



PARLIAMENT OF NEW SOUTH WALES
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SEVENTH PARLIAMENT

Motions

13 May 2021

HUNTER REGION CODE ONE INCIDENTS

Ms SONIA HORNER (Wallsend) (12:33):

I move:

That this House:

(1) Notes New South Wales has the second slowest paramedic response times across Australia for Code One Incidents.

(2) Notes ambulance services in the Hunter Region are running at or above capacity, particularly on weekends.

(3) Calls on the Minister for Health and Medical Research to review the minimum operating levels and employ more paramedics.

How would members feel if a nursing home patient with a broken hip in their electorate waited six hours in agony for an ambulance to arrive? Like me, they might be shocked.

In 2019, the Health Minister announced that an extra 750 paramedics and call centre staff would be employed over four years. So far the number of new paramedics in the Hunter has not kept pace with the numbers of paramedics leaving the industry.

It is obvious that the Government is not funding extra staff. Every time a paramedic goes on unplanned leave—and that is a regular occurrence because

injuries remain sky high for ambulance workers—there is no money to call in a replacement.

It leaves the community down close to one ambulance for every injured or sick paramedic each shift. Hunter ambulances are running at or above capacity at the best of times, and weekends are much worse.

In the Lower Hunter on Friday nights, only nine cars are working to service a vast area and a big population. It was on a typical Friday night on 5 February this year that a patient in a nursing home in the Wallsend electorate was forced to wait for six hours in excruciating pain until an ambulance arrived. Dozens of jobs were queued up and not enough ambulances to cover them. It is not unacceptable but it is not an isolated incident.

Kristy told me via social media:

When my daughter was seven months old I phoned an ambulance because she was having difficulty breathing. I waited an hour and rung them so many times in that hour saying she's getting worse and that I was worried about putting her in her seat as lying made it worse for her. Their response each time was "there's no ambulances". In the end my husband decided we would take the risk and drive her up. Once we'd been through triage and things had settled I phoned them back to let them know to cancel the ambulance—they still hadn't assigned one to her.

Justin put it very well when he commented:

My wife called an ambulance for me last year. Took near two hours for an ambulance to arrive at our house and then I was told they couldn't take me to John Hunter as that would take them out of service for too long with limited crews available, so my family ended up driving me to hospital. Not a bad word can be said against the paramedics. They were great and were just doing their job in really tough circumstances but it definitely highlighted a clear problem.

I agree. Our paramedics are fantastic, but they simply do not have the numbers nor the support they need.

Our populations are growing and ageing, and our hospitals are expanding their capacity, but the Government does nothing to increase the number of local ambulances and paramedics. Fewer ambulances in rotation and overworked paramedics means much longer response times, which puts patients' lives at risk.

Paramedics tell me that they are stretched to breaking point, with many staff working multiple overtime shifts per week or being sent to cover staff shortages in other areas.

On one recent occasion, paramedics from Newcastle were sent to the Central Coast to complete extra work after they had completed their exhausting 12-hour

shift. It is now a regular event, and it is posing a serious risk to community safety. It is also a risk to the health and wellbeing of our paramedics.

As Kay, a local, said in a Facebook post about this situation:

This is ridiculous. Our paramedics should not be stretched so far. Their own health is at risk saving others. Many in the community were horrified to learn that only nine ambulances are operating on Friday nights to cover a very large area and population.

More resources are needed in the Hunter area to ensure that services can be delivered to the community even during peak-hour periods.

Currently, fewer ambulances are operating in the Newcastle and Hunter than in 2010.

I urge members to think about that. The problem has gone on for far too long. Paramedics are frustrated and worried about it.

I call on the health Minister to review minimum operating levels and employ paramedics.

That is what is best for our paramedics and for the health of our community.

Mr STEPHEN BROMHEAD (Myall Lakes) (12:40):

The motion before the House does not properly reflect the situation in the Hunter and in New South Wales. Accordingly, I take pleasure in moving an amendment to the motion. I move:

That the motion be amended by leaving out all words after "That" with a view to inserting instead:

this House:

(1) Notes New South Wales is receiving 750 new paramedic and control centre staff over four years, with \$27 million provided in this financial year to employ the third tranche of staff.

(2) Acknowledges the significant investment in the Hunter region, including most recently the announcement of upgrades or new ambulance stations at Medowie, Stockton, Gloucester and Tea Gardens. These projects are being delivered as part of the \$100 million Rural Ambulance Infrastructure Reconfiguration [RAIR] program, stage 2.

(3) Commends the Government for continuing this investment, the biggest in regional NSW Ambulance history, following the successful \$132 million stage 1 of RAIR.

NSW Ambulance is an integral part of the New South Wales health system, delivering mobile health services and providing high-quality clinical care, rescue and retrieval services to people with emergency health and medical needs. Paramedics provide an invaluable contribution to the health and wellbeing of the people of New South Wales. I take this opportunity to recognise the compassion, skill, professionalism and round-the-clock commitment of paramedics to patients in our community. NSW Ambulance continues to respond to a record number of 000 calls.

Over the past 12 months, NSW Ambulance received more than 1.2 million calls for assistance. That is one response every 26 seconds. Of course, NSW Ambulance emergency response times can be affected by local factors such as traffic conditions, distance, travel time and topography. Hunter Zone 1 and Hunter Zone 2A, encompassing Toronto, Belmont, Hamilton, Cardiff, Boolaroo, Birmingham Gardens, Stockton, Tanilba Bay, Nelson Bay, Kurri Kurri, Rutherford, Beresfield, Raymond Terrace and Cessnock provide 24-hour, seven-days-a-week ambulance coverage to the Hunter region. Additional stations in the outer Hunter area of Hunter Zone 2 provide on-call services during the night. The Bureau of Health Information [BHI] publishes quarterly activity and performance information by Statistical Area 3 boundaries. NSW Ambulance provides quarterly activity and performance data to the BHI. In its quarterly report for the period October to December 2020, the BHI reported that the emergency Priority 1 emergency response time performance for the Newcastle area improved by 0.2 minutes when compared to 2019. For the highest Priority 1A incidents for the period July 2020 to March 2021, response times were within the established target of 10 minutes across New South Wales.

Currently, NSW Ambulance employs over 5,000 staff, the vast majority of which are operational staff. The 2018-19 New South Wales Government budget confirmed an additional 750 paramedics and control centre staff across the State over four years under the Statewide Workforce Enhancement Program. As at 20 April 2021, 586 new positions have been recruited under the program. The program has also provided new call-takers across the four control centres. Those enhancements have improved the capacity of NSW Ambulance to provide emergency out-of-hospital care to the community and have improved paramedic safety and wellbeing by reducing fatigue. Of the new positions recruited to date, 368 paramedics were introduced into regional locations around New South Wales. It is good to see that the vast majority are going to regional New South Wales. In many areas those enhancements have enabled regional New South Wales paramedics to respond to more patients while on duty, rather than while on-call, and have reduced overtime. That is testament to the New South Wales Government's commitment to support regional communities and to improve the health and wellbeing of New South Wales paramedics.

In response to a recent increase in 000 calls, NSW Ambulance announced that the recruitment of 100 graduates for year four of the Statewide Workforce Enhancement Program would be brought forward and commence in three consecutive classes from April 2021. Those positions are full-time, permanent and are enhancements over and above existing rosters. The first class of 60

graduates commenced on 26 April 2021. This is the second year in a row that NSW Ambulance has been assisted with additional staff investment to bring forward previously committed enhancements. "Zone operating levels" set the minimum level of staff required to ensure service to the community is maintained. Since 2013 zone operating levels have increased to reflect staff increases and roster changes.

NSW Ambulance builds rosters with relief capacity to cover things like annual leave, training, workers compensation, long service leave, maternity leave and long-term leave. Once the roster has started, unexpected short-term absences may occur such as unplanned sick leave, personal carer's leave or other personal arrangements for paramedics. If the number of paramedics on duty for any shift falls below the updated zone operating levels, absences are filled using all available methods, including casuals, part-timers and flexible working arrangements. I am excited to inform the House that Myall Lakes will receive two new ambulance stations at Forster and Old Bar, both of which will have 12 full-time staff. It was a pleasure to host Minister Hazzard—New South Wales's best ever health Minister—in the electorate to make those announcements. Minister Hazzard has been to many other regional electorates to announce additional ambulance stations and paramedics to staff them.

Mr RYAN PARK (Keira) (12:47):

I make a brief contribution to this important debate. I congratulate my colleague the member for Wallsend, who is a fierce advocate for her community and for the Hunter region. No member in this place—certainly not on our side of the House, nor on the Government side if members are honest with themselves—could deny the fact that the member for Wallsend is a real advocate, a strong parliamentarian and someone who fights for her community every day. This issue is worth fighting for because the Hunter region desperately needs more paramedics. Half of all patients in the broader Hunter, including the Upper Hunter, wait longer than 15 minutes for an ambulance. In Muswellbrook 52 per cent of patients needing emergency care wait longer than 15 minutes for an ambulance. In Singleton that number climbs to just under 60 per cent. In comparison only 32 per cent of patients living in Sydney's eastern suburbs, such as Woollahra, Double Bay and Vaucluse, wait longer than 15 minutes.

Our paramedics do an incredible job, but they are continually being asked to do more with fewer resources, which results in delays in local residents getting the emergency care they need. The community has a right to expect that when they need emergency treatment they will receive it in a timely manner. But in places like the Upper Hunter and in the Hunter more broadly, the number of people waiting longer than 15 minutes to receive care is only increasing under this Government. Labor will not support the Government's amendment because it does not reflect reality. I congratulate frontline paramedics and the Health Services Union, which does a fantastic job of advocating for its members, as well as the member for Wallsend, who is a fierce advocate for her community, who always stands up for frontline workers and who always brings important,

critical issues to the House to address growing concerns in her community and across the broader Hunter region.

Mr JUSTIN CLANCY (Albury) (12:49):

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to debate on the motion. I thank the members responsible for the electorates of Wallsend, Myall Lakes and Keira for their contributions to debate. We all acknowledge the important and great work of our paramedics across the State. In March I met with paramedics in my electorate of Albury to catch up on their issues. I appreciate that it is important for all local members to engage with their paramedics directly in order to hear about their role as providers of health care, particularly in regional areas. I see two themes arising in debate today. The first theme, which was raised by the member for Myall Lakes, is the Government's significant investment in health across the State, and specifically in NSW Ambulance, both in physical resources through capital expenditure and also in human resources.

The Government will invest \$232 million to deliver the Rural Ambulance Infrastructure Reconfiguration program, which will rebuild and update NSW Ambulance stations and provide local paramedics with modern, fit-for-purpose infrastructure to better meet the emergency medical needs of communities in regional and rural New South Wales. The first stage of the program was a \$132 million commitment to deliver 24 new or upgraded stations. That was the biggest regional and rural transformation of infrastructure in NSW Ambulance's history. Stations that have already been delivered under stage one of the project include at Wagga Wagga, Coolamon, Ardlethan, Griffith, Kiama, Wauchope and Bathurst. Further, planning is now complete for a new station in Iluka and construction will commence soon.

Health Infrastructure NSW is working with NSW Ambulance to develop a program for the \$100 million stage two operation. The site locations for stage two were informed by the NSW Ambulance's review of the condition, capacity and location of its regional and rural infrastructure in order to determine which locations would most benefit from investment under the program. Several new stations have already been announced, including at Lake Cathie, Old Bar, Forster and Medowie, as well as refurbishments to the stations at Coleambally and Lockhart, which are in my electorate. Further, the Government has invested in human resources by providing an additional 700 paramedics and 50 call takers over four years to areas where it is most needed. I understand the Hunter region has benefited from an additional 44 paramedics across the Toronto, Belmont, Hamilton, Rutherford and Birmingham Gardens stations.

The second theme that has arisen in debate on the motion is that NSW Ambulance consistently reviews its activity and performance, which is critical for our agencies in order to meet their needs. The Government appreciates that NSW Ambulance is busier than ever. The member for Myall Lakes mentioned that its control centres have received more than 1.2 million calls over the past 12 months. That increase in demand is not without its challenges, as

demonstrated in submissions made to the upper House inquiry into regional health, which was outlined by the member for Wallsend. The Government must continue to work with its agencies to respond to that growing demand. Against the backdrop of increasing demand across the State and significant investment from the Government, we must continue to work together with NSW Ambulance for the betterment of our communities.

Ms JODIE HARRISON (Charlestown) (12:54):

I contribute to debate on the motion, which I support. However, I do not support the Government's amendment. The signs are clear that paramedic staffing levels in the Hunter have reached crisis point and the consequence is that lives are at risk. Unfortunately that is not surprising because, as the Productivity Commission Report on Government Services makes clear, NSW Ambulance lags behind the national average in per capita funding. The national per person spend on ambulance services is \$159.46; in contrast, our State's spend is \$136.68. The per person spend on ambulance services in this State, which determines adequate response times, is \$23 less than the national average. It is little wonder that we are delivering a below-average ambulance service when it comes to the capacity to respond to emergency calls in a timely way. That is not the fault of our dedicated paramedics; that is an indictment on the Government's utter failure to deliver health services to the standard that the people of New South Wales expect, as evidenced in the inquiry into regional and rural health.

The Government is not just spending less; the State also lags behind on every measure of patient satisfaction. Only 59 per cent of patients in New South Wales were satisfied with the length of ambulance wait times compared to the national average of 64.5 per cent. That is a dismal result even when compared with the already low nationwide statistic. Quarterly performance data for March, published by the Bureau of Health Information, showed the worst response times from NSW Ambulance in the past five years. Only 54 per cent of emergency cases were responded to by an ambulance within 15 minutes of a 000 call. According to the bureau's figures, 66.4 per cent of call-outs to life-threatening emergencies arrived within 10 minutes; that is a drop of 3.2 per cent on the previous year. Every second counts in moments of crisis; extra minutes can mean the difference between life and death.

Government members can spin those figures whichever way they like, but they cannot deny people's real experiences. My office was contacted by the family of a 96-year-old constituent who lives at home as a hospice outreach patient and who takes medication for severe pain from metastatic bone cancer. When the family called an ambulance after his pain medication ran out, they unbelievably had to argue with the operator and the triage nurse to convince them to send an ambulance because his condition had been deemed to be not life-threatening. The family said to me, "Surely a man aged 96 with metastatic bone cancer, who is in extreme pain and cannot be moved, is entitled to an

ambulance." The Government's amendment is absolutely outrageous. I support the motion from the member for Wallsend and I will vote accordingly.

Mr DUGALD SAUNDERS (Dubbo) (12:57):

It was nice to hear from those members who contributed to debate on the motion. We all appreciate and recognise the dedication and extended hours that paramedics work right across the State, including in the Hunter, but we cannot pretend that nothing is being done to address the increase in demand. I have heard some of the figures that have been raised and I acknowledge that more can always be done in every aspect of life, but more is being done and that has to be recognised. The men and women who are paramedics make a difference to people's lives every day. It is also important to note that the Government is committed to ensuring that people right across New South Wales can access emergency care as and when they need it by delivering a record additional 750 paramedics and control centre staff over four years under the Statewide Workforce Enhancement Program, or SWEP.

NSW Ambulance regularly evaluates response times to ensure that sufficient numbers of paramedics are available in the right locations at the right time to provide safe and timely emergency health care to the people of New South Wales. As of 21 April regional areas in New South Wales have benefited from an additional 404 paramedic enhancements at 46 different locations. NSW Ambulance actively encompasses a range of services, from over-the-phone triaging through to aircraft retrievals. The ambulance service triages all calls to prioritise responses and then uses the most appropriate available resource. NSW Ambulance continues to expand referrals to other providers, such as Healthdirect, for low-acuity 000 calls. In 2020 more than 57,000 patients were referred to Healthdirect for assessment. In response to COVID-19, NSW Health initiated a secondary triage service involving NSW Ambulance, My Emergency Doctor and the Patient Transport Service.

On 15 May last year, the New South Wales Government announced a \$17 million increase in funding for 89 additional frontline ambulance vehicles. In February this year, many members were present when Minister Brad Hazzard announced a further 69 dedicated intensive care ambulances, 50 of which are being deployed to regional New South Wales, which is very important. All of the 104 intensive care ambulances will be equipped with mechanical cardiopulmonary resuscitation devices by the end of the rollout, and that is also really important. Those vehicles are currently under construction. They will be high tech and, importantly, rolled out as part of that earlier package. Last week it was great to join with Minister Hazzard in announcing upgrades to one of the ambulance stations in Mudgee under the Rural Ambulance Infrastructure Reconfiguration program; there was over \$100 million for that program. The New South Wales Government is continuing to support NSW Health in getting on with the job of delivering world-class health care, including ambulance services and emergency care.

Mr TIM CRAKANTHORP (Newcastle):

I seek leave to make a contribution.

Leave not granted.

Ms SONIA HORNER (Wallsend) (13:00):

In reply: This is a very important motion. I express my disappointment at the Government's lack of commitment to the health and welfare of not only our paramedics but also our elderly and other people who need the services of a paramedic in the Hunter region. The Government clearly does not take this seriously. In fact, the Government's back-patting, "I'm so very good," "Aren't I wonderful?" amendment is making a mockery of the needs and concerns that have been sincerely addressed to members of the Opposition by paramedics. I am sure those same paramedics would be trying to voice those opinions to members of the Government, but they are clearly not being listened to. I am embarrassed for the Government.

There is a clear need. We have a situation where elderly people are waiting six hours to get a response time from a local paramedic, and the member for Myall Lakes gets up in this House and makes a joke about the concerns of our paramedics. I ask Government members to think clearly. I suggest to them, as well, that they get their bureaucrats to start writing a few more heartfelt and sincere speeches, rather than not even trying to address the topic. People in our community read those discussions and they will think that what Government members are doing is a joke. Every paramedic in New South Wales today is watching and listening to members of the Government and thinking that they do not take their needs and concerns at all seriously; instead, they give themselves a back pat. I do not support the amendment. The Opposition does not support the amendment. The Opposition supports our workers; for that reason, it supports the original motion.

TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Ms Felicity Wilson):

The member for Wallsend has moved a motion, to which the member for Myall Lakes moved an amendment. The question is that the amendment be agreed to.

The House divided.

Ayes 43

Noes 43

Majority 0

AYES

Anderson, K	Clancy, J	Crouch, A (teller)
Gibbons, M	Henskens, A	Pavey, M
Roberts, A	Speakman, M	Upton, G
Ayres, S	Conolly, K	Davies, T
Griffin, J	Kean, M	Petinos, E
Saunders, D	Stokes, R	Ward, G
Barilaro, J	Constance, A	Dominello, V
Gulaptis, C	Lee, G	Preston, R
Sidgreaves, P	Taylor, M	Williams, L
Berejiklian, G	Cooke, S (teller)	Elliott, D
Hancock, S	Lindsay, W	Provest, G
Singh, G	Toole, P	Williams, R
Bromhead, S	Coure, M	Evans, L
Hazzard, B	Marshall, A	
Smith, N	Tuckerman, W	

NOES

Aitchison, J	Mihailuk, T	Harris, D
Greenwich, A	Atalla, E	Minns, C

Bali, S	Kamper, S	Voltz, L
Harrison, J	Saffin, J	Dalton, H
O'Neill, M	Chanthivong, A	McGirr, J
Barr, C	Lalich, N	Washington, K
Haylen, J	Scully, P	Donato, P
Park, R	Cotsis, S	McKay, J
Butler, R	Leong, J	Watson, A (teller)
Hoenig, R	Smith, T	Doyle, T
Parker, J	Crakanthorp, T	Mehan, D (teller)
Car, P	Lynch, P	Zangari, G
Hornery, S	Tesch, L	Finn, J
Piper, G	Daley, M	
Catley, Y	McDermott, H	

PAIRS

O'Dea, J	Perrottet, D
Warren, G	Dib, J

TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Ms Felicity Wilson):

The numbers being equal, I give my casting vote with the ayes and declare the question to have passed in the affirmative.

Amendment agreed to.

TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Ms Felicity Wilson):

The question is that the motion as amended be agreed to.

Motion as amended agreed to.

TEMPORARY SPEAKER (Ms Felicity Wilson):

It being 1.15 p.m., I will now leave the chair.