

**Question on Notice
No. 794
Asked on 17 August 2004**

MRS J ATTWOOD asked the Minister for Child Safety (MR REYNOLDS)-

QUESTION:

With reference to working in the child protection area which would be very stressful and requires a high level of emotional effort-

What is he doing to ensure that staff workloads are reduced to a suitable level and what support mechanisms are in place?

ANSWER:

I thank the Member for her question and her interest in this important issue. On 6 January 2004, the Crime and Misconduct Commission (CMC) delivered to State Parliament, a package of recommendations designed to herald a new era in child protection in Queensland. The CMC report called for comprehensive reforms to the child protection system in Queensland to ensure that all children at risk from harm, abuse or neglect will be properly protected, cared for and supported.

The Forster Blueprint presents a plan of action for implementing the 110 recommendations contained in the CMC Report, *Protecting Children: An Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Foster Care* and the Gwenn Murray Report, *Final Report on phase one of the Audit of foster carers subject to child protection notifications*.

Specifically, the Blueprint details proposed actions for implementing the CMC and Gwenn Murray Audit recommendations regarding workforce numbers, caseloads for Family Services Officers (Child Safety Officers), an Employee Support Program, and training and professional development of staff.

In accordance with the CMC recommendation in relation to increasing workforce numbers, a nationwide recruitment campaign designed to recruit 518 additional staff over three years (with 318 in 2004-05) closed on 31 May 2004. The total number of enquiries received during the campaign was 10,034 and this translated into 1,600 applications (1,000 for Child Safety Support Officers and 600 for Child Safety Officers).

As at 2 September 2004, 200 applicants have been selected as suitable for permanent appointment, 30 qualified Child Safety Officers have been permanently appointed to priority areas throughout the state and commenced training, and a further 56 suitable, existing Family Services Officers had been converted from temporary to permanent employment.

Specialist positions, such as Senior Practitioners and designated Court Coordinators to manage all court preparation work, will also be located in Child Safety Service Centres to provide greater support and assistance to Child Safety Officers.

The Blueprint noted that Senior Practitioners are essential to improving front line service delivery practice standards, with at least one Senior Practitioner required for each Area Office. Senior Practitioners have a role in overseeing quality assurance for the entire work unit and providing advice/decision making in complex matters. Senior Practitioner positions make up 19 of the additional 518 total staff. This will increase the total number of Senior Practitioner positions to 46 FTEs over the next two years, which is a significant increase in the existing number of positions.

The recently launched organisational structure for the Department of Child Safety comprising seven Zones and 46 Child Safety Service Centres, is designed to ensure appropriate ratios of direct service delivery staff to management and administration staff.

In response to the Gwenn Murray Report recommendations regarding maximum caseloads for Family Services Officers, the Blueprint details appropriate staff workloads for Child Safety Officers as 15 cases per Child Safety Officer, and recommends that each Team Leader supervises a maximum of 6 Child Safety Officers. These reforms are designed to ensure not only manageable workloads, but also appropriate levels of support and supervision for staff. In addition to permanent staff appointments previously mentioned, 77 additional staff have been temporarily employed to assist with workloads in the area offices.

A number of initiatives are currently being implemented across the department to ensure appropriate support mechanisms are in place for Child Safety staff. The Blueprint recommended support for frontline employees and the introduction of a program that includes debriefing, vicarious trauma and resilience training, peer support and maximising external employee support assistance.

I am pleased to advise that on 30 August 2004, the first Peer Support Program for child protection workers was launched by the Director-General, Department of Child Safety. Twenty staff attended the five-day program and a total of approximately 80 staff are due to complete the training this year, with courses starting in September and November. A further series of courses will be conducted in 2005.

The Peer Support Program trains departmental staff, who have volunteered for the Program, to provide psychological and emotional support to their work colleagues as part of a new Employee Support Program that recognises the stressful nature of child protection work. Program topics include post traumatic

stress, vicarious trauma, loss and grief, Indigenous issues and understanding the unique nature of child protection and support work. This Program is one element of a new integrated Employee Support Program currently being developed, which includes post incident debriefing, Employee Assistance Scheme counselling, education, training and research.

The provision of post incident debriefing to departmental staff following a critical incident has also commenced, and has been deployed on a number of occasions in recent months following particularly traumatic incidents experienced by staff in area and regional offices. Career and Transition Counselling services have also been acquired, briefed and deployed.

In relation to providing support to staff through training and professional development, the Professional Practice Training Program has been formulated to address the recommendations of the CMC Inquiry and the Gwenn Murray Report. The program will provide training for service delivery staff that is based on national competency standards.

The new Professional Practice Entry Training Program, based on national competency standards, commenced in February 2004. To date, 108 staff have completed the eight-week course. An additional 17 staff graduated from the Program on 10 September 2004.

Another vital initiative to support and retain our staff is to significantly enhance professional supervision.

Effective professional supervision is an essential ingredient in quality assuring decision making by practitioners and in providing our Child Safety Officers and Team Leaders with the professional support and guidance they need to discharge their responsibilities.

Professional supervision training for Team Leaders, Senior Practitioners and Managers will be provided through partnerships with universities in the first instance, as internal capacity and expertise is built up.

In the future, training in professional supervision will be an essential part of the department's advanced training programs for Child Safety Officers, Team Leaders and Senior Practitioners.

Attraction and retention of workers is the key focus of the Community Services Ministers' Advisory Council on Structural Issues in the Community Services Workforce.

My department has lead responsibility for this sub-committee, which includes members from all Australian jurisdictions and New Zealand.

The sub-committee has developed national strategies to address attraction and retention of workers in the community services sector for implementation in 2004-05.

The Blueprint details a number of other fundamentally important initiatives to improve support, morale and well-being of staff in the new Department of Child Safety. These include:

- partnerships with universities;
- the introduction of cross-cultural competence training for all employees;
- leadership, management and supervision training for Team Leaders and Managers;
- targeted cadetships and scholarships;
- a mentoring program targeted towards Indigenous staff;
- an enhanced rural and remote incentive program; and
- upgraded positions of Manager, Team Leader and a new position of Senior Child Safety Officer at an increased salary classification level.

I value the staff of my department and I am determined to create an environment within the department where they feel valued and appreciated for the vital work they do in protecting Queensland's most vulnerable children and young people.