




Speech By
Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Record of Proceedings, 29 November 2023

**VICTIMS OF CRIME ASSISTANCE AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT
BILL**

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (2.19 pm): You caught me off guard, Deputy Speaker. I was not ready for you.

Ms Boyd: You should always be ready.

Mr BENNETT: Yes, indeed. Thank you very much for the guidance from the other side. I rise to make a contribution to this legislation. I thank everyone on the committee for the work they have done in closing this out. As has been acknowledged, a lot of other work was done previously in getting us to where we are today.

The bill proposes to: increase the upper limits for financial assistance payments and special assistance payments available to victims; increase the upper limits for payable funeral expenses and distress payments; and reclassify crimes of domestic violence as a category B act of violence for the purpose of special assistance payments. The committee received considered submissions from community services, legal services and the Office of the Interim Victims' Commissioner. They were all very welcome and we thank them for their participation.

The committee requested, and was provided with, key statistics from the Department of Justice and Attorney-General in relation to reported crime rates and the scale of financial assistance provided to victims of crime. Of particular concern is the rising number of instances of reported crime in the community and the consequential number of victims of crime seeking assistance. The committee heard from many submitters welcoming the amendments contained in the bill, noting that, except for the funeral assistance, nothing much had moved in this space since 2009. There are a lot of people welcoming the new amendments.

Issues about the increase in applications for financial assistance was prosecuted and lodged with Victim Assist Queensland, with the already, in some cases, lengthy delays in providing assistance. There was a case—and it was raised with the committee—about staffing and resources for Victim Assist. I am sure that the Attorney and others will look at that in due course and provide the opportunity for victims to get assistance in a timely manner.

During the public briefing with the department committee members were provided with some sobering statistics in terms of the number of victims. Again, when you do not absorb yourself in these sorts of bills you do not really grasp the magnitude of some of the issues happening in our state. The department advised—

In the 2021-22 Crime Report published by the Queensland Government Statistician's Office, there were 64,540 victims (52,202 unique victims) of offences against the person recorded by the Queensland Police Service (QPS), noting a 49.2% increase in total recorded victims (41.2% increase in total unique victims) reported in 2020-21 (43,260 total victims and 36,962 unique victims recorded).

There are a lot of numbers. The magnitude of the percentage increases was something that the committee, particularly my colleague the member for Oodgeroo when he was asking these questions about the numbers, was quite surprised about. We were looking forward to the transcripts to make sure that we could validate some of these issues. When compared to 2021-22, there was a 54 per cent increase in financial assistance applications, and for the number of financial assistance applications relating to domestic and family violence there was an 87 per cent on the year before. There is significant work going on.

Of the 7,621 applications for assistance received by Victim Assist Queensland in 2022-23, the department paid nearly \$40 million to support nearly 7,000 victims recover from crime in Queensland. That figure includes: payments totalling \$29 million in special assistance; \$800,000 for counselling; payments totalling \$6.5 million for damaged clothing, distress, funeral expenses, incidental travel expenses and so on. In terms of the rising number of applications to Victim Assist Queensland from victims of crime, the department stated—

In 2017, legislative amendments were made to the Victims of Crime Assistance Act 2009 which extended eligibility for financial assistance to all victims of DFV. Since these amendments were introduced, VAQ has seen a 195% increase in applications for financial assistance. Further, in 2022-23, 56% of all financial assistance applications came from DFV victims.

When questioned at the public briefing about whether there had been any financial modelling done on the anticipated costs of this bill, the government disclosed the fact that \$185 million had been modelled for this particular bill over five years and another \$40 million per annum ongoing from 2028-29.

There remain questions about the actual funding allocations to allow the reported increases of financial assistance to victims. We asked that question because the explanatory notes did not provide any estimates of costs but talked about budgetary processes. It stated—

The anticipated costs of the increased maximum amounts of financial assistance will be met through normal budget processes.

The costs associated with increasing the number of members on QSAC will be met through existing departmental allocations.

I questioned the sincerity of putting budget processes in the explanatory notes when we are talking about nearly \$220 million. The remuneration of newly created positions should be disclosed in the interests of transparency and integrity of the process.

The committee has heard the support for the recommended changes to the Victims of Crime Assistance and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2023, with the proposed amendments providing for increased support for victims of crime. The bill addresses recommendations from several reviews, including the independent Commission of Inquiry into Queensland Police Service responses to domestic and family violence, the Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce, and the Legal Affairs and Safety Committee inquiry that has been reported.

Overall, I thank the committee, the secretariat and my fellow committee members for getting this bill inquiry done so quickly. It was a bit rushed but, as has been said, the work had been done pretty much over the previous year. We are not opposing the bill. We look forward to making sure that those people who unfortunately become victims of crime do get support. It is great to see this bill moving in the right direction.