



Carers (Recognition) Bill 2008
Speech by GLEN ELMES
Member for Noosa

Hansard, 26 November 2008

Mr ELMES (Noosa--LNP) (7.52 pm): I rise tonight to address the House on a particularly important piece of legislation; namely, the Carers (Recognition) Bill. It is indeed time to recognise those people amongst us who give their time, support and attention to the care of disadvantaged people.

It is well known that carers make up one in every four Australians, but it is less well known that these selfless members of our community often feel undervalued and unappreciated by their peers in their communities. This should not be the case. The value of their unpaid and voluntary services is incalculable, both to their own family and consequently to the wider community. It is time to recognise the magnitude and significance of their contributions. In particular, tonight I would like to highlight those carers who are grandparents. According to statistics quoted by Mission Australia in 2007, there were 22,500 Australian families where grandparents were the primary carers of grandkids, and these grandparents looked after more than 31,000 young children.

These grandparent carers are not foster carers; they are kinship carers. There are many reasons grandparents assume the care of children within their immediate family circle. Regrettably, this is frequently in response to a family crisis or dysfunction. Often it is because there has been parental substance abuse, parental incarceration, mental health issues, child neglect or abuse, domestic violence or the death of one or both parents. This informal and so far unrecognised care means that these children who may otherwise have been placed in the statutory child protection system can continue to stay within a family home and be cared for by a family member.

The taking on of such a hands-on role at a time when most of these grandparents are retiring in anticipation of taking it a little easier can be a major strain on them financially and emotionally. These grandparent carers repeatedly find themselves having to tap into lifetime assets and savings in order to support their grandchildren. They can also get caught up in draining legal custody battles. In one case recently it cost a grandmother \$38,000 to obtain legal custody of her grandchild to keep him from going into the foster system. This is ludicrous when we are advertising in school magazines for foster carers and there are grandparents who are willing to take on the children but who cannot afford to fight the legal fight against the state. Sometimes they lose their social circle and can feel very isolated. It is hard to maintain friendships with older people who are enjoying retirement and who are not caring full-time for their grandchildren. There can also be a struggle with these kids who time and again exhibit behavioural effects of parental abuse or neglect. I sought and received permission from Minister Nelson-Carr to visit and inspect the Brisbane Youth Detention Centre in the middle of October, and I again thank her for that opportunity. I did this because in my short time here as a member I have become very interested in youth issues. Everyone here has heard my repeated calls for additional police in Noosa. They have heard me talk about hooning and other antisocial behaviour in my area. But the more I spoke about it and

the more I looked into it, the more I wanted to know. The beliefs that I brought to my position as a Queensland MP are based upon a set of conditions which include my upbringing, life's journey and many other influences. It is the same for all of us. The staff at the Brisbane Youth Detention Centre are wonderful and caring people, and they challenged many of my very long-held beliefs. I now know that as a society we are intervening too late, once a young person reaches their teens. We need to be able to offer support, love and compassion much earlier in a child's life, and who better to do that than the child's grandparents? The young people who are currently at the Brisbane Youth Detention Centre and other facilities like it are there because they have a long history of disobeying the law. I invite all members in this House tonight to go to the foyer of the Parliamentary Annexe and have a look at the art display that one can see there. There are some amazing works of art done by some very talented young Queenslanders, and guess where they are from? The Brisbane Youth Detention Centre. We should explore with great urgency a sound policy that puts the very youngest of our disadvantaged Queenslanders with their grandparents when it is at all possible. I take nothing away from foster carers as they, too, are extremely dedicated people. But right now in this state we have a situation where grandparents are not even recognised, let alone receive a carers allowance or any Centrelink payments of any kind, as is the case in other states. Any one of these factors, or in combination, can have a large impact on grandparents' physical and mental health. We are witnessing the emergence of a new social phenomenon, not just in Australia but internationally. We must do the right thing and look at what extra support can be provided to help grandparents doing it tough simply because they have done the right thing. The very least we can do is recognise their contribution. Much more should come later, but we must as a parliament and as human beings recognise what these fantastic grandparents do on behalf of their families. It is recognition of their views, recognition of their needs and, above all, recognition of their right to be included in the assessment, planning and delivery of those services affecting them and their ability to do what is best for their grandchildren. In conclusion, I say to everyone in this House tonight, whether they are from the LNP, the Labor Party or Independent: why can't we tonight commit to all of those grandparent carers in Queensland? Why can't we at least send a signal tonight to grandparent carers and all carers in our state that we know, we understand and we commit ourselves to their support and recognition? I commend the bill to the House.
