




Speech By
Ali King

MEMBER FOR PUMICESTONE

Record of Proceedings, 11 May 2021

WORKERS' COMPENSATION AND REHABILITATION AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Ms KING** (Pumicestone—ALP) (5.05 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2020. Every single day our first responders, paid and volunteer, head out on their shifts to do the essential work of keeping Queenslanders safe and protecting our community. Queenslanders know that keeping them safe is what our government is all about. It is right up there with keeping workers safe—at the very heart of our values. Supporting our first responders, who do so much for Queenslanders in their time of greatest need, is the highest possible priority for our Palaszczuk Labor government.

The Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2020 provides first responders with an important safeguard if they experience post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the work they do to keep Queenslanders safe each and every day. The bill means that first responders struggling to cope with PTSD will not need to demonstrate that their injury was caused by their work. Instead, the usual onus will be reversed and the first responder's injury will be presumed to be a result of their work unless evidence shows otherwise. This reduces the barriers for first responders to come forward and seek treatment early. Anything we can do to reduce the stigma related to workplace psychological injuries is especially important for first responders where there has traditionally been a culture of toughness and resilience.

Presumptive workers compensation laws for first responders who have developed PTSD as a result of repeated attendance at traumatic incidents or being exposed over and over to information about traumatic events are essential to ensuring their long-term mental health and rehabilitation and maximising the chances of them being able to return to work. Evidence is mounting that the cumulative impact of these experiences is an indicator for PTSD. Those cumulative impacts create particular barriers to access for first responders because, unlike a regular worker who experiences a one-off catastrophic event at work, first responders usually cannot point to a single, isolated incident that has resulted in their PTSD. Claims for psychological injuries such as PTSD tend to be extremely complex. They normally take longer to determine and, unfortunately, with longer claim times comes higher risks of workers' conditions worsening.

I commend the minister and the Education, Employment and Training Committee for the high level of consultation and careful consideration of existing literature that has gone into this bill. Evidence provided in the 2019 Senate education and employment references committee's report titled *The people behind 000: Mental health of our first responders* was harrowing. In his submission to the committee serving firefighter Mr Andrew Picker said:

Our work as First Responders is not a sterile office environment. We put our hearts and souls into our work ... We have lost friends in our work. Our families risk losing a son, a daughter, a father, a wife when we go to work. We have had colleagues significantly burnt or injured, shot or wounded, beaten and bashed, fallen from heights and hit by vehicles ... Our actions or inactions are something we must carry with us for the rest of our lives ... It is an honour and privilege to help others, but just as we care for others we also need to be cared for.

Beyond Blue's national survey of 20,000 police and emergency services workers regarding mental health and wellbeing issues led to the November 2018 *Answering the call* report. The *Answering the call* report found that 10 per cent of first responders had probable PTSD, with significant distress or impairment to their functioning. Another five per cent had experienced suicidal thoughts in the last 12 months. These rates are two to three times those in the average Australian population.

For first responders struggling with PTSD, the strain of demonstrating their injury arose as a result of their work may be a step too far. Across Australia, of those who had lodged a workers compensation claim, many experienced the process as unsupportive, stressful and unfair, and some reported that it had a negative impact on their recovery.

Having myself been through a Comcare claim following a very serious accident at work, I remember the distress and helplessness that the claims process itself can create. How much more challenging must this be when your injury is psychological rather than physical—so you do not have X-rays or hospital admission reports to show—and worse again when, due to the repeated and cumulative nature of exposure to trauma in your work, you may not be able to point to a single incident or event that led to your injury. Adjunct Associate Professor Ray Bange in his submission to the Senate Committee said—

Demonstrating work-related mental harm can be an onerous process for someone who is already in jeopardy ... Paramedics have said that the stigma involved in declaring distress and gaining recognition of harm, and the perceived difficulties in obtaining redress through ... workers compensation, tend to inhibit reporting and contribute to overall stress.

No longer will first responders need to prove their PTSD was the result of a particular traumatic incident at work. Their injury will be presumed to be work related unless there is evidence to the contrary.

I reached out to some of the first responders who care for people in my electorate of Pumicestone to hear what these changes will mean to them. Amy and Rob are critical care paramedics in the CCP Pod at Caboolture that was formed in the last term to care for people facing the most dire health emergencies across the north of Moreton Bay and beyond. Amy said—

We will never be able to manage our world and prevent PTSD from happening. It's about how we manage it afterwards. If you feel like you are supported afterwards it makes all the difference. If people in general society came to these jobs with me and saw the 90-year-old who jumped off a building because she had a terminal diagnosis, we would never have to argue about these issues. It lights a fire in me to think about it.

Rob told me—

Each day and each job, we just don't know what we are walking into. We can't put a number on what exact cases we go to could lead to PTSD. Among ourselves we call it "the straw that breaks the camel's back".

I note the member for Hinchinbrook's comments to that effect. Rob continued—

It's unpredictable what could be the thing for each person that causes them to freeze, to have that fear of going back to work. With PTSD your mind holds onto the memories from a bad job. It doesn't let go. It gets repeated every time you open a newspaper, every time you turn on the TV, and then you get called back to another one of those jobs and it all starts again. And you know it will be weeks before you can have peace again.

Rob particularly mentioned trauma endured by emergency medical despatchers, saying—

EMDs are also under immense pressure with the calls they are taking from people in crisis, listening to people who are about to lose a loved one and having to instruct them to give CPR and tell them an ambulance is coming. They are there listening when someone takes their last breath, and then coping abuse when there's nothing more they can do.

I note that this bill will ensure that emergency medical despatchers, who are repeatedly exposed to accounts of traumatic incidents, will also be spared having to prove their PTSD was caused by their work.

I could not help but compare the member for Kawana's self-serving and self-aggrandising contribution with the heartfelt and thoughtful words of the member for Macalister. We are fortunate to have her experience in this place. I also want to acknowledge other first responders in this parliament on both sides and those who have done the work of first responders including the member for Moggill; the member for Caloundra, who shared some very thoughtful words with me regarding the work of custodial corrections officers; the member for Nicklin; and the member for Greenslopes, as well as others I have not had a moment to acknowledge.

We are so insulated from reality every single day by the work of first responders. We do not have to go to jobs where a child has run out on to a road to chase a ball because they do that for us. Most of us never have to face up to what it truly means when someone drink drives or speeds or when an elderly person decides to end their life. First responders protect us with their bodies and their minds to save our bodies and our minds from harm. Ensuring that if they suffer post-traumatic stress disorder their path to care and support is that little bit smoother is the very least we can do in return. I am proud to commend this bill to the House.