



Speech by

Jann Stuckey

MEMBER FOR CURRUMBIN

Hansard Tuesday, 25 November 2008

EMERGENCY SERVICES LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

Mrs STUCKEY (Currumbin—LNP) (8.11 pm): I rise to speak on the Emergency Services Legislation Amendment Bill 2008, brought into the House by the Minister for Emergency Services on 7 October this year. As the honourable member for Mirani and shadow minister for emergency services has already indicated, the LNP will be supporting this bill. The principal objective of the bill is to amend the existing legislation covered under the Ambulance Service Act 1991 and the Fire and Rescue Service Act 1990.

I am pleased to see that the Labor government has finally stepped in to protect these dedicated individuals who are out there serving their communities at all hours of the day and night. Mind you, it has been suggested to me by several front-line emergency workers that some of these amendments may not have been necessary if more forethought had gone into the Community Ambulance Cover Bill 2003, a bill that has raised literally hundreds of millions of dollars for this government.

These amendments will bring into effect the recommendation of the Queensland Ambulance Service audit report, a report that deals with inappropriate use of resources through a framework of addressing false 000 calls and clarifies confidentiality requirements for ambulance employees. The amendments to the Fire and Rescue Service Act 1990 recommend the abolition of the Rural Fire Advisory Council and enable false calls to be dealt with in a consistent manner as established in the Ambulance Service Act 1991.

Firstly I want to focus on the amendments to the Ambulance Service Act 1991. This legislation, as I have already mentioned, is designed to deter false or frivolous calls and abuse of the system by those who do not require this service and provides the ability to serve infringement notices on those members of the public who seek to abuse the service in this manner. Disarmingly, during the 2006-07 period the Queensland Ambulance Service identified 2,378 calls as possible false calls. This shamefully high number translates to countless hours of precious ambulance officer time wasted on selfish individuals who in some strange or perverse way think it funny to dial 000. Collected data also indicates a further 5,658 code 1 and code 2 incidents were attended by paramedics who subsequently entered 'unable to locate' on their report forms, meaning that no patient was found at the scene when the paramedics arrived. No doubt some of these calls were hoaxes and a further sign that some people in our neighbourhoods either do not realise the danger they may be causing to a legitimately ill patient or just do not care what happens to them. The maximum penalty for the QAS false call offence has been increased to 100 penalty units. At \$75 per unit, this is a hefty fine, and so it should be—otherwise it is one year's imprisonment—to reflect the seriousness with which this offence is viewed and to bring it into line with the existing penalty in the Fire and Rescue Service Act 1990.

Speaking recently in my electorate office with some ambulance officers who were Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union representatives, I was further enlightened as to the nature of some of the calls that they receive. One not infrequent example revealed how the communications system for analysing and prioritising calls could still be misleading and people could still abuse this overworked service by giving incomplete information. I was told that often when people phone for help they say that they are breathless, which quite correctly rates as a high priority. Yet when the ambulance and paramedics arrived at one residence recently, the caller had stubbed their toe and became breathless running to the

phone to call the ambulance. Other times patients who have called in with chest pain are packed for hospital by the time help arrives as they failed to tell the communications centre that they had had this chest pain for some 10 years. Chest pain and breathlessness are of course potentially life-threatening symptoms and should be taken seriously, but there will always be people who exaggerate their symptoms in order to get faster treatment.

It is understandable that experienced officers are sick of these calls which have nothing to do with any emergency. I listened to the argument put up by the honourable member for Tablelands, who is worried that callers requiring urgent attention may be too frightened to call for fear of their symptoms not being taken seriously. However, tales of ambulance officers being called to pick up a pizza or to pop down to the chemist for some sort of performance-enhancing medication are indications of some of these time wasters who warrant this legislation. There is, however, no intention to use these provisions in cases where people have a genuine belief that the ambulance and fire services are needed, even if that belief is not borne out by the actual severity of the illness or injury. I understand the genuine concerns that Disability Services Queensland has put forward on behalf of its clientele who, due to psychological or intellectual impairments, may not have the capacity to understand the consequence of their actions.

Since my election as the member for Currumbin in 2004 there have been a number of instances where I have had meetings with disgruntled Gold Coast ambulance officers. In 2006 over 80 furious ambulance officers gathered outside my electorate office to protest about the proposed new roster reforms. They believed these reforms would place more stress upon them and their families and result in even more overtime and loss of meal breaks. I was happy then, as I am now, to advocate strongly for fairer conditions for all of these dedicated workers in the emergency services field. What a pity this government did not put more thought into the effect that the 2003 legislation, which introduced the ambulance levy, would have on the demand for service. Safeguards should have been implemented then to ensure that this essential service was not misused in the first place.

In adopting this blanket approach, with some residents paying two and three levies, it is not surprising to learn that thousands of calls are not legitimate. People feel as though they have a right, because they are paying for it, to use the ambulance for non-urgent reasons. That would usually make sense: if you pay for something, you expect to get something in return.

Our local ambulance committee—and we have heard tonight from many people applauding their local ambulance committees—the Coolangatta-Burleigh Heads branch, which was based at the Bilinga station over many years, raised countless thousands of dollars and purchased numerous items for the Queensland Ambulance Service. I have been with the minister when he has presented some of these items such as defibrillators to our Ambulance Service. Sadly, though, due to dwindling committee members and volunteers, it decided to disband last year. One of the reasons members of that committee cited was the new ambulance levy that was introduced in 2003. They believed that people were less inclined to give donations of money or time as they were hearing the message that as all Queenslanders were already paying for this service why should they give more, especially when there were so many other needy causes vying for a donation?

In fact, a recent survey conducted within the industry revealed that almost 80 per cent of emergency services employees thought that their current pay is exceedingly inadequate to their cost of living. This explains the high level of anger that front-line emergency services workers feel towards the Bligh Labor government. At another meeting recently members of the LHMU were telling me about a stop-work protest in Brisbane on 3 November, and the ambulance officers who were in attendance told me that the minister said that they were greedy and asked them what they were worried about, saying that they had job security.

Mr ROBERTS: I rise to a point of order. I find those words offensive and untrue and I ask that they be withdrawn.

Madam DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mrs Kiernan): Order! The member will withdraw.

Mrs STUCKEY: I withdraw. The LHMU told me that the minister went on to say there are lots of people waiting for jobs.

Mr ROBERTS: I rise to a point of order. I find that offensive and untrue and I ask that it be withdrawn.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: The member is to withdraw.

Mrs STUCKEY: I withdraw.

Mr Roberts: I was at the meeting. You weren't there and I didn't say those things.

Mrs STUCKEY: In putting forward the thoughts and wishes of the union tonight, I will be very keen to let them know that the minister certainly feels that he has been misrepresented. Recommendation 2.1 of the Queensland Ambulance Service audit proposes the implementation of an integrated demand management strategy to reduce demand pressures on the organisation and its staff. This recommendation

also allows for alternative referral for non-urgent transfers, or determining that patients are able to be treated in their own homes and thus not requiring ambulance transport for treatment in an emergency department.

The amendment provides for legislative support for the expanded scope and role of paramedics to provide treatment or alternative referral pathways where ambulance transport to a medical facility is not required. That will undoubtedly serve to free up the backlog of non-urgent case transportation to hospitals, help to relieve the critical issue of ramping of ambulances at emergency departments and, hopefully, free up our highly qualified paramedics to deal with more urgent front-line medical emergencies. In supporting this amendment, I echo the sentiments of the shadow minister with regard to the liability of paramedics who make a diagnosis and/or referral that leads to a negative consequence for the patient.

Part 2 of this bill, which contains amendments to the Fire and Rescue Service Act 1990, also deals with false calls in a consistent manner by reflecting the framework for addressing these deceptive calls and further deterring the number of false calls with the imposition of infringement notices.

During this debate we have heard many accolades for the wonderful assistance that was given by our volunteer and other emergency services personnel during the recent disasters. I would like to take a moment to applaud the untiring work of our rural fires in the Currumbin electorate. The Tomewin, Currumbin Valley and Tallebudgera Valley brigades are all volunteer rural fire brigades. Many of their members are long-time residents who know more than a bit about fires and who between them have hundreds of years of experience. People are drawn to the tranquil lifestyle that the valleys offer and, as our population grows, so does the need for more volunteers to keep our homes and bushland safe.

The Minister for Emergency Services, like his colleagues, mentions over and over that the Bligh government's major priority is front-line service providers, yet there is no doubt that the culture of bullying and low morale continues. Emotions and frustrations overflowed at the recent sitting of parliament in Cairns when ambos and fires from across Queensland, appalled at this government's shabby treatment of them, protested loudly both inside and outside the venue.

I found the comments of the member for Aspley interesting, as she called for the LNP to make a commitment to keeping the PTS if it was elected to govern Queensland. What about her government's record and commitment to keeping officers, when many ambos have indicated that they are considering alternative employment or retirement rather than continuing to work under intolerable conditions? If I were an ambo, a fire, a nurse or a police officer, I know which team I would be backing.

A report undertaken recently by the EMSPA organisation, which is the Emergency Medical Service Protection Association, stated that over 58 per cent of Queensland Ambulance Service employees were actively seeking other employment options. This was attributed by over 80 per cent to poor management and over 70 per cent to low morale. It is to be hoped that in some way this legislation is going to be able to reduce those figures. I ask members on the other side of the House, when drafting legislation in the future, to seriously consider the long-term ramifications of amendments to emergency service provisions to ensure that this problem, which was largely borne out of a revenue-raising exercise, will not impact further on our emergency services or our personnel.

As one paramedic and union representative told me last week when I asked him if he thought this legislation would have any effect, we won't know until it's put to the test. With those words, I commend the bill to the House and re-enforce the LNP's commitment to emergency services—our front-line heroes—unlike those opposite, who have treated them shabbily for years.