




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR CALOUNDRA

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WORKERS' COMPENSATION AND REHABILITATION AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr HUNT** (Caloundra—ALP) (11.26 am): I rise to speak in support of the Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2020. The Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2020 introduces presumptive workers compensation laws for first responders diagnosed with PTSD. The objective of the bill is to provide an alternative claims pathway for first responders who are struggling to cope with PTSD that presumes that they have a work related injury, unless it is proved that their injury was not caused by work. As the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said, if you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss will gaze into you. This is precisely what happens to our emergency services workers and first responders. So long do they spend looking into the abyss of trauma that eventually it will consume some of them.

It will come as no surprise to anyone in this chamber to hear that I have chosen to single out custodial officers for singular mention in this address. Naturally I have a bias in that direction. Twenty-one years on the job means that custodial correctional officers will always be uppermost in my mind, but I do so for another reason as well—to give custodial officers a voice. We—they—are invisible. The very nature of the work and the architectural and security requirements that go into making a correctional facility isolate the staff who work in them. What this means is that custodial staff do not attract the accolades that are so rightly showered upon other responders.

Everyone will be and should be full of praise for the excellent work carried out by Queensland police, Queensland Fire and Emergency Services and our Queensland Ambulance Service. Their work is on full public display and when they do encounter difficulties in the area of mental health the public is supportive and sympathetic as a consequence of long exposure to the efforts of these services, and as well they should be supportive. Our coppers, our firies and our ambos are our front line and community safety.

But what of the screws? What does anyone acknowledge about custodial correctional officers? They are the stuff of either satire or revulsion. Portrayed as comical, brutal, cruel or callous, their role in community safety is rarely acknowledged and even less well understood. I said in my maiden speech that custodial officers start every shift by walking into the lion's den. Well, those lions bite and they leave scars, psychological as well as physical. So confronting is the role that radio traffic in a custodial centre is divided into innocuous sounding coloured codes that hide the true trauma behind every event. A code green is an escape attempt. A code purple is an exterior threat to the perimeter. A code silver is a prisoner who has climbed on to a roof or a vantage point, but there are other colours that custodial staff must deal with.

A code blue is a medical emergency, which sounds harmless enough, but it can be any number of things in a custodial setting. It could be a prisoner experiencing chest pains or a sprained ankle, or it could be the aftermath of some of the most graphic episodes of self-harm. Custodial officers routinely

deal with people with cognitive impairment and a vast range of psychological presentations. Nearly every custodial officer in Queensland will have responded to a self-harm episode where the cell they enter is quite literally awash with blood. To enter the cell and render assistance is to walk across the sticky mass of coagulated blood. The sweet metallic smell of large amounts of spilled human blood stays with an officer long after the code has been called down.

Cognitively impaired prisoners will self-harm with anything available. They can and will rip off sections of toenails and use them to literally saw through their own flesh until a blood vessel is reached. I have witnessed the aftermath of a prisoner who was mechanically restrained but was so determined to self-harm he bit into and ripped chunks out of his forearm until he reached a blood vessel and then, using only his teeth, pulled it out and severed it. Does anyone imagine that this line of work does not leave scars?

I have seen the aftermath of a prisoner who wrote his own suicide note in bright red arterial blood on the floor of his cell. Fortunately the officers responded in time, as they almost invariably do, and saved the prisoner's life. My colleagues have witnessed prisoners autocannibalise—that is to say, my former workmates were forced to respond time and time again to a prisoner who, over a six-month period, bit off and devoured nine of his own fingers, one knuckle joint at a time. The health ramifications of these incidents are still being felt. Does anyone imagine that this line of work does not leave scars?

A code black is a prison riot. These are not for the faint-hearted. My own centre at Woodford experienced one not long before I departed to campaign in 2020. They are noisy, chaotic and terrifying for all concerned. Fortunately Woodford, like some other centres, is blessed with an emergency response group: regular officers who undertake a significant level of extra training in order to confront the more dangerous situations. They are an invaluable resource in every centre sensible enough to train and retain an ERG. Riots though are mercifully rare and are invariably concluded with the deployment of chemical agents and a significant application of force which is justified, authorised and excused under the act. However they start and however they conclude, they are dangerous for all concerned and they are traumatic. Does anyone imagine that this line of work does not leave scars?

A code yellow is an officer who requires assistance. This could be to subdue prisoners who are assaulting each other or, more chillingly, to assist an officer who is being assaulted. An officer assault is a haunting thing to listen to on the radio. When an officer is being assaulted or responding to an assault, an entire correctional centre will stop and collectively hold its breath. An officer will usually be trying to fend off multiple assailants while trying to make a coherent call on the radio. The effort and the anxiety is very clear in the officer's voice and the custodial officers in non-responding posts will often look to each other and say, 'That sounds like a bad one', meaning that an officer will almost certainly be leaving in an ambulance. These same officers will then take a moment to compose themselves, disguise their own anxiety with an off-colour, gallows-humour-style joke and then go onto the floor in their own unit wondering if they will be the next one to leave in an ambulance. Does anyone imagine that this line of work does not leave scars?

Indeed, some of my workmates have been unfortunate enough to be involved in what is known in prison lingo as a bronze-up. For the uninitiated, a bronze-up is when a prisoner covers himself, and usually part of his cell, in his own excrement and then deliberately becomes violent and noncompliant. The responding custodial staff are then forced to be close with the prisoner and use control and restraint techniques to restore the security and good order of the prison. Please take a moment to imagine having to touch and wrestle to the ground a noncompliant adult who is covered in faeces. Does anyone imagine that this line of work does not leave scars?

The risks of other frontline workers are not any less, but they are also well known and easily identified and well documented, too. The fact that few, if any, people in this chamber are familiar with what I have just outlined is testimony to the isolation and the corresponding lack of understanding of custodial officers in the broader community. They face demons of their own, but they do so usually with only each other to lean on. This is not ideal for an industry that, as I have just outlined, positively courts trauma and the detrimental health effects that follow.

Couple this with one overarching and dominant factor: custodial officers run towards danger. The blood, the violence, the codes and the lack of appreciation does not change the single and most noble trait of custodial officers around Queensland: custodial officers run towards danger. When every sensible person would recoil from the horror and the graphic scenes, custodial officers run towards danger. When the most basic tenets of humanity and survival dictates self-preservation, custodial officers run towards danger. I acknowledge the efforts of a hardworking group known as Response—Adrian Bourke, Karen Davis, Craig Miller, Shannon Webb, Tom Hosier and Sean Street—custodial staff working very hard in this space of custodial mental health.

These amendments—this recognition of the potential health effects of the prolonged exposure to trauma—are a fundamental recognition for custodial officers that finally, critically, significantly someone has listened. This government and this minister should be congratulated for that. On behalf of every screw in Queensland, I commend this work to the House, not simply for what it can do but, more importantly, what it speaks to.