



Full Day Hansard Transcript (Legislative Assembly, 20 June 2011, Proof)

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Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard and Papers Monday, 20 June 2011 (Proof).

CARERS

Ms MELANIE GIBBONS (Menai) [6.56 p.m.]: The New South Wales Government is strongly committed to supporting this State's carers. There are in fact more than 750,000 carers in New South Wales. To put it another way: one in 10 members of our community are providing care to another person. These carers are providing the majority of support for one or more people they know who are frail aged or have a disability, a chronic illness, a drug or alcohol problem or mental illness. Many carers provide support all day, every day, seven days a week. It is worth taking a moment to let that sink in: all day, every day, seven days a week, no break in sight, no day off. These carers contribute both socially and economically to ensure another person's wellbeing and connection to society.

Last year Access Economics released a report, "Economic value of informal care", which found that the work performed by carers is worth \$40 billion nationally each year. Though my previous career working for charities assisting people with disabilities, and in my very first volunteer role helping out in the Sutherland Hospital Kiosk, I came into contact with and got to know many carers. I got to spend time in some of their homes to see what they deal with on a daily basis. I had the opportunity to hear many of their stories and to listen to both the joy and the struggle they experienced looking after their loved one. I learned of their hardships and the effort they put into planning and organising their day-to-day lives and the long-term thought and stress that they invest when they plan for the future.

I am happy that a key priority of this Government is to support carers to have a life. The enactment of the Carers (Recognition) Act 2010 in New South Wales recognises the contributions made to society by carers. When in Opposition the member for Bega was the initial sponsor of carer recognition legislation. I believe he did so with the assistance of the President of Carers NSW in drafting the bill. The Act has two key functions: to introduce a Carers Charter and to establish a Carers Advisory Council. The Carers Charter contains 13 principles for recognising and supporting carers.

The charter provides that the contribution of carers should be recognised; that carers must be recognised as having their own unique and individual needs within and beyond the caring role; that carers' health and wellbeing are to be given due consideration; that carers' should be referred to appropriate services and that their needs should be considered, as well as the needs of the person they are caring for; and that the views and knowledge that carers have in regard to the individual needs of the persons they care for must be recognised and included in the assessment, planning, delivery and review of services that impact on them in their role as carers. The community, service providers and government should respect the relationship between carers and the persons they care for. The diversity of carers' individual needs should be identified and acknowledged, taking into consideration cultural differences, age, disability, religion, socioeconomic status, gender identification and place of residence.

The Carers Charter also includes two principles to recognise and support children and young people who are carers. It is hard to believe but in New South Wales 90,000 children and young people under the age of 25 years old are providing care and support for family members and friends. The legislation requires public sector agencies to take reasonable steps to ensure that officers, employees and the agents have an awareness and understanding of the Carers Charter and to reflect the principles of the charter when providing services that affect carers. Public sector agencies must also consult with carers and their representative bodies when developing policies that may impact significantly on them and in recognising the needs of their employees who are carers.

The Act also establishes a Carers Advisory Council so the Government has direct access to advice from carers, carer advocates and other experts who understand carer issues. Advertisements for membership of the Carers Advisory Council attracted nearly 200 applications. This shows the level of engagement that this State's carers have with promoting awareness of carers and the issues they face, and ensuring their needs, rights and interests are taken into consideration. The majority of Carers Advisory Council members have current or previous

experience as carers. The broad range of carers and caring experiences is represented by these members. Members come from both metropolitan and regional areas. This is important as the Carers Advisory Council now gives carers a direct voice. The council first met with this Government on 7 June. The members are such dedicated people who will increase the recognition and support provided to all carers in New South Wales.

Significant reforms are also underway to give carers of people with a disability more choice and control over the services their family uses. Under the second phase of the Government's Stronger Together plan people with a disability and their carers will have access to enhanced services and greater choice and control as person-centred approaches and individualised funding arrangements are introduced. The people to whom I have spoken are so looking forward to having the opportunity to choose the services they need; to determine what suits them; and to have the option to pick their preferred provider. Support is vital, and the Government supports carers directly through carer support services, counselling, respite and information to help them look after themselves and understand the service system. Carers are also supported indirectly through the provision of increased assistance and options for the people they care for.

In my inaugural speech I mentioned my career working in disability and my personal connection and experiences. But through other recent inaugural speeches by new members in this place I have been surprised to learn that many of our members have someone in their family who has a disability, or who have themselves been carers for someone who is frail aged, with a chronic illness, drug or alcohol problem or mental illness. This is an issue that touches so many and our experience in this place is just a reflection on the wider community, including in my electorate of Menai. In implementing the Carers (Recognition) Act 2010, building on existing services and whole of government initiatives begun under the NSW Carers Action Plan 2007-2012, I know this Government will ensure that carers are appropriately recognised in this State.

Mrs BARBARA PERRY (Auburn) [7.07 p.m.]: The Opposition acknowledges the significant contribution of the 750,000 people in this State who provide care to family members, friends or others in the community. More than one in 10 members of the community are carers. The carers I know or have met are incredibly dedicated, compassionate and resilient people who often sacrifice their own life opportunities to care for a family member or friend. I acknowledge the hours that they give and the massive contribution they make both to the person they care for and the community as a whole. But, as we all know, it is not just hours they give; their love and empathy both nurture and maintain the dignity of those that they care for.

We know that for many carers their own physical health and emotional wellbeing often take a back seat because they are so focused on meeting the needs of those they care for. Others just do not know that support services are available for them. I have been privileged as the former Minister Assisting the Minister for Mental Health (Mental Health) to work with many organisations such as Carers NSW. Carers NSW plays a tremendously important role in improving the lives of carers and the people they care for. As the peak body for carers in New South Wales it has been a strong advocate working to increase the capacity of agencies and other non-government organisations to better support carers, promoting best practice in working with carers and identify emerging issues. Carers come from a range of different backgrounds, life stages, careers and relationships from those of the person they are caring for. They care for people who live with a mental illness, persistent disability, or chronic degenerative conditions or many other conditions. With more than one in 10 people in New South Wales being carers the advice given to the former Government generally from Carers NSW and other key stakeholders in the sector, especially carers themselves, formed the basis of the New South Wales Carers Action Plan 2007-12. That plan guided the delivery of support to carers to achieve physical and emotional wellbeing and to participate in work and community life.

An example of a particularly successful initiative under the plan and involving collaboration between NSW Health, non-government organisations and the area health services is the Family and Carer Mental Health Program. That program provided an integrated multi-faceted approach to support, education and information for families and carers of people with a mental illness. The focus was to ensure family friendly mental health services throughout all the area health services where families and carers are recognised, supported and included in treatment planning and service provision. Under that plan there were also investments to non-government organisations for carer support services including for specific disability groups dealing with conditions such as autism and multiple sclerosis.

I also acknowledge that the member for Menai referred to the Carers (Recognition) Act 2010 that was introduced by the former Government and supported in a bipartisan way by the former

Opposition, now Government. That Act provides clear and strong legislative recognition of carers in New South Wales. The Act establishes a comprehensive Carers Charter with 13 principles to recognise and support carers. Importantly, that Act established a Carers Advisory Council to ensure that the Government had direct access to advice from primary carers, carers' representatives and others with relevant expertise on carer issues. It is important to note, and I agree, that more than 90,000 carers are under the age of 25 in New South Wales. A recent Access Economics national report estimated the replacement value of the care provided by informal carers at more than \$40 billion a year, which is very significant.

I acknowledge the carers and advocates who worked tirelessly in our community. It is a privilege to speak on this issue. It is very important for the communities of our State and not just for those who have someone who needs care in their lives but for everyone. The fundamental acknowledgement made by the former Government was that the care of those in need is not a private problem but a public priority. We revolutionised the role and support of carers in our State not just with words but with money through the Stronger Together Program. Strong Together is not just a program for some of us; it is about all of us. The measures put in place by the former Government are in the long-term interests of not only those with a disability but also their carers.

Through Stronger Together we moved the long-standing focus away from temporary care and support to deliver a change in the way we think about and deliver services for people with disabilities and therefore their families and carers. Where once we used to fit people into the type of service we were able to deliver, we are now letting people make their own life choices about the disability services that will suit them best. The positive effects on people, their families, carers and communities have been profound. Stronger Together was ambitious from its inception. The former Government set out to do things differently from the way they were done in the past. It made a long-term commitment to achieve the best social and economic outcomes for people with a disability, their families and carers and for the broader community.

We enabled service providers to be more responsive to the individual needs of families—the families that bear the primary burden of care. I hope we made practical, positive differences to thousands of families. And most of all, we did this together with carers. We did it through a pragmatic, consultative, creative approach which challenges needs and which defines the best of contemporary governments. As we meet tonight I express my sincere hope that this new Government will not only meet its commitment to fund Stronger Together but also will continue this collaborative approach to building a strong and inclusive community for everyone.

I acknowledge that the role of carers, both social and economic, remains deeply undervalued. I acknowledge that we have so much more work to do together but I am proud that the Government I served in has helped to see a great shift of thinking about disability services. We need to maintain that momentum. We need to preserve the view that our society is only truly strong when we take responsibility for all in our communities. The more we understand that those who need help are not "them" that they are "we" then the stronger our society becomes.

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Tonight I pay tribute to the vital and often unacknowledged social and economic contributions that carers make to our society. I acknowledge their love, their compassion and their support for their families, friends and all that they care for.

Mr MARK COURE (Oatley) [7.10 p.m.]: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this matter of public importance, the Carers (Recognition) Act 2010. The Minister for Ageing, and Minister for Disability Services, the Hon. Andrew Constance, was the original sponsor of the New South Wales Carers (Recognition) Act passed in May 2010. In his agreement in principle speech delivered on 12 May 2010, he noted:

We can test the heart of society by looking at the response of government to community needs and the recognition of carers. For too long in New South Wales we have failed in that duty. We have failed to recognise those who contribute in ways that we can only imagine.

It was for those reasons that he introduced the Carers (Recognition) Bill 2010. As shadow Minister at the time, he did so on behalf of 750,000 carers in New South Wales. During his time as shadow Minister for Disability Services, the now Minister has seen carers commit to their loved ones in ways that would amaze the rest of our society. They gave of their time, their finances, their social existence and their health to look after and care for their loved ones in need. It is high time that the New South Wales Parliament recognised carers, and I thank and congratulate the member for Menai and the member for Auburn, who spoke on the bill tonight. This Parliament should recognise carers in the same way as have other Australian and international jurisdictions. We must do better than we have in the past.

In his 2010 speech the then shadow Minister for Disability Services also cited examples of the experiences of families illustrating the need for legislation to recognise carers and to support their rights to better treatment and better services. The New South Wales Carers (Recognition) Act 2010 provides legislative recognition for carers and describes obligations for public sector agencies. The Act includes a New South Wales Carers Charter and also establishes a Carers Advisory Council to provide direct advice to the Minister from carers. I understand from speaking to the Minister that the Carers Advisory Council met as recently as last week, 7 June 2011. It is a privilege to be part of a Government that established and chairs this group, which includes a diverse group of 10 members with experience as primary carers. The group will make a valuable input to advise the Government on improving responses to carers. Discussions at the council reinforced the reality of the everyday experiences of carers and the need for us as a community to recognise their role and contributions, and to better meet their needs.

In the past three months, as the member for Oatley, I have had the privilege of seeing my community groups firsthand. I will mention but a few of those tonight. The first is the Pole Depot. Throughout my community a number of organisations just like the Pole Depot have provided invaluable support to people living with a disability. I have had the benefit of visiting most of them, including the Pole Depot, St George Community Services and Mortdale Community Services before and after my election to this place. The Pole Depot was visited by the now Minister, the Hon. Andrew Constance, as shadow Minister. It is a non-profit organisation that has been in operation since 1975. It offers a range of services that have been expanded since that time to meet the needs of the community. The Pole Depot Community Centre is run by an independent board made up of local residents and users. It offers a range of services including carers, child services, Chinese support, home handyman services and disability services, and works with seniors.

Mortdale Community Services—with which I have a long history—offers a range of services to promote positive ageing that relates to the independent, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity of the ageing community in my electorate. Among the other services that they provide are social support, dementia monitoring, home maintenance, and advocacy and support. I also had the privilege recently of visiting St George Community Services. This is another non-profit, locally based organisation, which is in Carss Park. It offers a wide range of services to the frail aged, to people with a disability and their carers residing in the St George and Sutherland shire area. Carers in our community have done a great job. This Government recognises that significant problems exist for carers, and is determined to rectify this situation.

Ms MELANIE GIBBONS (Menai) [7.15 p.m.], in reply: The Carers (Recognition) Act 2010 recognises the contributions made to society by the more than 750,000 carers in this State. I am pleased it recognises all carers, whether they look after someone with a disability, chronic illness, drug or alcohol problem or a mental illness. The Act will ensure that carers in New South Wales receive better support from government and increased recognition from the broader community. In opposition, the Hon. Andrew Constance was the initial sponsor of this legislation, and I know as Minister he will ensure that carers are given the support they deserve and the opportunity to have a life while caring for their loved ones.

As I mentioned earlier, the Act has two key functions: to introduce a Carers Charter and to establish the Carers Advisory Council. The Carers Charter contains 13 principles for recognising and supporting carers, and helps to acknowledge their own unique and individual needs. The Carers Advisory Council provides the Government with direct access to advice from carers, carer advocates and other experts who understand carer issues, helping the government to support and represent them. Public sector agencies also have obligations under the Act in relation to consulting with carer representatives on relevant policy matters and in recognising the needs of their employees who are carers. Ageing, Disability and Home Care, Department of Family and Community Services, is responsible for implementing the Act and leading carer policy in New South Wales to ensure that carers are appropriately recognised in this State.

People deserve the right to make their own choices. I am sure this person-centred approach and individualised funding will help do this. I also trust that the Carers (Recognition) Act will help to ease some of the stress and concern that carers shoulder, and that this along with the Carers Advisory Council will help them to be represented. I conclude by paying tribute to the many carers in our communities. I empathise with the pressures that they are under. I thank them for all that they do. I also thank members for their contributions, particularly the member for Auburn and the member for Oatley. This is an issue close to a lot of our hearts, and I appreciate the time and effort that they put in.

Discussion concluded.