

Mrs BUTLER (Lyons) - Mr Deputy Speaker, I rise to make comment in support of the Children, Young Persons and their Families Amendment Bill. Among other matters, the bill deals with deficiencies in regard to information sharing, mandatory reporting and permanency arrangements when dealing with matters relating to Tasmanian young people.

I want to make a contribution in light of my years of experience as a school social worker so that we can highlight the need for this bill. Previous speakers have certainly spoken eloquently about the need. I worked in schools and education facilities in many roles over four decades so I have seen many shifts in policy positions. The richness of the work that I have done stems from helping young people and their families to work together so that students have been best able to learn, to expand their expectations and reach their full potential - personally and intellectually.

Social workers are bound by a code of ethics which arises from a body of knowledge and belief systems that are part of a differentiation of that entity as a profession. Adherence to the code of ethics is mandatory for members of the professional association, the Australian Association of Social Workers. The only circumstances in which that code can be broken are, first, with the client's permission and, second, where there is danger to life. In my experience I have certainly had to use that second premise.

Confidentiality is a key premise in all work carried out by professional social workers. As such, boundary-setting around cases occurs to protect vulnerable people. This necessary precaution has inevitably created tension in relationships with other professionals and services that are trying to assist in an intervention, such as police, medical practitioners, nurses, occupational therapists, psychologists, guidance officers and speech therapists.

I would like to give some case examples that might help members to understand some of the complications which have arisen in my experience that have left children, young people and their families in situations which were unclear and where smoother processes and clearer collaboration could have eased very painful circumstances for all those involved and enhanced or improved the child's safety, welfare and wellbeing.

One Sunday afternoon a mother arrived at my home with her teenage daughter and her suitcase. My memory is that the child was 15. She was giving her away, then and there in

my home on a Sunday afternoon. Many months later, after joint and individual counselling, many visits and referrals through due process, the child was eventually adopted by a welcoming family. The Catholic Church was also a great help in that case. I stumbled into that.

If there had been a gatekeeper process with a gateway entry point, this child at risk would have benefited from sharing of information between Child Protection and Family Services earlier or an assessment by an identified secretary. There could have been a wider range of options available for this family, especially with younger sisters in this family setting who were at risk in that particular circumstance a few years later. While some children come to the notice of authorities through various acting-out activities, others are hidden, their behaviour well masked. These children might seem prematurely wise or old for their years, and often take on responsibility for younger children.

Another teenager comes to mind. He came to notice quickly in most situations. His parents had split up when he was young. His mother had custody but made life choices that did not involve him. His father had tried hard to care for him and his older brother, but his new partner found managing him and caring for this young man just too much. Case conferences with professionals recommended that his care should become the responsibility of his grandmother, who is the closest and most constant person in his life. This young man trusted very few people and pushed boundaries all over the place. Bomb threats, property damage and throwing himself down behind his grandmother's car when she was reversing, saw her emotionally exhausted and asking for help from trusted friends and neighbours. The level of danger was escalating as he started to actually construct bombs in the garage. Having a gateway service with earlier diversion would have meant that the at-risk nature of this relationship would have been addressed earlier and a more proactive approach adopted, rather than friends, family and neighbours stepping in, initially to calm things down, and following my intervention, the teenager was moved to a foster home, so that the welfare of both he and his grandmother was ensured. They are those difficult cases that previous speakers have spoken of, where you have to weigh up that level of danger and make a call on what is best for the safety of those people involved.

A big difficulty in my experience is the hangover community attitude in our State that welfare should be kept out of personal and family situations, and I do not know how many times in my professional life I have heard that. There is a healthy scepticism which seems to be historic in nature. This bill maintains that any risk to a child should be reported to Child Protection. There are penalties for inappropriate use of information and the identity of those who make the notifications.

I recall another situation where a teenager arrived at my home. Her father had threatened to shoot her. I remember she came very early in the morning, about 8 a.m., and she crouched down and went around under the windows where she thought someone might be able to see

in, so she was absolutely traumatised, and her mother and brother were hiding in the caravan park in St Helens. I will not go into the details of that case but, after having rung the police, my only option was to get them to the hospital as a designated place of safety. I drove to the caravan park and managed to pick them up, and the father had had a gun trained on the caravan park and had recognised my car and searched for us. He got to me as I dropped them off at the hospital. That matter blew up very quickly. The family was taken out of the area and they have escaped the violence often associated with some adult life choices. This incident brought up debates about duty of care and roles of responsibility. As reportedly the father had the gun trained on the mother and son in a semi-public place, there was a real and perceived danger to life. A co-located child protection worker and wider powers for the Secretary, as is proposed by this bill, might have provided a circuit-breaker earlier in the situation where this family was clearly at risk.

This is especially important in isolated areas. Given improvements in communication technologies, it is imperative that government keeps pace with methods of service delivery that ensure that our children, young people and families are able to function as peacefully and as cooperatively as possible. This bill will help to address bullying, violence and power plays, and I believe it will help to protect those most vulnerable members of our society and ensure that the best interests of the child are maintained.

I support this bill, which aims to give our young people improved protection and care when things beyond their control in their lives go wrong, as they so often and sadly do.