



Speech by

Mark Ryan

MEMBER FOR MORAYFIELD

Hansard Wednesday, 19 August 2009

CORRECTIVE SERVICES AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mr RYAN (Morayfield—ALP) (3.59 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Corrective Services and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. As already highlighted, this bill is part of an ongoing review of corrective services legislation in Queensland. This bill continues the reform of this area of law by updating current laws to reflect and respond to the modern demands and practices of Queensland Corrective Services.

This bill effects a number of amendments to the current legislation, including the abolition of resettlement and reintegration leave of absence, improved procedures for visiting a corrective services facility, clarification of the chief executive's power to manage prisoner trust accounts and increased time periods for parole board decision making. I would like to spend some time addressing one particular aspect of the amending bill—that is, the removal of the ability for prisoners to participate in resettlement leave of absence and reintegration leave.

In his second reading speech, the minister pointed out that reintegration and resettlement leave of absence once served the purpose of assisting prisoners to reintegrate into the community by providing an opportunity to, among other things, set up bank accounts, reconnect with family and friends, make social security arrangements, and source accommodation and employment opportunities.

It is a reality of our criminal justice system that prisoners who are released from prison after serving their respective prison sentences need to be provided with sufficient support to properly reintegrate into the community. There is a widespread view about how important it is that prisoners re-enter the community prepared to live their lives as law-abiding citizens. By saying 'prepared', I mean that they have somewhere to live, a job to go to or skills to get a job, someone to talk to when things are not going right, and access to social and other counselling services. Granting release to a prisoner for a couple of hours a week before they are discharged does not achieve these goals. I am even more convinced of this since I found out that resettlement leave does not require that prisoners attend to matters that will assist them after their release, such as setting up a bank account or looking for a job. In fact, current research supports the contrary view that targeted evidence based programs reduce recidivism.

Having said this, I want to be absolutely certain that the chances of prisoners settling back into society and becoming law-abiding members of the community would not be impacted negatively by removing their ability to participate in resettlement and reintegration leave. You do not have to be an expert in criminal justice and corrective services to know that prisoners face many barriers when they are released from custody. That is why it is so critically important that sufficient and effective strategies are employed to ensure prisoners do not return to crime after they are released from a correctional facility.

It is important to appreciate the social, financial and psychological barriers faced by prisoners following their release from prison. That is why the government is continually working with community stakeholders to address these barriers, because by addressing these barriers and providing support to prisoners we can prevent further offending and criminal activity, which impacts on us all and the community generally.

One approach for effectively managing the reintegration of prisoners into the community is based on the concept of throughcare. It is an approach adopted by Queensland Corrective Services. It is not just a buzz word; it is a philosophy and an overarching principle under which offenders are managed. In simple terms, throughcare starts the moment a prisoner comes into contact with the correctional system and continues well after their release into the community. It is about helping an offender to plan for their release into the community and supporting them to put that plan into action.

The Integrated Transitional Support Model was first introduced in Queensland prisons a couple of years ago to help achieve this. This model targets the release needs of all offenders. Higher risk, violent and sexual offenders participate in the intensive transitions program, while offenders serving short sentences participate in a less intensive transitional support service. Prisoners undertake modules which cover a range of issues relevant to their release into the community. These include, for example, accommodation, employment, physical and mental health, addiction, family and relationships, identification, budgeting and financial assistance, education, and probation and parole requirements. Every prison provides these programs, with a dedicated transitions coordinator appointed at each centre to deliver the transitions program and support service.

Continuing in the spirit of throughcare, high-risk offenders are given additional support once released through the Offender Reintegration Support Service. This initiative engages specialist workers from non-government organisations to provide offenders with assistance to settle back into the community and lead law-abiding lives. An example of how this service operates in practice was recently reported to me. I have heard of a particular offender who, without any family or law-abiding friends in the community, was at a bit of a loose end when he was released from prison. This prisoner was met at the prison gate by a support worker. She drove him straight to Centrelink to register for his crisis payment. She then drove him to the department of housing to secure a bond loan, then to his reporting probation and parole officer and then to his new home where she helped him settle in. The next day, the support worker took the offender to apply for an 18-plus card and open a new bank account and shopping to purchase groceries and new clothes. The support worker continued to work with the offender to access financial counselling and other support services. She also referred him to a family tracing service so that he could start looking for his family whom he had lost touch with before his imprisonment.

This offender has remained drug free and crime free, reports as required to his probation and parole officer, is also actively seeking employment and volunteers daily in his local community. The relationship between this offender and his support worker will not end until Corrective Services is satisfied that he is able to maintain a stable lifestyle independently. This type of support is the norm for offenders in the Offender Reintegration Support Service program.

Responsible, effective and supportive service programs are assisting with the reintegration of people into the community after they are released from a correctional facility. These programs are critical not only for the reintegration of people into the community but also for the community generally. Proper support through reintegration services means people are able to return to the community and make a valuable contribution to their communities through service and participation in a law-abiding manner.

Nonetheless, it is important that prisoners are able to maintain, where necessary and appropriate, relationships with family and friends whilst within the detention of a correctional facility. I understand that Queensland Corrective Services manages this contact through visits by families and friends and telephone contact. I also understand that the changes proposed in this bill in respect of resettlement and reintegration leave will not limit these forms of contact. As an aside, I note that in the 12-month period to March 2008 only 21 applications for resettlement leave of absence were received by the Parole Board. Of those, only 15 were approved. These figures indicate to me that the leave of absence mechanism has limited use and limited relevance in a modern correctional services framework.

The amendments set out in this bill reflect and respond to the modern demands and practices of corrective service frameworks and continue the important aspects of modern corrective service frameworks of supporting reintegration and, in turn, limiting further destructive criminal behaviour in the community. I commend the bill to the House.