

Speech: Minister Carmel Sepuloni

Talofa lava, malo e lelei, kia ora koutou

- Thank you for the invitation to join you all this evening on World Social Work Day.
- Can I begin by making a couple of acknowledgements;
 - former Social Development Minister Steve Maharey – who first introduced what was then known as the Social Workers Registration Act back in 2003. Thank you for your work in this space.
 - my fellow parliamentary colleagues;
 - Social Workers Registration Board Chair Shannon Pakura;
 - Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers President Sharyn Roberts;
 - Robyn Corrigan and Miriama Scott of Tangata Whenua Social Work Association;
 - Rose Henderson of the International Federation of Social Workers;
 - Board members, and leaders from across the sector, government and non-government.
- On World Social Work Day, the naming of tonight's event is significant. **Kia utoka, kia tauwhiro** acknowledges our tauwhiro/social workers as experts in caring for and bringing balance for others by working closely with and alongside tamariki, whānau and communities, supporting them towards a better quality of life. Utoka recognises the knowledge and strength of our social workers and the social work profession.
- In 2017, there were 6,631 social workers on the register when legislation to shift to mandatory registration was introduced. Registered social workers increased to 7,812 in 2018/19 and last year to 8,642.
- I am pleased to let you know just recently we hit a major milestone - there are now 10,000 plus registered social workers in New Zealand, and that number will continue to grow.
- When we look at the social work profession through a Māori world view, we can see how we move and transition from the space of tikanga (negotiable) to the space of kawa (permanence).
- The transition from a voluntary to a mandatory environment acknowledges and elevates the social work profession to a place of permanence where the profession remains fixed, firm and resolute in what it does – **kia utoka, kia tauwhiro**.

Social workers are a vital workforce

- Our world tilted in March last year when the country went into lockdown. It has been an extraordinarily challenging 12 months, and one where the resilience, ongoing mahi and compassion shown by social workers has been needed more than ever.
- We know that social workers have had to work harder than ever as the families, whānau, and communities you work alongside were put under stress or faced tough situations. Your

mahi is appreciated by those you work alongside, and I would like to acknowledge that social workers rose to the challenge every day over this time, and continue to do so.

- Social workers are essential frontline professionals and part of a key workforce involved in supporting our communities and improving the wellbeing of New Zealanders.
- There are thousands of social workers employed across 600 NGOs and many public sector agencies, spread across fields from health to child statutory protection to the community and voluntary sector.
- You are a vital workforce.

Regulated workforce

- With the profession stepping into mandatory registration, it is taking a step forward and one that is significant for New Zealand.
- As many of you will know, mandatory registration is a measure I've been pushing for and vocal about since I was an Opposition MP. In 2015 I put forward a Member's Bill that sought to make registration mandatory, but unfortunately, the bill did not receive support from the Government at the time.
- I progressed the Social Workers Registration Legislation Bill introduced by the previous Minister, but also was encouraged to strengthen the bill even further, which is why for example I proposed Scopes of Practice for social workers. This was favoured by the Select Committee at the time as well as the sector.
- It was developed following consultation and the efforts of a working group comprised of leaders across the sector, working together over the last year (and many of them are here tonight). I would like to thank the group and others who have contributed to this work.
- The intent behind the move to mandatory is to protect the public by registering all social workers, and to enhance professionalism. Being registered and holding a valid Practising Certificate provides reassurance to the public that social workers adhere to a Code of Conduct, uphold the Code of Ethics, and are part of a fully professional workforce.
- And it means tamariki, whānau and communities can be confident in the care, advice and support from social workers, as they find their own pathway. It should strengthen trust in the profession which enables the Mauri ora of people and communities every day in New Zealand.
- Having a registered workforce also acknowledges the valuable contribution social workers make as a specialist profession in supporting the community.

Mandatory registration

- While mandatory registration is an important step forward for social work, I would also like to acknowledge the many social workers who, in a voluntary space, became registered recognising how important it was.
- There are many gathered here tonight who have spent years working towards this and I want to thank you for your unwavering support to strengthen the profession.
- Being a registered profession provides social workers with shared professional values and competencies recognised in Aotearoa. This provides the people who need assistance from social workers with the assurances the practitioner is accountable for the way they work.
- Mandatory registration also puts social work on an equal footing with other regulated professions; for example, health where doctors, nurses and allied health professionals are all registered. A member of the public would not want to go to a hospital and be seen by a doctor or nurse who was not registered, and now we can start to provide the same level of accountability with social work.

Workforce planning

- In another step forward, I've asked the Social Workers Registration Board to act as the lead agency on workforce planning in a move to strengthen the profession.
- With so many social workers spread across a wide number of fields (health, child statutory protection and on to the community and voluntary sector), it's important to understand the emerging workforce issues.
- The workforce planning role will provide an overview and strategic response to these challenges, and is a key component of the profession moving forward in a mandatory environment.

Conclusion

- There are many challenges facing us in what has been a time of uncertainty. What I would like to acknowledge is that as a workforce, social workers understand the stresses and challenges this can bring, and the impact it has on those they work alongside.
- Your resilience, strength and mahi provide a way forward for many, and we thank you for that.