Family Services Act. These groups cover a wide range of services from neighbourhood centres to support for seniors, from community safety services to youth justice and domestic and family violence prevention.

The Atherton Neighbourhood Centre in my electorate is an example of how much can be achieved by dedicated people working hard for their community. It began several years ago with a small group of women deciding that something needed to be done and it has grown to a large operation with 40 to 50 staff ranging from full-time to part-time staff to volunteers. It involves a very wide range of community support activities and has just taken on a role in drug and alcohol relief. The Atherton Neighbourhood Centre also played a very important role during the Cyclone Larry recovery period.

The Mareeba Information and Support Centre is another organisation that helps meet some of the pressing needs of the people who are in vulnerable or fragile circumstances. Organisations such as the ANC and MISC and their colleagues across the state make a truly significant contribution to the social welfare of Queensland, and it is a contribution that is coming under more and more stress as the burdens grow.

I take the opportunity to point out the need for the tablelands to have better access to referrals for active intervention services, ideally via a service spoke from the RAI hub established in Cairns. I am advised that for demographic reasons the tablelands has some of Queensland's most complex child-care cases. It is essential that these needs are addressed as a matter of urgency.

Along with established issues such as domestic violence, we are faced with new and growing issues such as housing accessibility and affordability. It is such a basic need—that is, a family to have a roof over its head—that it is hard to believe that in far-north Queensland, in what is supposed to be a First World country, there are waiting lists in the thousands. For example, recently in Atherton a family had to move out of a rental property. They came to me when they could not find any other accommodation at all after they had been looking for two months. I discovered that there was not just one family in crisis, but five. There was mum and two children plus four other members of the family, all of whom were single parents with families of four children, three children and two children each, all faced with having to live under a bridge. The only other alternative was to try to find other families to move in with. That was becoming more and more difficult for them.

A similar situation exists in Ravenshoe where another family has also had to leave a rental property. In that case the family had lived there for decades and it involves a mother who, I am told, is 105 years of age. She, too, could find herself under a bridge, such is the shortage of rental accommodation in the far north. It is hard to imagine any more stressful situation for a family to be in than to be unable to find a home. Yet that is the case for so many at present.

Among the changes being introduced in this bill are those aimed at establishing a process for community organisations—or NGOs—to become eligible for assistance from the government and clearly

identifying the types of assistance that can be provided. This is intended to improve transparency and certainty about how funding and assistance can be provided. I think it is important to distinguish between making funding and assistance processes more transparent and making sure that there is enough funding and assistance to go around. Even a crystal clear process will not help one extra family if the amount of resources is insufficient. I would like the minister to look into how disability respite services are being delivered in Mareeba.

However, on a nicer note last week I was pleased to attend the opening of an arm of Child Safety in Atherton, which will assist Indigenous families who get caught up in the Child Safety net. This office is staffed by Indigenous people who understand the families they will be working with. The week before I also attended the opening of a preschool Indigenous organisation, also set up in Atherton, which is attracting Indigenous mothers and their young children. This organisation is giving these mothers and children a head start before the children go to school. This group is linked with the primary school and also the Miden Health Clinic, which operates next door. The health clinic sends someone to talk to these mothers and children about basic health matters, such as covering mouths when coughing and sneezing and the importance of washing hands. I believe these organisations are providing steps in the right direction in assisting our Indigenous population in Atherton and the wider tablelands Indigenous community to become better educated and to lift their standard of living. I also believe that these groups should be supported and sufficiently resourced as it is organisations such as those that will make a difference to the lives of the Indigenous population of the tablelands.

It is the practice of governments to talk about how they have increased budget allocations, of how record amounts are being spent on this, that or other problems. But the problems are often growing faster than the amounts dedicated to them. Yet at the same time leisure and pleasure facilities, such as sporting fields and art galleries, continue to soak up government dollars. It is impossible to look at some of the edifices in Brisbane and justify the expenditure on them to a family who is forced to live in a crowded tiny flat, in a tent, out of the back of their car, or even under a bridge.

The bill before us also includes amendments that deal with meeting community expectations about the quality, safety and accountability of service delivery. This is a very important issue as the continual drive for so-called efficiency has the potential to see resources allocated in ways that end up delivering weaker services, all for the sake of a dollar or two. Clearly, the quality, safety and accountability of service delivery are important goals. But I repeat: if the resourcing remains at the lowest of levels, then the on the ground differences for the people who need it the most will be negligible. I support the bill.