



PARLIAMENT OF NEW SOUTH WALES
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SEVENTH PARLIAMENT

Bills - Second Reading Debate

28 May 2019

AGEING AND DISABILITY COMMISSIONER BILL 2019

Ms SONIA HORNER (Wallsend) (18:09):

Fletcher local Lachie Riggs is an absolute soccer tragic. When he was diagnosed with Tourette Syndrome last year, 13-year-old Lachie was worried that he would not be able to play this season. Thankfully the Northern NSW Football and Newcastle Football worked together to find a new side for Lachie to play in—the South Wallsend Junior Soccer Club stepped up. His mother, Janelle, told the Newcastle Herald:

There was a lack of education and willingness to be educated about Lachie's condition...we're hoping to spread the word as far as we can because the more people that know the more accepting they're going to be.

This week, noting that we have just celebrated Tourettes Awareness Week and with Lachie in mind, I asked the Minister for Families, Communities and Disability Services, the Minister for Sport, Multiculturalism, Seniors and Veterans and the Minister for Education and Early Childhood Learning about awareness programs and systems to help young people diagnosed with the syndrome. Lachie would not be covered by the provisions of this bill, which aims to protect and promote the rights of adults with a disability and the elderly, but his case is illustrative of why we need to have these sorts of the protections. With the support of Janelle and his community Lachie's story had a happy ending. But not everyone who is diagnosed with a disability is so lucky nor are those in aged case.

Estimates from the Australian Bureau of Statistics state that 40,000 older people and 90,000 people with disability experience violence each year in this State. That is a staggering number but the prosecution rates remain low. Older Australians and people living with disability are some of the most vulnerable members of our community. They deserve protection against violence and exploitation. We need a professional government organisation in their corner and advocating for them without fear or favour. The abuse suffered by the elderly and those living with disability is coming to light thanks to greater community awareness and ground-breaking journalism. Still not enough is being done to redress the harm that has been done.

This bill, and the establishment of the commissioner's office and advisory board will go some way to doing something about this. One of the stated purposes of the Ageing and Disability Commissioner is to provide for community education and general advice and assistance to the public. The commissioner would also be in place to help people with disabilities and the elderly deal with allegations of abuse, neglect or exploitation. The mandate to inquire into and report on systemic issues with aged care and disability services in New South Wales will ensure that the issues impacting elderly people and people living with disabilities are kept front and centre for this and all future governments. A Cardiff resident, Julie Robinson, wrote to the Newcastle Herald about the experiences of her mother and mother-in-law in local aged care facilities. She said:

There is some good and a lot wrong with life for people in aged care facilities...my mother lived in hostel care in a church-based facility. The food initially was reasonable but deteriorated over time. The meals, I was told, were adequate nutritionally but were chilled and brought in. There are big profits in bulk cooking but it not good for residents who have to live on reheated food. It is cooking smells that give you an appetite and make you look forward to eating. She went on to say:

My mother-in-law was in a private facility which left a lot to be desired. During all the years she was there, first in low and then high care, she never had one outing. In fact, I doubt they had a bus. It was a little better than being in prison. The treatment of my loved ones didn't change in death. When my mother died they wanted her room cleared as quickly as possible, that is, the very next day. My mother-in-law's personal possessions were packed up into cardboard boxes by staff when she died. The elderly deserve a whole lot more than they are getting now.

As Julie said, part of this collapse in the standard of care can be linked back to the privatisation of aged care and disability care. When protecting and caring for the vulnerable becomes a money maker, companies will cut costs—and the standard of their services—to keep their profit margins strong. I have heard from workers in the sector who have reported that the standard of their employment, and of the care they are able to provide despite their best efforts, has dropped due to privatisation of services like Ageing, Disability and Home Care and a drop in funding. I am proud of my record on this issue, fighting to keep the Wallsend Aged Care Facility in public hands.

I support efforts to add protections for the elderly and those living with disabilities. Although we will support the bill, I regret that it has taken so long for the Government to get to this point. I hope the Government will consider the amendments we offer so that this bill may be strengthened and people with disability and older people can be fully protected by this new commissioner.