

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the handling of child abuse by religious and other organisations

Ballarat — 7 December 2012

Members

Mrs A. Coote
Ms G. Crozier
Mr D. O'Brien

Ms B. Halfpenny
Mr F. McGuire
Mr N. Wakeling

Chair: Ms G. Crozier
Deputy Chair: Mr F. McGuire

Staff

Executive Officer: Dr J. Bush
Research Officer: Ms V. Finn

Opening statement by Chair

The CHAIR — Good morning, everyone, and welcome to our first regional hearing for the inquiry into the handling of child abuse by religious and other non-government organisations. The committee acknowledges that Ballarat has a particular interest in this inquiry, and the impact of child abuse in this area has been far-reaching. We thank you for having us here today and for sharing your very personal stories with us, not just in these hearings but in the many submissions we have received from people in the Ballarat region.

Since the federal government announced a broad-ranging national royal commission into child abuse there have been questions about how this will impact our inquiry here in Victoria. I have said that our committee will continue with our work not only because at this stage there are many things we do not yet know about the royal commission but because we believe that we can make a substantial contribution to the understanding and exposure of what has taken place in the past within this state.

We are fully appreciative of the care and sensitivity with which we need to approach our task, potentially impacting as it does upon the lives and aspirations for justice of victims and their families who have suffered and continue to suffer greatly. An important part of our job therefore has been to set up parallel processes to ensure that victims are supported through the Victims Support Agency and that there are appropriate investigations by Victoria Police when specific allegations are made. Victoria Police last week announced a special task force named Taskforce Sano, comprising 10 investigators specifically allocated to deal with the expected flow of information emanating from this inquiry.

Our terms of reference specifically focus on Victoria and, as you are aware, on the appropriateness or otherwise of the response to child abuse by religious and other non-government organisations. As part of that we are considering how practices and processes within organisations may have discouraged reporting to state authorities and possibly contributed to both the incidence of offending and the effective denial of justice to victims, and of course we will look at how those in positions of authority have responded to claims of abuse.

From our committee's perspective we are here today to listen and gather evidence. We want to hear firsthand the impact that child abuse has had not just on the people who have had to suffer abuse and its consequences but also on their families and those around them. We have also said that anyone who wants to appear before this committee will have the opportunity to do so, as we believe this is an important part of our process.

We have been talking with people in the Ballarat region, many of whom wish to appear before this committee. We obviously will not hear from everyone today, but we will be back early in the new year to allow anyone who would like to give us evidence the opportunity to do so. The importance of the work we are undertaking hardly needs to be emphasised and is well understood by the committee. It is reflected in the more than 350 submissions we have received and more than 120 requests to appear in public and confidential hearings.

It may not be generally understood that our committee has substantial powers and privileges as a joint house committee of the Victorian Parliament. We can issue a parliamentary subpoena to require the attendance of any person before the committee and call for any witnesses to come before the inquiry, produce any and all documents and answer questions relevant to the terms of reference. Witnesses who appear before this inquiry must be truthful in all their evidence, and we have the power to take evidence confidentially if needed.

In addition, the committee has powers and privileges that extend beyond those of a court, judicial inquiry or royal commission that relate to parliamentary privilege. This is a key form of transparency, accountability and free speech in a democratic society and is unique to the Parliament. It allows members of Parliament and people to seek and speak the truth in a way that other settings do not necessarily allow. The extent and candour of many of the submissions received to date and the evidence received in hearings, all of which are covered by parliamentary privilege, reveal the willingness of parties on all sides to explore the truth and pursue the issues in the committee's terms of reference.

Child abuse has presented fundamentally important questions in relation to the organisations concerned and indeed has affected our investigatory and monitoring agencies. I have said before that all of those affected by child abuse, and our wider society, have the right to expect that there will be full accountability and justice for any past wrongdoing or failures and that we can develop mechanisms to ensure that abuses of the past will not continue. We believe that within a relatively short time frame — not years — we will be in a position to make findings and recommendations which will hopefully make this state a safer one for our children.