

Mrs BUTLER (Lyons) - Mr Deputy Speaker, I rise today to make a contribution to this very important debate. I am speaking from a background as a social worker and a lecturer with the Queensland Police Service from 1988 to 1991. I spent a fair bit of time working with Karen Struthers, who is now a member of parliament in Queensland, when she was at the Centre for Domestic Violence Studies.

As in Queensland, our integrated response, Safe at Home, is based on the principles that the safety of the victim is paramount and that police are responsible for providing immediate intervention to secure victim safety and for managing the risk that the offender might repeat or escalate violence. I agree that family violence must be seen as a crime and that arrest and prosecution should occur wherever sufficient evidence of an offence exists. I think that is some of what we - members of opposition parties as well - have been trying to grapple with. I hope that the Attorney-General can perhaps define some of those matters that contribute to the gathering of evidence in a more definite way.

In Tasmania we have learned from the experiences of other States, like Queensland, where the alleged victims were removed from their homes in the early days of the legislation. I know that was certainly in the minds of trainees when they went out on station duty, and also in the minds of officers who used to come in from stations to help us with our training. Police were very aware of their powers but new police were very concerned.

There is a strong government commitment in Tasmania to reducing family violence. We are moving towards reducing the incidence of domestic violence by one-third in the first 15 years of operation. As the Attorney-General said, there has been an historical tendency for criminal justice systems not to treat family violence with appropriate seriousness, and a lack of integration and coordination across the services. In Queensland the actual section on training for the new act was left to the end of training of new recruits. Whenever there was a flood or some serious incident, recruits would be pulled out - even for graduation - from that particular period. Mental health was second last and then domestic violence was the last unit. Time and time again we would lose a cohort to these other activities. It just was not seen as a precedent. I did raise that and it was a matter of investigation by the CJC at the time. I believe that that has since changed, and I hope that does not eventuate in Tasmania.

Victims have also been ambivalent about proceeding with criminal charges. This of course is a huge problem for police, who continue to put themselves at risk as the first line of response.

I would like to congratulate the Attorney-General on the review process he has undertaken. It has found that Safe at Home represents a commitment to addressing domestic and family violence which is unprecedented in Australia. That is a fantastic finding - just amazing, well done. In terms of funding, resourcing, commitment to law reform and departmental culture

change they concluded that Tasmania could well be regarded as setting a benchmark for the rest of Australia. I think that is an advantage of perhaps waiting a little longer than some of the States to get our legislation up. I know that Judy Jackson spent a lot of time in Queensland and the magnificent work of Liz Little must be acknowledged.

Lawyer and researcher Karen Wilcox from National Clearinghouse asserts that Tasmania's Family Violence Act provides an inspiring framework for domestic violence law reformers. The Tasmanian domestic violence legislation provides many benchmark features to inspire mainland law reformers, including the safety-focus bail provisions, a broader definition of family violence and the use of risk assessment processes in determination of matters of police family violence orders.

It is important too that we all have some input, right across government and right across agencies, into redefining what we are doing. One of the strengths of the act is the safety now available to victims at the first point of contact with police through the arrest and removal policy.

I believe that about 97 per cent of cases involve women and children, so I am certainly not exclusively talking about women when I talk about victims. From my personal experience I have had a lot more to do with women and children. People I have dealt with have felt safer in the way that police are able to talk to them, and through the contact that is available now with their contact officers. They feel that they can ring them up at odd times when odd things happen to them, and certainly some very strange things happen to people at all times of the day and night. Police respect the people who ring them and I have heard wonderful reports from everyone I have dealt with. Congratulations to Tasmania Police, who do carry out this very responsible and important work.

The review points to the need for a more comprehensive response to children who live with family violence and to the rehabilitation of offenders. So many cases continue to arise. The rehabilitation of offenders is a huge challenge to us. I know that some church agencies have special programs to work with offenders, and I talk about men such as Michael Voumard, Dr Thom Ryan and Roger Viney as just some shining examples of doing wonderful work with people who have offended and managed to turn their lives around.

Mr Deputy Speaker, the fact that 44.5 per cent of the total number of families dealt with under Safe at Home had reports of children being present at an incident saddens me greatly. Actions speak louder than words and most of those children will remember these incidents for the rest of their lives. The inter-relationships that end up in family violence are, as has been said before, very complex and multilayered. Lack of respect can be imprinted on impressionable young people forever.

I will be very interested in seeing what the Attorney-General decides to do regarding mandatory reporting. The framework that was established in Queensland appeared to work well in the early years of the legislation but all of us who were involved in examining the progress of the act were aware that many cases had gone underground and after the initial surge of reporting there was certainly a drop-off in numbers. I think it is fair comment that mandatory reporting might lead to the breakdown of therapeutic relationships and I strongly recommend that agencies contribute their views about this matter to the Attorney-General.

I commend the Attorney-General for his diligence in reviewing the legislation and his commitment to ongoing upgrading of the current practices in line with the carefully constructed framework developed by his predecessors, Judy Jackson and Steve Kons. I encourage members of the public and agencies to make comment to their members of parliament so that the Safe at Home framework remains current within the context of the lifestyle and values that make up our culture here in Tasmania. There are still too many victims and too many children exposed to appalling behaviour from adults whom they love. Another case came across my desk this morning which was very sad. Let us do better, everybody.