

KATANNING ABUSE SCANDAL

IT'S TIME TO SAY SORRY

■ Gary Adshead and Jayne Rickard

Public servants and parents ignored more than 20 attempts to warn them about child sex abuse happening at State-run boarding hostels over two decades.

In a stark 345-page report into how such systemic abuse could go unchallenged by authorities for so long, retired Supreme Court judge Peter Blaxell singled out people, saying they should be "ashamed" of themselves.

While most of the public officers were now retired or dead, Mr Blaxell made adverse findings against serving WA Police inspector Bill Todd and Shire of Katanning councillor Ainslie Evans.

Mr Blaxell concluded that both failed to respond to allegations about Dennis John McKenna, the warden of St Andrew's Hostel in Katanning, who molested boys for 15 years before being arrested in 1990.

The report, tabled in State Parliament yesterday, found that at least 48 boys and girls sent to the hostel between 1975 and

1990 while they attended the town's high school were victims of McKenna, his brother Neil or a third staff member.

Maggie Dawkins, a former government youth worker who tried to blow the whistle on McKenna, said she felt vindicated by the inquiry and called for those who did nothing to apologise.

Mr Blaxell said people were more worried about the hostel's reputation than investigating allegations "that something evil was going on".

"There are many failures by many people in terms of failure to respond to what they were told and allegations made at the time," he said after the report was released.

"One factor was very clear as to why public officials did nothing.

"Nearly all of them knew McKenna, they admired him and when allegations were made they simply didn't believe them."

It was a similar story at North-

am's St Christopher's Hostel, where warden Roy Wenlock regularly wrestled boys, while wearing just his underpants, for sexual gratification.

Premier Colin Barnett said that as a result of the damning report, the organisation that managed State hostels, the Country High School Hostels Authority, would be abolished.

"It is astounding that such abuse could go on for such an extended period of time and it wasn't acted upon," he said.

"Care and responsibility for children in hostels will come under the Department of Education fully."

Mr Barnett, who apologised on behalf of the State, accepted five recommendations to improve reporting of child abuse allegations including a "one-stop shop" for complaints.

He also announced an ex-gratia payment scheme for victims.

But news that the scheme would allow for a maximum payment of only \$45,000 infuriated former St Andrew's residents.

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'Something evil' at hostel

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"The amount of medical costs and suffering that the boys and the girls that are still alive are still going through — that figure is probably just as insulting as what Redress was," former boarder Mike Hilder said.

Mr Barnett said the figure was consistent with the Redress WA scheme for victims of abuse in government institutions.

"It doesn't pretend in any way to compensate for the abuse and should some of those victims decide to pursue civil action, they are free to do so," he said.

Mr Barnett said the future of Insp. Todd, who rejected evidence to the Blaxell inquiry that a youth worker raised concerns about McKenna with him in 1985, rested with Police Commissioner Karl O'Callaghan.

The report revealed that 11 allegations of sexual abuse were referred to WA Police during the Blaxell inquiry.

McKenna has already been convicted of molesting 11 boys and the report said he was facing 66 new charges in relation to 16 former hostel students.



Vindicated: Maggie Dawkins gets a hug from sex abuse victim Darryl Stevens yesterday. Picture: Astrid Volzke