

**EMERGENCY SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENTS — HEARING-IMPAIRED**

*Statement*

**HON SIMON O'BRIEN (South Metropolitan)** [9.46 pm]: Before we rise, I would like to address some remarks in a constructive way to the Minister for Disability Services, who is aware I am raising these matters. I am hopeful that other members might get something out of it as well. On 25 October last year, the president of the Deafness Council Western Australia wrote to the strategic communications coordinator of the Department of Fire and Emergency Services in terms such as this. I will relate those terms so that it gives the whole picture. In substance, the letter reads —

We understand that arrangements are in place to ensure that major emergency services announcements are to include Auslan interpreters to enable people who are Deaf and rely on Auslan communications to receive the message. We are fully in agreement with this initiative.

However there are a large number of Western Australians, particularly older people, who are hard of hearing and use hearing aids or cochlear implants to assist with their hearing. Many of these people rely on the closed captions now available on most tv shows and news services to assist them to understand the dialogue contained in the program.

We would like to suggest that consideration be given to also OPEN caption these major emergency service announcements, so that what is being spoken is not just being interpreted in Auslan but also written across the screen. For those whom are hard of hearing and do not know Auslan and for all other members of the public the accurate OPEN captions will enable them to know and react to what is going on right away. These services are now readily available and able to be accessed for this purpose.

This will then ensure that these important messages are available to hard of hearing and Deaf Western Australians.

I think members can relate to all of that. We are all familiar with those very important emergency services announcements—particularly when done by DFES about a fire emergency—when it has an Auslan interpreter signing to the profoundly deaf community who use Auslan. There are so many other members of our community who have a hearing impairment that does not date from birth and who do not use Auslan—they have simply gone deaf through processes of age, for example. They would benefit greatly from captions on the television, clearly spelling out the nature of the emergency. That seemed a perfectly reasonable letter for the president of the Deafness Council to write to DFES on 25 October 2018.

On 15 February, having heard nothing, the same president of the Deafness Council of Western Australia wrote to the Minister for Emergency Services in these terms —

Dear Minister,

In October last year we wrote to the Department of Fire and Emergency Services suggesting that consideration be given to ensuring all emergency services announcements broadcast by television be open captioned. A copy of that correspondence is attached.

As we have indicated in that letter, we are very supportive of these announcements being accompanied by an Auslan interpreter. However, there are a large number of Western Australians who are hard of hearing that do not use or understand Auslan. A significant number of these people are the more elderly in the community. We would appreciate it if you could consider our request and indicate to us your views on our suggestion.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,

Having heard nothing, on Wednesday, 17 April this year, the president of the Deafness Council sent an email, again to Minister Logan, which said —

Please find attached a letter we forwarded to you in February this year.

To date we have not received any response to this request.

Are you able to advise us if you have been able to give this matter your attention; and, if so, your position on our request?

More recently, the president of the Deafness Council of Western Australia came to see me and said, “Here are the communications I’ve had. Here is what we’re trying to do. I can’t get any acknowledgment at all. Simon, can you raise the matter in one of the forums available to you?” So I did. On Tuesday last, I asked a question of the Minister for Environment representing the Minister for Emergency Services. I thought that was a good synergy

because, of course, the minister representing the Minister for Emergency Services is the Minister for Disability Services. My question was quite simple, and reads —

I refer to correspondence from the president of the Deafness Council Western Australia to the Department of Fire and Emergency Services' strategic communications coordinator on 25 October 2018 and to the Minister for Emergency Services on 17 April 2019.

I asked quite simply —

Will future emergency services announcements broadcast by television be open-captioned; and, if not, why not?

I wanted to get this important matter acknowledged because I thought the president of the Deafness Council had been treated quite disrespectfully and, through him, the rest of the community. I thought, "Here we are. I'll just bowl it up and it'll go through a couple of ministers' hands, a couple of their officers' hands and they'll presumably, in the course of researching the answer, go back to the correspondence I nominated and realise there has been an oversight and the nature of that oversight." In the answer I received on Tuesday, instead of just answering yes or no and explaining why, I got another long explanation. The person who drafted the answer probably had reasonably good intent but, honestly, the soft soap was not required. There are clear references to what was being proposed: "Are you going to do it—yes or no; and, if not, why not?" I received a very long description about media outlets doing this and that, about the WA deaf society working in partnership, the department working in partnership with the WA deaf society and "We have Auslan WA deaf society interpreters and what have you", but none of it addressed the simple question that I asked. Both the president of the Deafness Council and I have a long history with the WA deaf society. I hold it in the highest regard—no question about that. But I was not asking about that and that was not the important matter that was being raised. I thought I would raise the matter with the Minister for Disability Services, who is here now. He is a gentleman. I am sure he will give me an answer in due course.

The president of the WA Deafness Council is one Barry MacKinnon. A lot of members would know Barry MacKinnon and, if not, then by repute; he is a decent fellow. Heck, years ago in another capacity, I appointed him to chair the board of the taxi industry—and despite that, he still talks to me! He is sometimes a bit abrupt admittedly, but I cannot blame him for that.

**Hon Sue Ellery:** He once said, "I didn't realise you are Peter Ellery's daughter. He's so nice."

**Hon SIMON O'BRIEN:** When he repeated the story to me, he said, "You know, Simon, it runs in the family, just like Peter Ellery."

To conclude, in his day, Barry MacKinnon was the chairman of the Fire and Emergency Services Authority board. He was also the chairman—appointed by a Labor government, I might add—of the Disability Services Commission. When this guy on behalf of the Deafness Council of WA raises as politely and persistently as this a decent and simple suggestion, I think he should be taken more seriously. I am not suggesting that anyone is being deliberately rude, but, clearly in this case, proprieties, as well as good advice, have been allowed to fall through the gaps. I turn to the minister and hope that he will retrieve the situation.