




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR LYTTON

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WORKERS' COMPENSATION AND REHABILITATION AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Ms PEASE** (Lytton—ALP) (12.15 pm): 'Ring triple 0.' Those are the words that are used each and every time there is an emergency. At the end of that line is a highly trained professional ready to listen, triage and organise appropriate first responders. These are the men and women whom we go to whenever we need help. We know that we can rely on them to do whatever they can and wherever they can. They regularly see the worst of life, yet they are the first to get up each and every day to do it over again.

First responders play such an important and incredible role in protecting and serving our Queensland community, and we have a role to protect those who protect us. This bill provides Queensland first responders with an important safeguard under the workers compensation scheme if they are diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, as a result of the important work that they do for us.

We have all seen in recent times the unbelievable work that first responders face in some of Australia's biggest challenges from catastrophic bushfires to floods, horrific and tragic deaths by domestic violence incidents and the ongoing battle against the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet each and every day they go out.

First responders are exposed to traumatic incidents that most of us could never imagine attending, let alone undertaking lifesaving practices. We often witness them at arms-length through a television screen or images in the paper. However, first responders are participants in these incidents. Whether it be one catastrophic event or a gradual build-up over many years, it can take its toll on the mental health of our first responders.

This bill follows extensive work started in 2018 to improve the workers compensation experience for our first responders. The review found that many commendable practices were in place. However, it also suggested improvements in the areas of communication, education, health literacy, client management, and rehabilitation and return to work. I understand that much of this work has already taken place.

The minister in her second reading speech shared a quote from the Senate Education and Employment References Committee report titled *The people behind 000: mental health of our first responders*, which was finalised in 2019. This quote from an Australian police officer who submitted to the inquiry really resonated with me, so I will repeat it. It reads—

What other job requires you to be in a constant state of hyper vigilance and alertness yet at the same time be a counsellor, a social worker, a lawyer, or a prison warden. What other profession authorizes you to take a person's liberty, or potentially use deadly force, but then mandates that you attempt to save the person's life that has just tried to kill you? What job causes you to wonder whether you will come home to your loved ones after you bid them farewell each and every day as you head off to work?

This statement highlights the important work that first responders choose to do in our community to keep us safe. Yet they also choose to do this knowing they are putting their own lives on the line. What an amazing group of people they are, prepared to do this not just one day but each and every day. These brave Queenslanders put their own lives at risk to provide assistance in time critical and often life-threatening situations in, might I add, a highly professional manner.

Sadly, they are at a very high risk of developing PTSD due to the very nature of their job. First responders often find the workers compensation process daunting and adversarial. PTSD is already compensatable under Queensland's workers compensation scheme, but when a first responder sustains trauma related to a psychological injury they can find the legislative test for injury a significant barrier to making a workers compensation claim. That is why it is really important that we support our first responders.

Many first responders are unable to identify one particular event that has led to their trauma. Many claims can be delayed due to investigations regarding the cause of the injury, and we know that this does not meet with community expectations to take care of those who care for us. This bill ensures that we will do more to protect and support those who protect Queenslanders in their time of need. This bill will overcome this barrier. It will further eradicate the stigma associated with psychological injuries and send a clear message to first responders that they are supported by Queensland's workers compensation scheme.

By introducing presumptive workers compensation laws for our first responders and eligible employees, we will ensure that these people who serve Queenslanders are protected. These laws do not create or change any existing workers compensation entitlements but provide a different pathway for certain claims to be detected. Under presumptive laws, first responders and eligible employees who are struggling to cope with PTSD will not have to go through a lengthy claims determination and investigation process. It will be presumed that their PTSD is caused by their work.

The impressive state-of-the-art Queensland Combined Emergency Service Academy is on White Island in the Port of Brisbane, which is in my electorate. This training facility provides best practice training to our finest Queensland emergency services firefighters, paramedics and communications operators. I have had the opportunity on many occasions to go out to QCESA and meet and talk to these impressive men and women during their training. On one occasion at a ceremony for communications operators I met the comms operator who took the first call for the terrible incident at Dreamworld. The support that her fellow officers gave this comms operator was amazing. Comms officers do incredible work keeping a clear head and directing calls appropriately, all whilst taking important information from those on the scene. It is impossible for me to imagine the impact that such a call would have on these operators. Their training kicks in and they do their job. The same would be said for the first responders at the scene.

Last week I attended the graduation of 12 new QFES firefighters from recruit course 114. This group will be located across Queensland, supporting communities each and every day. Their trainers watched with pride as the group marched into the ceremony and cheered loudly as they threw their hats skyward in celebration. All of the new officers and families were beaming with pride, as was I, because I know that these firefighters will represent and serve our communities. I know that they will put themselves above others to preserve life and property, and I know how well they have been trained. The staff at QCESA are exceptional, and I believe there is no better place to be trained in the important work of emergency services, whether it be QFES or QAS. Importantly, I am proud that I now know they will be protected in the future if they develop PTSD. I commend this bill to the House.