

WA PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO MENTAL ILLNESS IN FLY-IN FLY-OUT WORKERS

Education and Health Standing Committee

Submission from FIFO Families Pty Ltd and Creating Communities Australia Pty Ltd

Contacts

Andrew Watt

Creating Communities

Senior Associate

(08) 9284 0910 or 0432 260 500

andrew@creatingcommunities.com.au

Nicole Ashby

FIFO Families

Founder and Managing Director

6188 7670 or 0432 686 171

nicole@fifofamilies.com.au

Andrew Watt and Nicole Ashby are able to appear before the committee if required.

Inquiry Terms of reference

That the Education and Health Standing Committee review and report on the mental health of fly-in, fly-out workers. In particular, the Committee will inquire into:

- (a) the contributing factors that may lead to mental illness and suicide amongst FIFO workers;
- (b) the current legislation, regulations, policies and practices for workplace mental health in Western Australia;
- (c) current initiatives by government, industry and community, and recommended improvements.

1. BACKGROUND

About Creating Communities

Creating Communities is a multidisciplinary social and communications planning firm, formed in 1992. We aim to improve the way our clients connect with their communities by realising the potential mutual benefits that sit at the intersection of the interests of people, community, industry and government.

Creating Communities provides a solutions-driven approach to workforce mobility, through a range of specialist services that support employees, employers, host and source communities to grasp opportunities that make the Fly in Fly Out (FIFO) choice work.

Creating Communities has undertaken extensive research into FIFO for various resource companies and also completed work on FIFO related issues for the Chamber of Minerals and Energy and APPEA, including authoring the reports:

1. A Matter of Choice - Capturing the FIFO Opportunity in Pilbara Communities (CME and PICC, 2012)
2. Heading North – the Importance of Labour Mobility in Developing Northern Australia (APPEA, 2014)

www.creatingcommunities.com.au/about/services/fifo

About FIFO Families:

FIFO Families was established in July 2010 to assist in supporting FIFO workers and their families. We also work and engage with resource industry companies to help educate, support and assist their FIFO workforce and families.

www.fifofamilies.com.au

Our Philosophy on Long Distance Commuting / FIFO Workforce Models

Creating Communities and FIFO Families have a view that long distance commuting work models are neither purely positive nor purely negative for workers, families or host and source communities. Varying work models have their inherent advantages and disadvantages.

What is key is how workers and their families can be supported to adapt to any change in work-life arrangements to enable personal, familial and community benefits.

FIFO work practices have evolved over time and have created a cost effective approach to quickly and efficiently mobilising skilled workforces to undertake key project work.

While FIFO employment is much talked about and achieves significant media coverage, it is generally not well understood. There are many statements made, views given and assertions proffered without any real basis of fact or research.

The reality is that this work model has increased over time due to a number of factors, such as:

- Workers choosing to access work in remote locations, without having to move their family away from social, family or community networks and services
- The decrease in travel costs

- The increase in access to communication, thus breaking down issues of isolation, which was previously a barrier to taking on this work model
- The increased work choice it provides
- The ability for companies to attract and retain skilled workers by providing both residential and FIFO work options, allowing families to decide where they wish to live and who they choose to work for.

The preference for FIFO work is particularly evident with employees involved in the construction phase of a resource project, where a worker may only be required to perform their specialist trade for a few intensive weeks or months at a time. It is not viable or appropriate for a company to only offer residential employment that would require the employee to move themselves or their families to a new town and change their preferred lifestyle for such a short period.

There is great sophistication in the logistical management aspects of FIFO employment including well organised travel arrangements, shift rostering, accommodation and workplace training. Unfortunately there is far less sophistication applied to the essential social planning and community development support related to this work practice. This is particularly evident in a lack of systemic and strategic level of worker/family support, which is needed to ensure that significant lifestyle changes are planned for and effectively managed. There is currently little evidence of any comprehensive approaches to ongoing workforce induction, support and monitoring to ensure each worker is productive, safe and healthy. Similarly, there is insufficient consideration or investment in supporting partners and families in ensuring this workforce model becomes a positive choice for them and their communities.

Herein lies the opportunity. The ability to use experts in social planning and community development to establish strategies to ensure that workers, their families and the communities in which they live and work, generate benefit and reduce any potential harm from what is a common work practice.

This paper will outline the key findings of research and engagement undertaken by Creating Communities in partnership with FIFO Families and will describe the proposed recommendations. These recommendations will create mutual benefit for all while simultaneously reducing negative impacts on worker mental health.

2. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND EXPERIENCE

Research conducted by Creating Communities and FIFO Families

FIFO Families and Creating Communities have been working together for the last three years and have recently conducted two large surveys related to long distance commuting workforces and their partners/families.

The FIFO¹ workers survey was completed in 2013 and included responses from 800 workers. This gave unprecedented access into the opinions and insight of the workforce, across all sectors.

NOTE: The detailed findings of this report have been supplied to the Education and Health Standing Committee.

The second study included responses from over 1,200 partners of FIFO workers from all over Australia and again is representative of all industries. This survey also asked questions relating to the effects of FIFO life on the children of workers. This survey was completed in 2014, preliminary findings have been developed and the final report is will be available in late 2014.

¹ In this case FIFO is used to refer to long distance commuters, including Bus-in, Bus-out (BIBO) and Drive-in, Drive-out (DIDO). BIBO and DIDO workers made up around 15% of the sample, while the remaining 85% worked FIFO.

Findings of the research

Below is a short summary of the findings we believe are particularly relevant to the current inquiry:

Demographics and general satisfaction

- Most are male (80%), aged between 25-44 (78%), and in a couple household with children living at home (70%).
- 62% are satisfied with their life working FIFO.
- The following factors have been found to be linked to satisfaction with life working FIFO:
 - Do not have children
 - Work in the mining sector (not oil and gas or construction)
 - Attending a formal induction into FIFO Lifestyle (of which a very small percentage have had the opportunity to do so)
 - Feeling their company understands the needs of them and their families
 - Feeling they belong with their company
 - Have a strong sense of loyalty towards their company
 - Feel their company has been loyal to them
 - Originally intended to work FIFO long term
- Average male BMI is 28.8 (overweight). This is higher than the Australian male average of 27.9 (ABS. Australian Health Survey 2011/12). Average female BMI is 26.9 (overweight) which is slightly lower than the Australian female average of 27.2 (ibid).

Induction – A Preventative Approach

- 79% agree that in general, a FIFO induction program/s would assist workers in being more productive and safer, while only 7% have attended such an induction.
- 84% agree that an induction into FIFO lifestyle should be provided to assist employees to adapt to FIFO work and lifestyle, while only 7% have attended such an induction.
- 90% agree that an induction into FIFO lifestyle should be provided to partners and family members of FIFO workers to understand and effectively manage their lifestyle, while only 2% of workers' families have attended such an induction.
- 36% do not believe their companies understand the needs of FIFO workers and 42% do not believe their companies understand the needs of FIFO workers' families.
- According to FIFO workers the top 5 things an effective induction process should include are (open-ended results, grouped into themes):
 1. Family – effects on family/relationships
 2. General Lifestyle
 3. Dealing with Isolation
 4. Mental Health and stress
 5. Facilities / services/ accommodation / layout

Other experience

Creating Communities' ongoing engagement with workers and industry

Creating Communities have completed many major projects with resource companies, industry groups and local governments in relation to FIFO, accommodation, lifestyle, community impacts and host and source community considerations.

The Creating Communities team also has a huge depth of experience in the areas of social planning and community development which provides a unique perspective on FIFO and the associated challenges. Many of these projects include engaging directly with FIFO workers and key stakeholders in relation to FIFO. Although this work is generally confidential as it is commercial in confidence (unlike the research described above), the recommendations below have been formulated on the basis of this collective experience.

FIFO Families' ongoing engagement with workers and industry

FIFO families have several thousand FIFO workers on their database and as members. FIFO Families engages with workers and their families on a daily basis through the numerous groups, meetings and events which are part of the service they provide. This means that over the years, FIFO Families has spoken to thousands of people who work FIFO or are involved in the FIFO industry. The information gathered through this grass-roots engagement has also been taken into consideration when providing the recommendations below.

3. MENTAL HEALTH

Social Factors Which Contribute to Stress and Mental Health Issues with FIFO Workers

Based on our experience of working in the FIFO industry these are some of the social factors that have been found to contribute to stress and mental health issues amongst FIFO workers:

- Managing the multitude of life changes associated with FIFO work.
- Challenges in transitioning between home and work life.
- Separation and isolation from family and friends.
- Strain in maintaining regular meaningful communication (and therefore strong relationships) with family and friends.
- Challenges in maintaining connection to the broader community (such as sporting or social groups, volunteer work arrangements).
- Fatigue and stress associated with long working hours and long work swings.
- Lack of knowledge about how to plan for work/life changes, and where to get help when it is needed.

Records of Mental Health Incidents On-site

Mental health stressors, mental illness and suicide have been a concern of FIFO Families over the past 4 years. This information comes from a grass roots level; from people who have experienced it in one way or another and have shared their experience with FIFO Families.

These concerns have been shared with some key political leaders as well as the WA Department of Mines and Petroleum. FIFO Families have come to learn that suicides on site are not recorded as such. Recording a

suicide would be effective so that data can be tracked and compared to the rest of the population and to identify if there is in fact a higher incidence within the resources sector.

The recommendations below are aimed at understanding and addressing key issues, as well as generally improving the satisfaction, productivity and safety of workers and families.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is our firm belief that the best approach to managing mental health issues is in a proactive and holistic manner. This approach should focus on understanding the needs of workers and their families, and providing a supportive environment and the tools to manage the challenges to enhance the positive aspects of FIFO working practice. This will lead to prevention, or early identification of mental health problems. In doing so, everyone benefits – the workers, their families, the company and the wider community.

Currently the predominant method of social intervention is the use of Employee Assistance Schemes, which provides free counselling support. Such an approach becomes reactive rather than preventative, with workers and their families often either:

- Not being aware of the service
- Accessing the services too late, and only once issues have reached crisis point
Not feeling comfortable in accessing the service due to stigma or fear that others might find out, which can affect their standing

Therefore, Creating Communities and FIFO Families recommend that the following simple model be adopted. This model takes a systematic and preventative approach, rather than the reactive approach that predominates currently.

FIFO worker and family change management model and associated solutions:

RESEARCH	➔ SOCIAL PLANNING	➔ INDUCTION/ ONBOARDING	➔ SUPPORT
Workforce research, engagement and modelling	Village community development planning, implementation and activation	Pre-induction awareness training – supporting informed workforce decision making	Membership support services for workers and their families
Worker/resident satisfaction surveys	Attraction, retention and productivity strategies	Induction for workers and families into FIFO lifestyle	FIFO worker and family events (local and regional)
FIFO village reviews and audits	Accommodation and facilities design advice	Induction into village life	Site visits to promote social support services
Social Impact Assessment	Social Impact mitigation strategies	Induction into host community life	Social services advice and links
Demographic profiling		Community integration planning	Effective communication mechanisms & technologies

Preparing and Managing a FIFO Lifestyle

Induction of FIFO Workers is a service which FIFO Families have been providing for some time, and with the assistance of Creating Communities have the opportunity to extend as part of a comprehensive social planning approach to create sustained benefit for workers, their families, their communities and employers.

The team have identified that there has been a substantial gap in terms of workers, their partners and families not having been made aware of, or prepared for, the challenges of the FIFO lifestyle before they begin.

Creating Communities and FIFO Families firmly believe (and the data supports this understanding) that if workers, together with their partners and families, attended an induction before commencing FIFO work, as the following benefits would arise;

- Lower incidence of mental illness and suicides
- Increased levels of resilience amongst FIFO workers and their partners/families
- Increased retention
- Increased safety levels
- Increased productivity

Much time, effort and money is put into job induction training of FIFO workers but little, if any, consideration is given to inducting workers into the lifestyle. If this was part of company or even industry policy, it would be a win-win for not only the companies (in terms of profits) but also for the FIFO worker and their partner/family.

This induction should be undertaken at the following levels:

1. **Pre-Induction/ General Information on FIFO Lifestyle**– This phase of induction should create a genuine understanding of the challenges and opportunities of FIFO work, what type of personality adapts best to the work, and what you need to do to prepare for the changes inherent in taking on FIFO work. (This stage should encourage those who are not suited to FIFO work, i.e. isolation to not pursue FIFO work in the first place).
2. **Induction in FIFO Lifestyle: Worker, partner and family (once employed)** - This phase should create a more in-depth knowledge of the strategies to consider to effectively manage the many changes and challenges that FIFO work provides for the worker and their partners, family and friends. This induction should focus on practical approaches to planning and preparing for life ahead from a personal, social and financial basis.
3. **Induction into the FIFO Accommodation** – It is important for a worker to feel comfortable in their new surrounds and to adapt to the community in which they will be living. It is also crucial for workers and their families to have access to care, understanding and support services while the worker is onsite and at their accommodation. Simple strategies such as a buddy system, personal welcome, village tours and social activities are all crucial to creating social connections and resilience.
4. **Induction into Host Community** – FIFO workers at times experience criticism of the work choice they make from others who feel it is anti-community. Inducting workers into the communities in which they will be working and living is important to enable the development of positive connections with the community and respect for the behavioural expectations of the community. Opportunities to interact with the community to “de-institutionalise” behaviour is an essential aspect to this induction.

Support Services

Community support services are needed that adapt to the lifestyle of FIFO workers, their families and their hours of work. Most services are during normal office hours and are difficult for workers or their families to access.

Some key actions that could be taken to better prevent mental health issues for FIFO workers and their families include:

- Development of a state wide strategy for the coordination and development of services across agencies to better cater for the needs of FIFO workers and their families
- Development of best practice models that engage workers, companies, consultants, communities, non-government and government agencies in a collaborative approach to FIFO workforce and family development
- Each FIFO Village to have its own community development strategy to provide better social support for residents and enhanced connections with their host communities
- Local Government Strategic Community Plans to include strategies and initiatives related to better planning for the needs of FIFO workers and their families
- Training of workforce mental health safety officers (as per first aid officers)
- Establishment induction sessions by trained professionals, with experience in the field (as per above)
- Training of on-site village staff (e.g. Active Lifestyle Coordinators) to have a greater understanding of social planning strategies that create social bonds and connections. This is to run parallel with a focus on physical activity, which while important, isn't accessed by the majority of residents
- Better awareness of mental health support strategies via increased promotion to workers and their families
- Breaking down the stigma associated with mental health management through on-site health and safety training, plus access to training for families
- Resources to be targeted towards organisations that provide networking and social support for FIFO workers and their families

5. CONCLUSION

Recent tragic events related to mental health has brought into focus the need to address the social and emotional needs of FIFO workers and their families.

There is now sufficient research to inform what needs to be taken to ensure FIFO workers are safer, healthier and more productive citizens.

The state government and its agencies should aim to work in unison with companies, local communities and experts in the field of social planning to not only enable the development of an agreed set of principles and strategies that will better prepare workers and their families for the challenges of FIFO work, but also to allow them to harness the opportunities that this type of work presents.

Creating Communities and FIFO Families would be well-placed to utilise our extensive experience and expertise to assist in this improvement process in the future.