

## NEWS

# Another four public servants suspended

Sean Ford

AT LEAST four more Tasmanian public servants have been suspended over child sexual abuse allegations since mid-August.

They were suspended between August 17 and October 30. It took the total of public servants suspended over such allegations since October 2020 to 94.

That averaged roughly one per fortnight.

The suspensions were to allow investigations into whether they breached the State Service Code of Conduct, which would often lead to dismissal.

Of the 94, 55 were from the North and 39 from the South. The alleged misconduct of 53 of the people was in 2018 or later.

The state government figures did not say where the suspended workers were employed.

A significant number would have been employed at the notorious Ashley Youth Detention centre.

Nelson independent MLC Meg Webb in August said the state government had confirmed 17 Ashley staff had been suspended between November 2020 and June 20 this year because of child sexual abuse allegations, and two resigned before investigations were completed.

At least five Ashley staff who were found not to have breached the State Service Code of Conduct were then stood down again because of further allegations.

Of the 94 suspended state servants:

- six were terminated after breaches were determined;
- four more would have been terminated for breaches but they had already resigned or their contracts had ended;
- one had a breach determined, received a non-termination sanction and returned to work;
- five resigned without breaches being determined;
- 34 had no breach determined by preliminary assessment and returned to work;
- 35 were currently suspended as of October

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Nelson Independent MLC Meg Webb

30 with investigations under way; and nine resigned or their contracts expired before investigations were complete.

Premier Jeremy Rockliff in August said all state servants accused of child sexual abuse had been suspended and appropriate authorities informed, including police.

The state government's October 30 disclosure report also revealed one public servant subject to child sexual abuse claims had been stood down on full pay for more than four years pending the completion of investigations into whether they breached the code of conduct. Thirty-four public servants were suspended on full pay for that reason as of October 30. Six of them had been suspended for more than 1000 days.

## 'UNACCEPTABLE'

Ms Webb was not impressed.

"It is unacceptable that we have public servants suspended under a cloud while investigations drag out to four years and beyond," Ms Webb said.

"That is not fair for the staff member or the complainant, and does not provide confidence to the Tasmanian community.

"Such delays in resolving investigations relating to suspended public servants invite questions on whether the government is giving this sufficient focus and investment."

A spokesperson for the Department of Premier and Cabinet said the government was committed to ensuring the matters progressed as quickly as possible, "noting the complex nature of the investigations".

"In response to the commission of inquiry

and the Tasmanian State Service Review, a Shared Capability and Centralised Investigations Unit has been established," they said.

"Respected barrister Regina Weiss has been appointed to provide advice to the head of the service on the new unit."

They said Ms Weiss would help in the investigation of commission of inquiry allegations of child sexual abuse and related conduct relating to current or former Ashley Youth Detention Centre employees.

## COVERING UP?

Meanwhile, someone appears to be going to unusual lengths to protect the names of public servants who resigned or were fired in the wake of the Commission of Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Institutional Settings.

Some of those would have been subject to allegations of child sexual abuse and some others would have potentially failed to adequately protect children in state institutions.

The normal practice when public servants leave, are appointed or are transferred between agencies is for the Tasmanian Government Gazette to list their agency, role, name and the date the change took effect.

Unusually, that does not appear to have happened with many of the people believed to have been fired, quit or "moved on" following allegations of child sexual abuse or potentially failing to protect children.

Ms Webb said: "There are valid questions for the government to answer about whether the standard disclosure process of gazetting staff movements is being applied consistently or whether exceptions are being made and, if so, why?"

"A central issue exposed by the commission of inquiry was the breakdown of monitoring and reporting, and a lack of transparency, which makes it of even greater importance that we are rigorous in consistent disclosure of staff movements."

It took questions from this newspaper before 22 people who had left the State Growth Department in July, August and September were "gazetted" much later than would be

usual, on October 23.

One of them was former Ashley manager Patrick Ryan, an ex-police officer who came in for criticism stemming from the commission of inquiry.

His most recent state government job was managing the Silverdome for State Growth.

It is not suggested Mr Ryan or the other former State Growth workers were suspected of child sexual abuse.

## 'ADMIN ERROR'

Asked why Mr Ryan left the state service and it was not gazetted, a departmental spokesperson said Mr Ryan was no longer a state government employee and it was not appropriate to comment "on specific employment matters relating to individuals".

"The Department of State Growth has identified that due to an administrative error, a number (22) of State Growth separations over several months had not been listed on the jobs website or Gazette," they said.

"This has now been rectified."

In November last year, Tasmanian Greens Leader Rosalie Woodruff in parliament asked Mr Rockliff if Mr Ryan was still employed by the state.

Dr Woodruff said the commission of inquiry documented many instances of deeply problematic behaviour by Mr Ryan.

"Mr Ryan did not act appropriately in relation to harmful sexual behaviours and physical assaults at the centre," Dr Woodruff said to Mr Rockliff.

"He failed to report matters to police or child safety services. His failure to act on staff concerns directly led to children at Ashley being exposed to an unacceptable risk of harm. Can you confirm if Mr Ryan is still employed by the state of Tasmania and explain what has been done to investigate his conduct at Ashley Youth Detention Centre?"

Mr Rockliff said he would not speak of individual cases "at this particular time".

Later in the exchange, he said: "I acknowledge the content of your question and I concur with you."

"We are going through due process."