

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

Fourth Report — “The Toll of Trauma on Western Australian Emergency Staff and Volunteers” — Tabling

MR I.M. BRITZA (Morley) [10.53 am]: I present for tabling the fourth report of the Select Committee on Community Development and Justice, titled “The Toll of Trauma on Western Australian Emergency Staff and Volunteers”.

[See paper 1625.]

Mr I.M. BRITZA: I notice that the chair of our committee came into the chamber. We were not expecting her to be here and had decided that I would present her foreword and then make a couple of brief comments after that. The tenth report of the Standing Committee on Community Development and Justice in the thirty-eighth Parliament entitled “The Toll of Trauma on Western Australian Emergency Staff and Volunteers” was laid on the table of the Legislative Assembly on 27 September 2012. It contained 27 findings and 23 recommendations and can be viewed on the government website.

The previous government had not responded to the committee’s recommendations before the thirty-eighth Parliament was prorogued, following the announcement of a state election. Despite three requests to the Minister for Community Services to provide a response to the committee’s current report, the committee has not received a response. Given the importance of the recommendations and concerns about government inertia, the current committee resolved on 7 May 2014 to bring the recommendations to the attention of the government by tabling them in the current Parliament. The committee’s report in the thirty-eighth Parliament found that the processes used by state government agencies to prepare and protect police officers, firefighters, paramedics and nearly 50 000 volunteers fell well behind those processes that operate in other jurisdictions. The committee’s report of the thirty-eighth Parliament sought to correct that situation by recommending that the chief executive officers of the relevant agencies be made accountable for the psychological wellbeing of staff and volunteers.

Although the inquiry’s focus was initially on trauma suffered as a result of attending natural disasters, the committee found that the cumulative effect of attending everyday emergencies often resulted in greater stress levels. However, none of the major state agencies has systems that can record traumatic events faced by their staff over time. The committee of the thirty-eighth Parliament noted that this major shortcoming could be addressed quickly and reasonably cheaply by using systems already in place in similar agencies in Victoria and Queensland. The committee also uncovered that for various reasons, but maybe monetary, the main emergency agencies do not undertake exercises and simulations based on the worst possible situation the state could face—for example, an earthquake during peak hour in Perth’s central business district. Every five years or so, resources should be provided for them to undertake a more realistic exercise based on the worst-case scenario, otherwise we will be as badly prepared as were the communities in Christchurch, New Orleans and New York.

The committee spoke with 160 staff from emergency response agencies in Western Australia and other jurisdictions, many of whom remain emotionally scarred. The committee applauds their professionalism in undertaking dangerous and sometimes traumatic tasks that most Western Australians will never have to encounter. The committee thanked those who contributed to the report for their honesty and for sharing their ideas about how to make staff support systems in Western Australia more effective. The committee of the thirty-eighth Parliament noted that it was now up to government to agree to its recommendations, most of which would cost little to implement.

In closing, it is important that the government provide a response to the Parliament on the matters contained in the tenth report, the findings and recommendations of which are produced in this report. Failure to do so in a timely fashion will be evidence that the government does not consider that those who serve our community in emergency responses and who now need our support are worthy of attention.

It was my honour and privilege to introduce this committee’s report of the thirty-eighth Parliament after experiencing one challenging and rough day with the forensic department at the Campbelltown police department in New South Wales in the mid-1990s. After hearing the testimonies of the officers about homicidal scenes they attended and had to deal with, I realised quickly that some of the officers had still not dealt with those experiences many years after I met them. At that time I decided that I was determined to do whatever I could to assist those who work daily on the front line where all traumas in all of its facets are displayed. Experiencing death in all of its forms daily would in the end have to take its toll on the human mind and eventually the body.

The testimonies that the former committee heard were quite difficult to hear and receive, and we were just hearing the front-line workers tell their own stories. The experiences of emergency services personnel at Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, 9/11 in New York and the earthquake in Christchurch were pretty much the same. Although the testimonies and statements we heard were generally distressing, painful, full of stress, worry,

consternation, anxiety and alarm, and, of course, alive with the experience of extreme trauma, there were a couple of incidences that filled the room with chuckles and humorous disbelief, which showed that traumatic events can sometimes be the delivery service of some very confronting truths. I want to share one of those stories from New York—that is as about as personal as I will get—when we sat before a particular organisation that lost the most people in the twin towers on 9/11. When dealing with the families of the deceased people to find out about compensation, the wife of one man who had died came to get her compensation, only to find out that there was another woman who came with her children who said that she was the wife of the person who died. While those two women were dealing with that discovery, another wife came forward! The 9/11 disaster revealed that the man had three families. The situation was not very funny; what could the organisation do? I believe—the committee chair will need to confirm this—that the organisation decided to pay compensation to the three families. That story is not so uncommon; indeed, we heard about a similar situation after the Christchurch earthquake. You never know; members with three families should watch out if a bomb goes off here!

The report's 27 findings are very uncomfortable reading, but nonetheless they need to be read and digested expeditiously by those who have the power and capacity to make the appropriate changes and transformations. Of course, it goes without saying that the 23 recommendations were well conceived and intentional and that they should be deliberated on with the utmost vigilance, discretion and prudence. All these matters do not take away the simple fact that the committee's report has not received an official response from the government, even though it was tabled in September 2012. The committee's many findings and recommendations have still not been addressed. I accept that the timing of the tabling of the report and its call for an official departmental response on 27 September 2012, just before the 2013 election, was not ideal and that a delay in the government's response can certainly be justified and genuinely excused. However, here we are in May 2014 and still we have not heard from the Fire and Emergency Services Authority or the Minister for Emergency Services. I would like to think that the lack of a response to the report has been a genuine department oversight. Nevertheless, I support the tabling of this fourth report and encourage the minister to give it his sober attention and solemn consideration and deliberation.

I commend the Chair of the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee, the member for Girrawheen; we served together on the previous committee. I ask the government to take notice of the report and to provide a response as soon as possible.