

*Bills*

## **SOCIAL WORKERS REGISTRATION BILL**

### *Introduction and First Reading*

**The Hon. T.A. FRANKS (16:56):** Obtained leave and introduced a bill for an act to make provision for the registration of social workers, to establish the social workers registration board, and for other purposes. Read a first time.

### *Second Reading*

**The Hon. T.A. FRANKS (16:57):** I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

I introduce this bill today with great excitement and positivity, and I hope it will be viewed in a collaborative spirit in this place. It is a bill that would make an act to make provision for the registration of social workers, establish the social workers registration board and associated purposes. Before I go much further, I would like to acknowledge and thank the many members of the Australian Association of Social Workers, some of whom are in the chamber with us today, and many of whom are watching us on the live stream. I have been very fortunate to work with them and to receive their support in the drafting of this bill. I know that they are all looking forward to seeing this bill hopefully progress through this parliament.

I also want to acknowledge the extraordinary and valuable work that the Australian Association of Social Workers and its members do each and every day. It may surprise members of the community, but it possibly is no surprise to members of the council, that there is currently no form of legal professional registration for social workers in Australia, despite many organisations, parties, reports and individuals calling for this reform for an incredibly long time.

The Australian Association of Social Workers is by no means alone in that call. In fact, the current Marshall government promised this reform in its 2018 election platform, and back in the days of then minister Snelling and the former Labor government there were also some positive noises in this direction. Indeed, one of the first bills I ever handled for the Greens in this place was a bill for the registration of professional bodies. Even at that time, it was still a longstanding sore point that social workers were not included in that work.

This reform has been a long time coming. It was called for in the Layton report. It was called for in the Children in State Care Commission of Inquiry. It was called for by a South Australian parliamentary committee. It was called for in the inquest into the death of Chloe Valentine. But, despite all of these calls and more than two decades of these calls, we are yet to see action, and we have waited long enough.

This reform is vital to ensure adequate standards. Around the country there are thousands—literally thousands—of social workers working outside of a regulatory framework, which means that there are the risks of clients being unaware of their workers' qualifications, skills and ethical obligations. The Australian Association of Social Workers has been pursuing registration of social workers as it is a means of enforcing safe and competent practice and it further protects the public from practitioners who do breach those ethical standards.

While there is currently a self-regulatory system within the Australian Association of Social Workers, it is a very limited one and it is only those who are members who can be investigated. Also, the penalties are, of course, most limited. Registration would allow for legally enforceable probity, qualification and practice standards and for these to be a requirement for entry into the profession. It would also allow for the maintenance of continuing professional development as a requirement for maintaining that registration and accreditation. This can give the public greater confidence that our social workers are qualified and conform to that ethical practice.

The bill provides for a registration board with powers to investigate complaints and enforce penalties for practitioners who breach those competency and ethical standards. By doing this, the bill can help to ensure that individuals who are not qualified, who are underqualified, or who act unethically, are less likely to enter the profession and, certainly, to remain in the profession. Importantly, the bill will also provide social workers and

their profession with greater recognition, improve the perception of the profession in the public and, of course, in the media.

As I have noted, social workers do some incredible work each and every day and there are a wealth of good news stories out there. But, more often than not, it is the bad news stories that the public and the media focus on. It is the few bad news stories that are the ones that get reported, and this can have a negative impact on the profession and its perception. By being better able to regulate how that social work is carried out, I would hope that we would avoid those bad news stories as much as possible. I am cognisant that they are not just stories: they are, of course, real lives of real people—some very vulnerable members of our community. We, as parliamentarians, owe them a duty of care to do all that we can to ensure the best possible professionals are taking care of them.

Given the pre-election support and commitments from both the Labor and the Liberal parties, I am hoping that, with collaboration and, indeed, working with crossbenchers as well, we can make good progress, finally, with the bill. I look forward to South Australia becoming the first state in Australia to register and properly recognise social workers.

We have heard time and time again that there have been stumbling points at a federal level, at a COAG level. The bill provides a way forward, a first step—an essential step—and unless somebody takes that first step, we will continue to hear, possibly for more decades, that it is all too hard at the COAG level. It should not be too hard. It is our duty of care to some of the most vulnerable members of our community and it is something that we can come together and be proud of as a parliament that South Australia could lead the way on the registration of social workers in this country.

With that, I note, for members of this council and members of this parliament, that there will be briefing sessions, and the Australian Association of Social Workers, right across the country, are keenly watching this debate. I also particularly thank the CEO, Cindy Smith, who is here today. Many members across the country are willing to work with members of this parliament to finally have the progress that we need.

I also foreshadow that one member alone cannot come up with a bill that will potentially have such an important role and that the bill should be put to a committee to ensure that we have that public consultation so necessary to get the best bill possible. I look forward to working with you all to achieve that for our most vulnerable members of the community. With those few words, I commend the bill to the council.

Debate adjourned on motion of Hon. T.J. Stephens.