




Speech By
Hon. Shannon Fentiman

MEMBER FOR WATERFORD

Record of Proceedings, 14 September 2016

**CHILD PROTECTION (MANDATORY REPORTING—MASON'S LAW)
AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Hon. SM FENTIMAN** (Waterford—ALP) (Minister for Communities, Women and Youth, Minister for Child Safety and Minister for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence) (8.33 pm): I rise to support the Child Protection (Mandatory Reporting—Mason's Law) Amendment Bill 2016, subject to some important amendments which I am pleased to say have been provided to the member for Aspley to move tonight. In the spirit of bipartisan cooperation, the member for Aspley has agreed to move those amendments that have been drafted in consultation with the sector. I thank her for that.

From the outset, I would like to acknowledge the tireless efforts of John and Sue Sandeman. The people of Queensland now have a much greater awareness of this issue, and it is largely as a result of their tenacity that we are debating this bill today. I was very pleased to meet with John and Sue this morning. This House owes them a great debt, and I believe we can learn a lot from them about how we, as elected representatives, need to make sure that we are always listening and engaging with people about their lived experiences and, most importantly, taking those lived experiences and applying it to our consideration of laws before the House.

I think we all recognise now that it should not have taken this long for this change to have occurred. In fact, it should have been part of mandatory reporting changes made in 2014. The Palaszczuk government is committed to the continual and ongoing strengthening of our child protection system. We are doing all we can to ensure the safety and wellbeing of our children, and I am pleased we are now moving in a bipartisan way to see this change happen.

They say that change is the only constant. It is certainly something we are continually managing within Queensland's child protection system. We are three years into the 10-year reform of our child protection system, and in that time we have already seen a number of positive changes but we still have more work to do. The job of keeping Queensland children safe is not one for government alone. It is a shared responsibility that the whole community must embrace. I know that many within the Townsville community have embraced John and Sue's campaign for change and have supported them to keep this front and centre. This was the message of the Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry. We must all take responsibility for the safety of Queensland children and this includes reporting genuine concerns about a child's safety to the department of child safety.

This is a responsibility we all have, and it is currently the case that any person can report a reasonable suspicion that a child may be in need of protection to Child Safety. Any person, whether mandated by law or not, who honestly and reasonably informs Child Safety of a reasonable suspicion that a child may be in need of protection is protected from civil, criminal, administrative and professional liability for doing so. That protection is afforded to everyone.

When there are other concerns about a child's wellbeing, it may be appropriate for Family and Child Connect or an appropriate service to provide support and assistance to the family. That is why the Palaszczuk government has committed \$13.8 million in this financial year to complete the statewide

rollout of Family and Child Connect services including two new services in Mount Isa and the Gulf and the Cape York and Torres Strait, and a further \$45.7 million for intensive family support services across the state for families with multiple and complex needs. We have also helped thousands of mums and dads with their parenting skills through the free Triple P parenting program, to which we have committed \$6.6 million over two years.

The Queensland Law Reform Commission explored the evidence for mandatory reporting and found an overall positive effect of targeted, well-designed mandatory reporting laws. Early childhood education and care professionals work day in and day out with children who, because of their age and development, are particularly vulnerable. This places them in a unique position to identify child protection concerns to my department. This is something that many of them already do even though they are not mandatory reporters under the act.

The Palaszczuk government is committed to the findings of the Queensland Law Reform Commission, and our government's response to the commission's report clearly supported recommendations to expand child protection mandatory reporting provisions to the early childhood and education care sector as well as the approved services within which the obligations should operate.

Although these legislative amendments are important, they are not on their own enough. To ensure meaningful change, the amendments must be accompanied by targeted effective training and support to embed reporting practices across the sector. I am proud to say that the Palaszczuk government is supportive of the intent of this bill and has worked to ensure it is workable. I am pleased to see the bill before the House tonight is honouring Mason. Queensland's statute book with this bill, and soon to be act, will always carry his name. I acknowledge that the member for Aspley has ensured this in her introduction of the private member's bill.

I also wish to acknowledge again the bipartisan support the member for Aspley is providing tonight in moving the government amendments. These amendments have been a collaborative effort between my department and the Minister for Education as well as key stakeholders in the early childhood education and care sector. Simplifying the bill will allow for more meaningful implementation, as professionals will be clearer on their reporting obligations. To achieve this, the wording of the bill should be consistent with terms and concepts already known and used across the early childhood education and care sector. The amendments moved tonight are better aligned and more consistent with the way other provisions in the act work and use clearly defined concepts that are already familiar to professionals working in the sector.

We also need to make sure the right people working in early childhood education and care services are captured by the new provisions. This includes professionals who have direct contact with children and their families and form those special relationships that help them see and hear the signs that a family is in need of help. It also includes those who have the skills and experience to support other professionals in making a decision on whether or not to report to Child Safety.

I know the member for Aspley is also aware, as was the parliamentary committee that considered the bill, that appropriate lead-in time is needed to embed good reporting practices across the sector. My department, together with the Department of Education and Training, has spoken with a wide range of stakeholders about this and the response has been overwhelming: sufficient lead-in time is critical to embed appropriate, consistent reporting practices. It takes time to meet the needs of such a diverse sector, to ensure early childhood professionals receive the necessary information and training to support and embed appropriate reporting behaviour. We are already commencing work to prepare for the implementation of these vital changes. Mandatory reporting obligations must be expanded to include the early childhood education and care sector. I think both sides of the House agree there is no doubt around this.

My department, together with the Department of Education and Training, has spoken with several key stakeholders in the early childhood education and care sector and they support the amendments that we have given to the opposition tonight which will be moved by the member for Aspley. I would like to thank all of our departmental staff who have worked so hard to make this a better bill tonight and who will continue to work with the sector to make sure these amendments are implemented effectively. We will continue to work closely with the early childhood education and care professionals as the changes are rolled out to determine appropriate implementation requirements. I support the second reading of this bill and encourage all members to support the amendments in the consideration in detail stage.