



MPS endorse calls to support young witnesses

NICHOLAS PAYNE

ALL four of Geelong's state MPs have voiced their support for laws to protect child victims in the court system after the family of the young girl at the centre of the dismissed Wild rape trial pleaded for legislative changes.

The *Geelong Advertiser* revealed on February 24 the victim's family had requested the case be dropped and confirmed their daughter had been too traumatised to take the witness stand.

Geelong MP Christine Couzens, Lara MP John Eren and Bellarine MP Lisa Neville said changes needed to be made to further protect young victims, while South Barwon MP

In a perfect world it is the perpetrators and not the victim who should be held accountable for sexual assault.

BARWON CENTRE AGAINST SEXUAL ASSAULT CHIEF EXECUTIVE HELEN BOLTON

Andrew Katos said he supported the moves in principle.

Mr Eren said Premier Daniel Andrews and Attorney-General Martin Pakula would meet the Geelong family to discuss potential changes.

"We'll consider any changes to make the legal process less intimidat-

ing for young witnesses and victims of sexual assault," Mr Eren said.

The alleged victim's mother confirmed to the *Geelong Advertiser* last night that the family would meet Mr Andrews and Mr Pakula next week.

She was confident reforms could be agreed upon.

"We need to examine what can be done," she said.

Police Minister Ms Neville said it was "critical" that young sexual assault victims were supported through the court process.

"This is a terrible case and has had a huge impact on the young woman, her family and community," she said.

Ms Neville said the Government was also reviewing suppression order laws, and supported "restrictions on gratuitous details being made public."

Ms Couzens said the Geelong case "raises a number of significant issues".

"Everyone has the right to justice," she said. "The distress and anger felt by the family is something I am very aware of and I will support necessary changes."

Mr Katos said protecting young victims was "paramount" and he supported "anything you can do to assist victims giving evidence".

But Mr Katos also said the "balance" needed to be right, and he was hesitant to endorse calls to replace a jury with a judge during cross-examinations in sexual assault trials, as some had suggested.

"I'm quite a strong supporter of the jury system," he said.

The Geelong region's largest support service for sexual assault victims

has also joined the call for reform, with Barwon Centre Against Sexual Assault chief executive Helen Bolton saying more could be done.

"Barwon CASA supports a review of the effectiveness of existing justice processes and further reform," Ms Bolton said. "In a perfect world, it is the perpetrators and not the victim who should be held accountable for sexual assault."

Barwon CASA has suggested myriad changes that could be implemented to assist victims.

These included "the need for a new remote witness facility in Geelong", as well as more responsive local forensic medical services.

For anyone who has experienced sexual assault, Barwon CASA is available on 5222 4318.