




Speech By  
**Hon. Craig Crawford**

**MEMBER FOR BARRON RIVER**

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Record of Proceedings, 11 May 2021

**WORKERS' COMPENSATION AND REHABILITATION AND OTHER  
LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL**

 **Hon. CD CRAWFORD** (Barron River—ALP) (Minister for Seniors and Disability Services and Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships) (6.40 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. I say from the outset that I was not planning to speak to this bill but the government whip asked me to given my background. I thank members of the House for their supportive words. A lot of people get to experience traumatic events throughout their lives. They come across accidents. Sometimes people experience different things in the workplace.

There is a select cohort that we are talking about this evening. I know that you, Mr Deputy Speaker, are from that cohort yourself. I speak of first responders and frontline workers—those who are paid and not paid and who carry out this work on the front line. They are military, emergency services, medical and law enforcement workers and others.

My story is one of lived experience. Like other members of this House, I devoted my life to a career on the front line before I came into this place. Many people in this House know that I was a paramedic. I served as a full-time paramedic for 15 years and as a casual paramedic for five years prior to that. My story regarding trauma and emergency services began much before that because I was firefighter in Victoria for many years.

Growing up on the family farm, at the age of 13 I experienced the Ash Wednesday bushfires which were bearing down on the family farm. My father, who was the captain of the brigade, and happens to be at Parliament House tonight to have dinner with me, was out on the truck and it was Mum and I who had to try to manage hundreds of head of cattle, amongst everything else, whilst trying to stop our farm from being ravaged by one of the worst bushfires in Victoria's history. We had friends who died. We had friends who lost their farms. We had friends who lost hundreds of cattle and their livelihoods.

I went on to follow in my father's footsteps and joined the fire brigade as a volunteer. A few years later, at the age of 22, I was a lieutenant in the Rutherglen Fire Brigade, which is in northern Victoria. I was the first person into a house that was on fire with a person reported missing. In the process of searching for that person in that building, in the smoke on the floor of a bedroom I came face to face with a person with significant fatal wounds. That was the first time I had seen a dead person. It was just me and that person. It was a startling experience. I can still picture that in my head.

While I was at Rutherglen we attended multiple significant fatal accidents on the Hume Highway between Wangaratta and Wodonga. I can recall that at least three of those were fatal accidents involving truckies burnt inside their cabs. By this stage I was about 23. Counselling was non-existent back then. You worked it out amongst yourselves. A few mates would come over and you would have a few beers. We did our best to try to comfort each other. We got through.

After Rutherglen I moved down to a place called Colac in south-west Victoria. Colac has a population of around 15,000 people. As you do, I transferred my membership down there. I was in the fire brigade there. Colac turned out to be one of the trauma capitals of regional Victoria. I served in the fire brigade there for 12 years and became a full-time paramedic. I did more road trauma there than I care to think about. I recall a job where I climbed across three deceased people in a vehicle to get to a fourth. I recall a job where I was in a car working on a severely injured patient while lying on top of a deceased patient, with my head barely six inches from theirs. That is what you had to do. That was my job. I can remember attending five people in a Tarago who were deceased and a sixth who was not. This is what you did. This was the life of a paramedic. This still is the life of a paramedic.

On 2 December 1988, as a lieutenant in the Colac Fire Brigade, I went to job at a place called Linton, just south of Ballarat. There was a major bushfire there. We had a bad wind change coming across. We knew it was going to be bad. I was working in a strike team command vehicle. The strike team command vehicle is the vehicle in charge of about five tankers. There are five firefighters on a tanker so there is a team of about 28 people.

We recalled our crews out of the bush. We knew that the wind change was going to be bad. Across the command channel I heard these words: 'Mayday, mayday, mayday. Linton control this is strike team 701.' They said, 'Go ahead 701.' They said, 'Mayday, mayday. We cannot account for the Geelong West tanker.' Five firefighters lost their lives right then and there due a wind change that went horribly wrong.

Those five firefighters were volunteers from the Geelong West brigade. I knew some of them. They died barely a couple of hundred metres from where I was. We were powerless to do anything. There were further radio conversations that I heard that I do not want to repeat, but we knew they were dead. I can still remember that radio transmission. I can close my eyes now in 2021—many decades later—and hear it.

Further into my career I saw more cardiac arrests and more fatalities than I can poke a stick at. Climbing across a person in a car I can remember seeing a phone sitting in the console. The person was deceased. They were decapitated. There was brain matter all over the place. I was kneeling in it. It has a very distinctive smell, which some people would know. The phone was ringing and it said 'Mum'. I did not answer it and neither did the police officer I was with.

A few years later in Murray Street Cairns a woman murdered seven of her kids. I was thankful not to be one of the paramedics who went into that house, but I was on shift. I was on shift when the paramedics returned from that job and walked back into the station. I now know what shell shock looks like. They looked like they had come straight from the trenches in France. They told me in very graphic detail what they had seen and what they had heard. I could tell that there was a long road to recovery for them.

This is my story. Other members of this House have similar stories. It is not a competition to see whose stories are better than others. It is about making everyone aware that this is the life of a first responder. This is what they put up with. Whether they are out on the road, whether they are in an emergency department, whether they are behind the radio or the phone in a call-taking centre, this is the life of someone who dedicates their life to first response, to the military and other jobs.

I have no doubt about it that I live with PTSD. I have never been diagnosed. There are times where it sneaks up on me. I can close my eyes and picture every single one of those jobs and many more that I have not mentioned. I can remember once in Colac a paramedic named Anthony Hann who recognised as a workmate of mine that something was wrong. He came up to me one day at work and gave me a big print. It was a montage of photos of me at different jobs that had been taken by the press. My feet were hanging out of cars. Sometimes all you could see was my bum hanging out of a window. On it he put the notation: 'Be proud of what you've done.'

At that time I was in a really black spot. That lifted me out. This is what this bill does. It will help those frontline staff lift themselves out. This is about making sure that our frontline staff do not need to fight the government for what should simply be recognised as a consequence of working on the front line.

Interestingly, members of the House might like to know that the incident controller of the job I talked about at Linton, where five firefighters died, was a man called Greg Leach, who is currently the QFES Commissioner. Greg and I go back to that very spot. I support the bill. Well done, Minister.