




Speech By
Michael Berkman

MEMBER FOR MAIWAR

Record of Proceedings, 21 August 2024

MOTION

Mental Health Services

 **Mr BERKMAN** (Maiwar—Grn) (4.40 pm): I rise to speak in support of the motion. I start by saying that we are here once again giving Labor an opportunity to prove their values, to walk the walk and to do the right thing. We are asking them to support 20 free sessions with a psychologist each year for Queenslanders instead of the current paltry, clearly inadequate, 10 sessions.

Surely this time they cannot argue that this is some pie-in-the-sky, pixie-dust proposal that cannot be achieved—an impossible dream. We have had 20 subsidised sessions under mental health plans before—during COVID—and that was transformative for so many people’s lives, but the federal Labor government cut the 20 sessions in half—back to 10—last year. Now we have a growing mental health crisis, particularly among young people, and a cost-of-living crisis that is stopping people from getting the help they desperately need.

Queensland’s mental healthcare system is still woefully underfunded. Despite whatever significant uplift the government wants to point to, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has reported that we have the lowest per capita spend on specialist mental health services in the country, and a much higher rate of suicide among people pervades in Queensland.

During the inquiry that we have heard so much about—we are not aloof to these figures; the member for South Brisbane has mentioned them—the recommendation from experts was that we needed an uplift of between \$650 million and \$900 million. Since then, the government has halved that amount and put an extra \$350 million in. Since then, demand for mental health care has only grown while support to access it has been cut. It is clear from experts like the Australian Psychological Association that 10 sessions are just not enough. Evidence indicates that 18 to 20 sessions per year are needed, even, in some cases, for relatively minor mental health conditions.

We cannot have Labor and the LNP continue to act like mental health care is a luxury. Mental health care is health care and it should be free. It is not a ‘nice to have’; it is absolutely essential. Mental ill health is the leading cause of disability and death among young people and those same young people struggling with mental ill health are increasingly unable to afford a psychologist because they are flat out covering the costs of daily life. One in five people are delaying seeking mental health support because of its cost. That figure is closer to 40 per cent amongst low-income people. It has risen to that point since Labor cut the number of Medicare funded psychology sessions. If this government refuses to freeze or limit rent increases, refuses to cap grocery prices, continues to fail to build enough public housing and continues to let the big banks run roughshod over mortgage holders and hopeful first home buyers, perhaps the very least they could do is allow people to see a psychologist for free.

Our proposal is one to address the failings of the federal government that cut the number of subsidised sessions under a mental health plan. The Greens are saying that this state government can and should step up and fix it. Proposing 20 free sessions per year with 1,000 additional psychologists

employed at public health clinics across the state would make these sessions available to any Queenslanders with a mental healthcare plan. The state government could claim the Medicare rebate for the first 10 sessions and cover the cost of the additional 10 sessions with funds raised by our proposed mining royalty raisers. We are not talking about the short-term sugar hit from the so-called progressive coal royalties increase. We are talking about a genuine, sustained, fair share of returns for Queenslanders.

Crucially, these psychologist positions would be secure, well-paid jobs, making them more attractive to people who have been forced out of private clinical practice and helping to address the workforce shortage in the sector. They would be employed directly by Queensland Health, with salaries on par with the private sector and leave entitlements and professional development opportunities.

The real question is: are we willing to make mental health a priority? This is a question of priorities. Are we willing to stop treating and valuing mental health as subordinate to other kinds of health? Bringing back 20 psychologist sessions under a mental healthcare plan and making them free would save lives. It would improve workforce engagement, reduce burdens on emergency departments and strengthen community safety and cohesion. It is certainly a better solution than building more youth prisons, given that half of the children who reach the point of offending have a mental health or behavioural disorder.

The Greens' plan is clear: make mental health a priority. Fund 20 free psychologist sessions for every Queenslanders who needs it. It is over to the government now.