




Speech By  
**Hon. Mark Furner**

**MEMBER FOR FERNY GROVE**

---

Record of Proceedings, 11 May 2021

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

 **Hon. ML FURNER** (Ferry Grove—ALP) (Minister for Agricultural Industry Development and Fisheries and Minister for Rural Communities) (3.21 pm): I rise to support the Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill. I would like to commend the committee for its work on these reforms and, of course, the staff who supported the committee so well through this process.

There are few in our community who are more admired than those on the front line dealing with the most horrendous incidents that our emergency workers can face. Our first responders are there when we need them—when serious criminal activity puts our citizens at risk, when buildings catch fire, when vehicles collide, and when children are in danger from those who should protect them. Time after time they put themselves into the breach when we need them the most, and they deal with the crisis in ways the untrained are unable to. The reasons they are up high whenever lists of our most respected professions are published are obvious to us all.

Our first responders pay a price for the trauma they experience and the trauma they witness on a daily basis. Our systems and processes for looking after them are likely better than ever, but, sadly, many still face the long-term impact of post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of what they experience while protecting the rest of us. These workers are proud professionals. They are great at what they do. As much as they might seem bulletproof to us, they can be damaged by what they put themselves through to protect us and to protect the most vulnerable among us.

Our workers compensation system already rightly recognises post-traumatic stress disorder as an injury. However, the very nature of this injury means it can be years before symptoms manifest, and even longer before they are recognised, acknowledged, treated and compensated. Our society has made great strides over the last few decades in that the acceptance and compassion shown to people with mental illnesses and injuries is now what we expect. That is as it should be.

The times when first responders were expected to take all traumatic experiences in their stride or, even worse, hide their pain behind closed doors are hopefully behind us. As a community we needed to move onto a place where pain and trauma do not need to be swept under the rug in order to be thought brave or competent or good enough, and I believe we are getting there. The stigma of PTSD is dissipating.

These changes that make up this legislative amendment are another step in ensuring that first responders who suffer trauma through the broad experience of their employment are adequately compensated and cared for. Crucially, it ensures that there is not an unreasonable or even dangerous delay in PTSD sufferers being able to access the support they need. PTSD symptoms can take a wide range of forms, and some of those symptoms can make it harder for the sufferers to get help. These changes will introduce a presumption that a first responder's PTSD is caused by their employment, unless that can be proven otherwise, eliminating one of the key causes of delays in treatment and support.

Imagine being traumatised by years of trying to save car crash victims or of putting out fires while families alongside you watch their homes go up in flames, only to be met with demands to 'prove it' when you finally reach out for help. These changes mean that our first responders should no longer face the potential for further trauma through the claims process.

Across these service areas there were more than 100 compensation claims for PTSD from the Queensland public sector in the 10 months to May 2020, and more than 90 per cent were accepted. On average, these claimants spent more than nine months off work before being able to return to the workplace with support. These changes are designed specifically to support officers employed under the Police Service Administration Act, authorised officers under the Child Protection Act, corrections officers under the Corrective Services Act, youth justice workers under the Youth Justice Act and fire officers either employed or volunteering under the Fire and Emergency Services Act. They will also apply to doctors and nurses employed in emergency and trauma care, acute care, critical care and high-dependency care roles.

Claims will relate to those who have experienced repeated or extreme exposure to graphic details of traumatic incidents either directly or indirectly as a result of their employment. The amendments in this legislation include appropriate safeguards in terms of access to compensation. For a claim to qualify for the presumptive provisions, the post-traumatic stress disorder diagnosis must be confirmed by a specialist, namely, a psychiatrist. Claims can still be lodged if an injured worker does not have a psychiatrist report confirming the diagnosis; however, insurers will then be required to organise and pay for a psychiatrist report at the time of the claim.

Insurers will remain free to accept claims made for PTSD if diagnosed by a general practitioner, with the claimant in such cases bearing the responsibility to establish that their condition is work related. Claims where the presumption of a work relationship to PTSD is operative, the ability for insurers to rebut claims of a work relationship based on evidence that has been provided will remain in place. The usual and appropriate decision review processes will remain in place for injured workers and employers who are dissatisfied with the decision of an insurer.

I am proud to stand in this place as a former industrial officer with the Queensland Police Union of Employees. Our police and other first responders have a rich and wonderful history of standing up for all of us, so I am proud to be able to stand up in here today and stand up for them. In years gone by I have sat with officers struggling with the trauma and magnitude of what they have experienced, either in a specific incident or over the length and breadth of their careers. I have listened to them as they spoke of their battles, the impacts on their health, the toll on their marriages, and their fear—yes, their fear—of being thought less of if they put their hand up and say they need help. I hope we are approaching the point where every officer and every first responder feels that help is at hand if they are struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder. On many occasions I represented those officers before the workers compensation medical assessment tribunal, with the vast majority of those cases being stress related.

I will give members a bit of a history lesson in terms of workers compensation for police officers. They were not covered by a workers compensation act until 1990. It was a Labor government coming into power that provided assistance to our brave, professional police officers. They had to wait for a Labor government to introduce protection and coverage under the Workers' Compensation Act 1990. Prior to that, the only way they could access assistance for a work related injury was through the sick leave bank. Now they have workers compensation thanks to a Labor government.

I will read into *Hansard* a passage from the second reading speech at the time which was given by Terry Mackenroth, the then minister for police and emergency services. He said—

Police officers will also have the equivalent of full workers' compensation coverage in the appropriate circumstances so that no police officer who is injured at work, or on the way to or from work, is in any worse position than any other working member of the community.

This a standard that a Labor government introduced into this parliament.

I also want to put on record my appreciation of many of the submitters who gave evidence on this bill—in particular, Ian Leavers, the President of the Queensland Police Union of Employees. He fought long and hard not only for the police officers he represents but also for first responders. Also, on many occasions I engaged with the Ferny Grove police in my electorate. They are honourable and decent people, like all police officers, and do a sterling job—in particular, the officer in charge, Jeannie Murray.

In conclusion, I want to thank Minister Grace for introducing this bill into parliament, a bill of a sort that is introduced by Labor governments on a regular basis, supporting workers. I know that she has the back of many of those workers. Well done. I am very proud to commend the bill to the House.