

Legislative Council

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INJURED WORKER SUICIDE

The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON (14:48): I seek leave to make a brief explanation before asking the minister representing the Minister for Industrial Relations questions about measures being undertaken to prevent injured worker suicides.

Leave granted.

The Hon. A. BRESSINGTON: Successive ministers for industrial relations and the WorkCover Corporation have consistently failed to acknowledge injured worker suicide as a consequence of the current draconian legislation regime and hostile case management approach. This has led to far too many injured workers being pushed to breaking point.

In October 2009, there was a tragic suicide of the husband of an injured worker at the Workers Compensation Tribunal who, clearly, left so distraught by the cruelty of the system, jumped over the railing of the air bridge between the tribunal and the lifts. It is my understanding that in early 2010 a decision was made to raise the height of these railings to prevent further such tragedy.

While slow progress has been made, with the design for the height and railing decided upon, I am led to believe that the project has stalled due to disagreement between the Department for Transport, Energy and Infrastructure, the building owner and the tenants of the Riverside building over funding of the upgrades. This is most disappointing and it would be tragic if this delay was to result in another such tragedy, as almost happened last week, with an injured worker hanging on to the outside of the railing for over five hours threatening to suicide. Thankfully, he was talked down.

To ensure that the project is completed expeditiously, I believe that WorkCover should initially pay and then seek to recover moneys owed at a later date. This, of course, is a reactionary measure and needs to be part of a broader suicide prevention approach. One such initiative would be to expand the independent support offered by organisations such as the Work Injured Resource Connection, which advocates for injured workers as well as supplying food parcels, called 'bags of love', and holding informal get-togethers to keep injured workers socially engaged.

Despite efforts to have the Work Injured Resource Connection, recognised and funded by WorkCover, its founder Ms Rosemary McKenzie-Ferguson is forced to operate on the smell of an oily rag. I note today that Dr Kevin Purse has come out and advocated for an industry summit to be held with key stakeholders to be encouraged to commit to a plan to prevent injured worker suicide. My questions are:

1. Does the minister acknowledge that the suicide of injured workers is a serious problem deserving an immediate and effective response?
2. Does the minister acknowledge that it is the system itself that drives injured workers to the point of desperation and hopelessness?
3. Will the minister commit to holding an industry summit as suggested by and advocated for by Dr Kevin Purse this year?

4. Will the minister commit to funding the Work Injured Resource Connection so the excellent work of the founder Ms Rosemary McKenzie-Ferguson can be expanded to assist more injured workers?
5. Will the minister commit to exploring the possibility of funding a 24/7 helpline so that injured workers can get the assistance and intervention that they need when they need it?

The Hon. G.E. GAGO (Minister for Regional Development, Minister for Public Sector Management, Minister for the Status of Women, Minister for Consumer Affairs, Minister for Government Enterprises, Minister for Gambling) (14:51): I thank the honourable member for her most important question on worker suicide. Indeed, any suicide is one suicide too many. I will refer those questions to the Minister for Industrial Relations in another place and bring back a response.