




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR MACALISTER

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

 **Mrs McMAHON** (Macalister—ALP) (3.45 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Workers' Compensation and Rehabilitation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2020. I thank both the previous committee of the 56th Parliament and the current committee for its consideration of the bill. I thank the minister for seeing this bill through to the parliament, noting the extensive work and consultation that has gone into developing this bill.

This bill is one that is important to me. In contributing to this bill I declare: that I have served as a sworn police officer in this state for 20 years; that in that time I have had my own mental health issues and subsequent battles with the service following a mental health diagnosis; and that my husband is still a serving police officer here in Queensland.

When I stood in this House just over three years ago to give my address-in-reply I outlined the pride I had in serving this state as a member of the Queensland Police Service. In that speech I made specific reference to my desire to be a champion for the general duties officer—the uniformed first responder—in this House, so it is as a champion of the general duties police officer that I offer my support and contribution to this bill.

I have seen the enthusiasm that people have when they join the Queensland Police Service. I have conducted many police recruiting interviews. I have sat with hundreds of civilians as they signed and I co-signed their first QPS employment contract. I have marched with hundreds more as they graduated as sworn police officers on that most joyous day. These people joined the Police Service to make a contribution to their community—a difference. They see the positives that police officers can bring about in keeping people safe. Very few of them, if any, are prepared for what they will see on the road. There are just not that many jobs out there that really prepare you, because in general duties you will see it all. They will see death—and lots of it—in almost every single imaginable way, the sudden and the not so sudden. They will see the results of, and bear witness to, extreme violence. They will see the worst of human depravity visited upon the most innocent. They will see and deal with people who are experiencing the worst day of their lives, and they will be the bearer of the worst news. They will put words to the news that you cannot bear to hear.

Some wretched few will have to make the split-second decision that ends someone else's life. They will carry that around and then they will go home. They will have dinner with their kids, put them to bed and wake up the next day for their next shift. Rinse, repeat. There is only so much that one can do to prepare a police recruit for this. For many of the police recruits I accompanied to the morgue it would be the first time they had seen a dead body. The mental health and trauma resilience training at the academy can only do so much when there is little real world context and emotion at play. There is only so much you can role-play or put on butcher's paper.

I remember my first shift on the road after graduation. I was 21. It was a fatal car crash on Nerang Broadbeach Road. It would be the first of dozens that I would attend throughout my career—holding someone's hand because that is all you could reach in the mangled wreckage of a car as they sobbed,

cried and took their last breaths. The suicides, the stabbings, the gunshot wounds, the lost limbs, the dismemberments, the violent murders, the drowned bloated bodies, the sudden unexplained deaths of infants. We all have a dark sense of humour and the most morbid dinner conversations. It is kind of how we cope.

It can blur. They can all fade into this dark picture but some of them do not. The faces, the bodies, the feeling of dread, the sounds of the guttural cries of grieving relatives—it pervades and it lingers. It sits at the bottom of your chest like a weight. Time eventually does lighten that weight but only until the next job, and then that cumulative weight just sits so heavy that sometimes you feel like you cannot get up. When you cannot get up and when you cannot put into words what it is that dragged you down there in the first place, when you most need help, that is when the first responder is meant to navigate the mental health and workers compensation scheme—if that person is even strong enough to do so.

I have spoken before in this House about the stigma of mental health and seeking help within the police culture, so I will not spend time going over those well-known cultural barriers again. Suffice to say that putting your hand up to ask for help is no easy thing. Beyond Blue's 2018 report *Answering the call* revealed that mental health and psychological injury claims for first responders were 10 times higher than the general workforce. One in three police and emergency service employees experience high or very high psychological distress. It also found that of those who made claims 75 per cent found that the actual workplace compensation system was detrimental to their recovery. What system does that? The very system one needs to navigate to get better actually makes them worse. One submitter viewed the compensation process as highly retraumatising. If I can say one good thing for the Queensland system, it is that in my experience it is still 10 times better than the military compensation and rehabilitation service.

The difficulty often experienced by emergency service responders—the ones who rock up to these jobs day in, day out—is the ability to link a psychological injury or diagnosis to a particular event. For those of you who are familiar with filling out the types of claim forms out there, the first page normally requires the complainant to fill out the time, date and place that the injury was sustained. For many first responders, they are unable to identify one particular incident because it is the result of a cumulative exposure to trauma. This bill provides first responders and eligible employees of first responder agencies suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder with easier, timelier access to necessary support and compensation by reversing the onus of proof and deeming their injury to be work related. I acknowledge the categories of employees that are captured under the provisions of this bill and note the role that the 12-month review will have in determining whether sufficient employment categories are covered in this bill. I also note that the minister will table the outcome of that 12-month review.

This bill is important. Do not underestimate the lives that are precariously balanced as shattered, broken people—the ones who put their hands up to serve the community for the greater good—navigate the system looking for help. I have been to far too many funerals. If all it took was love and support to help these people, to bring them back from the brink, so many more of my friends and colleagues would still be here today.

It has been just over three years since we lost a great friend and colleague, Senior Constable Bruce Cooper. Bruce served 10 years in the New South Wales police and then 10 years with the QPS. Bruce struggled with what he saw and what he did in the service and the jobs that he went to. Bruce coped by drinking. He was medically retired in 2008. So many people reached out but it was not enough. Once he was medically retired, the organisational support just was not there. Ironically, sadly, they were all there to manage the police incident that ended it all. I would like to acknowledge in this House the work of Mark Kelly and the team at Blue Hope. They stand ready to help current and former serving officers and I urge any and all former and current serving members to reach out when it is too much. I commend the bill to the House.