



PARLIAMENT OF NEW SOUTH WALES
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SEVENTH PARLIAMENT

Private Members' Statements

17 May 2022

NSW AMBULANCE SERVICES

Ms SONIA HORNERY (Wallsend) (16:30):

NSW Ambulance response times were among the slowest in the country in January and were the State's longest wait times in a decade, even before Omicron added strain to our health system. The data speaks for itself: In the September 2021 quarter, Ambulance Newcastle response times were slower than the same quarter in 2020. It took paramedics one minute and 24 seconds longer to reach emergency cases, a median time of 12 minutes and 36 seconds. For urgent cases the median wait was 22 minutes and 18 seconds—an increase of two minutes and 24 seconds. The percentage of emergency cases waiting 15 minutes for an ambulance was 52.4 per cent—an 8.1 per cent increase in a year. The median time it took the highest priority life-threatening cases to see an ambulance was up 36 seconds to eight minutes and 36 seconds.

The Productivity Commission's report says waiting time blowouts are squarely the responsibility of this Government. Funding was slashed and NSW Ambulance remains critically under-resourced per head of population. Health Services Union secretary Gerard Hayes said:

... Unprecedented pressure and fewer resources is a recipe for disaster.

Paramedics are at breaking point because there are simply not enough of them. The NSW Government needs to stop cutting funding to the service, employ more paramedics and also retain the ones we already have.

I have said before that in situations where every second counts, a single minute means a difference between life and death. Our paramedics are losing that precious time, and patients pay the price. When Hanna Scigala sat down to eat with her kids on 4 January, there is no way any of them could have expected what came next. The 31-year-old single mother of three entered severe anaphylactic shock and went into cardiac arrest in front of her children, Madden, aged 12; Leo, aged nine; and three-year-old Peyton. Hanna attempted to call 000 on a number of occasions but was disconnected due to issues with the phone system. After nine minutes of trying, an ambulance was finally dispatched to her home, arriving 11 minutes later. It took 52 minutes for an intensive care ambulance to arrive at Hanna's home, even after a code 1 call to 000.

It is due to large numbers of ambulances stuck in bed block at Hunter hospitals. She was not transported to hospital until 11.20, and by that time Hanna had suffered a hypoxic brain injury. Sadly, Hanna died several days later at John Hunter Hospital when her family made the impossible decision to take her off life support. This tragic incident could have been avoided if the State's ambulance services were adequately staffed and resourced. For years I have been trying for a stronger, more robust ambulance service. I have warned that the consistent failures to meet on-time targets and widespread reports of paramedic exhaustion and burnout would lead to tragedy. Hanna's death is exactly that tragedy.

Hanna's parents ensured that her tragic death had some positive impacts, donating her organs and potentially saving other lives. I thank the health Minister, who liaised with me directly over the past month about this issue. NSW Ambulance has spoken with Hanna's mother, Christine, and offered its apology and an explanation. But the fact remains that the ambulance required, with intensive care paramedics, did not arrive for 52 minutes due to bed block. We must address the chronic under-resourcing and paramedic shortage immediately. It is the least that we can do for Hanna