

NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard



Full Day Transcript

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STANDING TOGETHER AGAINST CRIMES OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

Mr PETER DRAPER (Tamworth) [6.07 p.m.]: Today I highlight the work of a support group in my electorate that has formed to help families recover from the emotional trauma of having a child fall victim to sexual assault. Sex crimes against children remain a silent epidemic in today's society, with little distinction between city and country trends. Figures from the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research reveal a steady rise in the number of sexual assault incidents reported to NSW Police in recent years. It must be noted that in December 2000 under the Child and Young Persons (Case and Protection) Act 1998, it became mandatory for all people who work with children to report any incidents or suspected incidents of child neglect or abuse. The figures jumped slightly from 1999 to 2000, but in the years between 2000 and 2003 there was a steady increase in the number of reported incidents involving children aged 0 to 18 years with 4,033 sexual assault incidents recorded in 2003. Some 1,765 of those victims were aged 15 and under.

At a local level, in the six years since the formation of the NSW Police joint investigation response team in Tamworth, the team reports an average of 240 notifications a year to the Department of Community Services helpline relating to children as victims of sexual assault or serious physical assault. Tragically, the majority of these notifications relate to sexual assault. The response team, known as JIRT, services an enormous area in the north-west, stretching between Singleton, Guyra, Gunnedah and Walcha. This means in the past six years around 1,400 families in this area have been touched in some way by this type of crime. With these figures in mind it was with great interest that I learned of a support group that has formed in Gunnedah to address the emotional support needs of such families. It began as Daisy Chain in 2002 but has since evolved into STACSA—an acronym for Standing Together Against Crimes of Sexual Assault. Beginning with three families, the members shared the common experience of being parents of children subjected to some form of sexual assault. Tragically, this group included a family who lost their son to suicide. His death was linked to the sexual abuse he suffered earlier in life.

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With the backing of the Gunnedah Family Support Service, STACSA was launched at the 2002 Reclaim the Night in Gunnedah and has since grown to include around 12 members. The group—which comprises parents, siblings, extended family and community members—focuses on healing by providing a support network for people to share their common experience. As parents, the foundation members knew they needed the love and support of people who completely understood the pain and frustration that they were feeling. It is important to note that STACSA has become a positive tool for educating the community. It is

hoped that through education more children can be protected. The formation of a group also has opened up networking opportunities, with members regularly attending interagency meetings convened by the Department of Community Services. The group has identified inadequacies within the legal system, which they hope to highlight through these meetings.

The department's Rural Victims of Crime Bureau Northern Region co-ordinator, Preeti Kotwell, has been of great assistance. She was instrumental in securing a one-off victims of violent crime grant of \$15,000 in 2003. The grant has enabled STACSA to purchase office equipment, hold public forums, and print brochures and run public courses, which STACSA members attend to gain knowledge. Foundation member Julie Scott, a mother whose life has been irrevocably changed as a result of sexual abuse, described STACSA as a healing tool with a significant role to play in Gunnedah. No other organisation in the north-west provides this type of emotional support. It is not surprising that the concept is gaining momentum. Recently a group formed in Orange and a group of like-minded individuals in Armidale has indicated its interest. The victims are now taking inspiration from their parents, with plans to start a group of survivors in Gunnedah to share experiences, lend support to others and highlight where the system let them down. As Mrs Scott said:

The children can see the power they get from having a voice. Their voice was taken away as children and they can see how it has helped their parents, because they can see a change in them.

The survivors group will be launched on 26 October at a STACSA public forum featuring Australian of the Year, Donna Carson, a badly burned victim of domestic violence and Howard Brown from the Victims of Crime Assistance League. STACSA is active in holding such forums to raise the profile of its work and to extend its services to the wider community. Despite their very important work, STACSA remains without a venue. Members meet in private homes. Following my meeting with STACSA representatives in Gunnedah I approached the Minister for Commerce requesting a subsidised office space in Gunnedah. I highlighted the fact that in rural New South Wales STACSA is just scratching the surface of a deeply embedded and very painful issue. Although some people wish to bury child sexual abuse to protect the victims, STACSA believes it should be in the public eye. As Julie Scott said:

It happens to a child because of secrecy and that's what protects it.

As a first step to ongoing success STACSA need an office to co-ordinate its activities and to meet. Nothing elaborate is required, and there is underutilised space in a government building that would be ideal. I sincerely hope the New South Wales Government is prepared to lend unqualified support to this visionary group of volunteers who are prepared to confront this hidden blight. They take a brave stand against the sexual assault of children. We must find them an office and lend support to their great work so that they can continue to offer these services to the Gunnedah community.