



Inquiry into mental illness in fly-in, fly-out workers

***beyondblue* Submission**

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beyondblue applauds the Western Australian Government's initiative in holding this parliamentary inquiry into mental illness in fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) workers. We believe the mental health of FIFO workers to be a significant national issue that has national impacts and implications for the workers, their families and communities where FIFO workers reside and fly out from. We believe any recommendations from this Western Australian specific inquiry need to be considered from a broader national context and that the involvement of all States and Territories is required for an effective response to these issues. It is also essential that the recommendations from the 2012 Commonwealth inquiry into the use of FIFO workforce practices in regional Australia are also implemented.

In making this submission *beyondblue* has focussed on the **high prevalence mental health conditions of depression and anxiety, and suicide prevention**. This submission has been informed by *beyondblue*'s extensive experience in workplace mental health, which includes research, education and training, partnering with industry and industry associations, and recently launching the national 'Heads Up' initiative.

There is significant anecdotal evidence and some emerging research on the challenges of FIFO work and the associated stresses to individuals, families and communities. FIFO work takes place in a range of industries including oil and gas, mining, construction and transport. The diversity of these industries (on shore, off shore, remote camps, camps in existing townships, variation in swing lengths), combined with the workforce's rapid expansion, all add to the complexity of establishing a sound evidence base on this workforce. In line with this, there a need to develop the **empirical evidence on the mental health impacts of FIFO work**. Further research is needed to identify the prevalence of depression, anxiety and suicide among this workforce, and those factors that put workers at risk for mental health issues, as well as those factors that enable workers to maintain their mental wellbeing.

While further research is needed, there are a range of existing programs and services that can be implemented to support the mental health of FIFO workers. Implementing existing evidence-based programs will help to ensure that all governments and FIFO employers are proactively supporting the mental health of FIFO workers and the broader community.

beyondblue is a national, independent, not-for-profit organisation working to reduce the impact of depression and anxiety in the Australian community. Established in 2000, *beyondblue* is a bipartisan initiative of the Australian, State and Territory Governments, supported by the generosity of individuals, corporate Australia and Movember. *beyondblue* takes a public health approach, which focuses on improving the health of the whole population with programs and initiatives for people of every age, at every stage of life.

The contributing factors that may lead to mental illness and suicide amongst FIFO workers

Research on the mental health of FIFO workers and their families is currently limited and somewhat conflicting – some research suggests that these workers may be more likely to experience mental health conditions,¹ while other research indicates that this population group may be less likely to experience mental health conditions compared to other employment types,² and the general population.³ The different research outcomes on the mental health of FIFO workers most likely reflects methodological differences across studies – for example, the type and number of workers included in the research, measurement tools used, timeframes for the study etc. Large-scale, high quality research is needed to better understand the mental health of this workforce, including specific FIFO-related factors that impact on mental health outcomes and wellbeing outcomes.

While the prevalence of mental health conditions in FIFO workers is therefore currently unknown, there is strong community concern for the mental health and wellbeing of this workforce. There is also broad recognition that they are likely to be specific aspects of the FIFO role that puts workers, their families and communities at risk for mental health problems, such as social isolation and disruptions to normal family life and routines.

Generally, depression and anxiety do not result from a single cause or event, but arise from a complex interplay of biological, psychological, environmental and social factors. The *beyondblue*-commissioned systematic literature review on “*Workplace mental illness and substance use disorders in male-dominated industries*” confirmed that there are a broad range of risk factors for depression and anxiety in people working in male-dominated industries such as mining.⁴ These include individual, team, work and individual/workplace interface factors – as outlined in [Table 1](#).

Individual
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demographic characteristics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Being a younger worker ○ Being more junior in the work team, unit, company ○ Being male
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life experiences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Negative life events (e.g., death of a close family member, divorce)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual characteristics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Job unsuitability ○ Attitudes towards work, associated with job security ○ Believing that alcohol will lead to positive experiences ○ Expectations of, or actual job changes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disparity in occupational status: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Manual workers were more at risk than non-manual workers ○ Unskilled workers were at significantly more risk than skilled workers ○ Lower status occupations were significantly more likely to be at risk than higher status occupations ○ Blue collar workers were at significantly more at risk than white collar workers
Team
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor workplace relationships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Lack of line manager support ○ Poor supervision combined with job stress

○ General lack of support and cooperation at work
● Permissive drinking norms
Work
● Work demands; job demands and job overload
● Poor employment conditions and job insecurity
● Limited work role; inability to use one's skills/decision-making capacity
Individual/Workplace Interface
● Work/life imbalance (e.g., little time to unwind after or see family between shifts, unpredictable work hours, excessive overtime)
● Job demands/overtime/negative work-related life events

Table 1: Risk factors for depression, anxiety disorders and substance use disorders in male-dominated industries

Research explicitly focusing on FIFO workers suggests that these risk factors may be important contributors to mental health conditions in this population group. Specific workplace-based risk factors reported by some FIFO workers include difficulties in completing jobs within the allocated timeframes; workloads being unrealistic; and having a lack of control over their work.⁵ Other common adverse effects of FIFO work which are reported in the literature, and align with the risk factors for experiencing mental health conditions, include:⁶

- High stress levels and poor health, including binge drinking, recreational drug use and obesity
- Poor quality relationships which lead to increased break-ups and divorce
- Family disruption and stress
- Reduced social and community interaction
- Feelings of loneliness and isolation.

There is little empirical data on the prevalence of suicide in the FIFO workforce.⁷ Some research has suggested that miners who die by suicide may be more likely to experience relationship problems prior to their death, compared to other workers who die by suicide.⁸ While this research requires further exploration, and applies to all mining workers, rather than just FIFO workers, the finding may have practical implications for both workplace policies and support programs (for example, providing additional assistance to FIFO workers experiencing relationship problems).

It is important to note that, while the existing research provides indications of which risk factors may disproportionately impact on FIFO workers, further research is needed to better understand the mental health of this workforce, including the factors that may negatively and positively contribute to mental health and suicide risk. Further research is also needed to assess the impact of FIFO working arrangements on families, as the current evidence suggests that FIFO work practices can have positive, negative or few effects on children and family relationships, depending on the circumstances.⁹ The effects of FIFO work appear to vary according to workplace-related factors such as culture, rosters and recruitment practices, as well as community and home environments and individual characteristics.¹⁰

Current initiatives by government, industry and community, and recommended improvements

Increasingly workplace mental health is being recognized as a significant issue for businesses. Research undertaken by PricewaterhouseCoopers (2014) found that untreated mental health conditions cost Australian employers \$10.9 billion every year through absenteeism, reduced productivity and compensation claims.¹¹ Conversely, investing in workplace mental health and wellbeing via targeted strategies to support employee mental wellbeing is estimated to provide a return on investment of \$2.30 for every dollar spent.¹² Overall, the evidence indicates that workplaces where the staff believe management values their mental health and wellbeing tend to experience less absenteeism and turnover and achieve greater productivity.¹³

beyondblue initiatives and programs that support workplace mental health

Workplace mental health has been a priority for *beyondblue* since its inception in 2000, and *beyondblue* has a range of initiatives and programs that would support the mental health and wellbeing of FIFO workers and their families, and reduce suicide.

Heads Up (www.headsup.org.au)

Heads Up is an Australian-first initiative of *beyondblue* and the Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance¹ launched in July 2014, which supports Australian businesses and workers to create more mentally healthy workplaces. Mentally healthy workplaces are those which are considered friendly and supportive, promote a positive workplace culture, minimise workplace risks related to mental health, support people with mental health conditions, and prevent discrimination.¹⁴ **They have been demonstrated to provide better support and protect employee mental health, and be more productive.** Mentally healthy workplaces are also more likely to have management and human resource practices which support the recruitment and retention of people with a mental health condition.^{15,16} This includes policies related to equal employment opportunities, work health and safety, diversity, return to work and leave arrangements, and the delivery of mental health awareness training to staff and managers.

Through Heads Up, FIFO employers can support the mental health and wellbeing of their staff, by developing a tailored and practical action plan for creating a mentally healthy workplace, based on their specific needs. The interactive step-by-step Heads Up guide helps employers and employees to identify priority areas of action, implement strategies to address these priorities, and review and monitor the outcomes.

¹ The Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance is a tripartite alliance of business, government and the mental health sector which is committed to improving the mental health of Australian workplaces. Founding Alliance members include the National Mental Health Commission, Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Australian Psychological Society Ltd, *beyondblue*, Black Dog Institute, Business Council of Australia, Comcare, Council of Small Business Organisations of Australia, Mental Health Council of Australia, Safe Work Australia, SANE Australia, and University of New South Wales. The Alliance has now been recently joined by Super Friend and the Australian Industry Group.

Tailored Heads Up action plans can be developed at any level of an organisation including corporate strategy, division, site, shift, crew and team. Health and Safety Representatives can also integrate the Heads Up action plan as another component of existing safety management systems and messages. These plans can therefore be directly relevant to the particular needs and circumstances of FIFO employees and employers. Heads Up action plans can also link directly to support materials and resources from members of the Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance and can be expanded to include specific supports and resources available from employers.

Some examples of key issues that can be addressed through a Heads Up action plan include:

Priority area	Example strategies
Increase awareness of mental health conditions	Provide information (e.g. fact sheets/pamphlets in staff rooms) to everyone in the workplace about mental health conditions – prevalence, signs and symptoms, and available services and support
Reduce stigma	Promote the personal stories of people who have experienced and recovered from a mental health condition
Increase the skills and confidence of everyone in the workplace to approach someone they are concerned about	Provide mental health awareness training to staff and managers, either online or face-to-face.
Encourage employees with mental health conditions to seek treatment and support early	Provide information about available services and support, such as face to face services, information lines, e-therapies/programs or an Employee Assistance Program, to encourage people to seek treatment and support early. In remote locations promote and provide rapid access to mental health services with equivalent levels of management support as for a physical injury.
Make adjustments to job roles, schedules or workloads to support someone with a mental health condition	Make changes in the workplace to support someone with a mental health condition stay at or return to work (e.g. allowing time off to attend appointments with health professionals, adjusting working hours, avoiding unnecessary shift changes).
Support employees with mental health conditions to stay at or return to work	Develop and implement return to work or stay at work plans, tailored for employees' needs
Monitor and manage work hours and schedules	Encourage employees to speak up at an early stage if they feel their tasks are excessive and to seek guidance about priorities
Avoid excessive workloads	Regularly review employee workloads at team meetings and during formal and informal catch-ups
Increase job control	Give employees a chance to have input into how tasks are completed and more control over the method and order of their tasks
Ensure clarity on job roles	Ensure that all employees have an up-to-date job description which includes role purpose, reporting relationships and key duties expected of them

Reward effort and recognise achievements	Provide regular feedback on task performance. Recognise whenever a task is done well and give constructive feedback on areas for improvement
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The Heads Up website also includes a range of practical resources that are relevant to individuals within a workplace, including people with mental health conditions, managers and organisational leaders, as well as the self-employed. These include interactive online resources (e.g. How to have a conversation with someone you are concerned about), case studies, videos (e.g. people who have had a personal experience of a mental health condition), brochures and fact sheets.

beyondblue is working closely with industry associations and Alliance partners to promote Heads Up within the resources sector. *beyondblue* has a partnership with the Australian Mines and Metals Association to promote mentally healthy workplaces across their membership. The Mental Health Working Group of the Chamber of Minerals and Energy has also workshopped material developed by Heads Up with a view to adapting the principles for effective mental health strategies for the resources sector.

[beyondblue Support Service – 1300 22 4636 - www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport)

The *beyondblue* Support Service provides all Australians with the opportunity to talk through their concerns with a qualified mental health professional. The service is delivered via a 24/7 telephone service, a web chat service from 3pm to 12am (AEST), and an email response service. **FIFO workers and their families can receive a one-on-one counselling session focussed on addressing their immediate concern, and receive information and advice on continuing to seek help.** The service has recently been independently evaluated and demonstrated to reduce levels of distress and increase motivation to take action for mental health concerns.

[Man Therapy - www.mantherapy.org.au](http://www.mantherapy.org.au)

Man Therapy is a website for the 5.5 million Australian men aged 18 to 54. The star of Man Therapy is Dr Brian Ironwood, a fictional doctor who uses humour and honest discussion to guide men through the website and provide them with the instructions and tools so they can take action against depression and anxiety.

FIFO workers can use the Man Therapy website to:

- **learn the signs of depression and anxiety**
- **know the range of treatment options**
- **develop a personal action plan**

[NewAccess - www.beyondblue.org.au/newaccess](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/newaccess)

NewAccess is a *beyondblue* demonstration project that provides a support service to help people tackle day-to-day pressures. This early intervention program provides easily accessible, free and quality services for people with mild to moderate depression and anxiety who are currently not accessing mental health services. NewAccess links clients into local community networks and engages them with other service providers should they require it - for example, employment, financial or housing assistance. Trained and clinically supervised coaches operate like personal

trainers, providing individual tailor-made support programs incorporating relevant areas such as problem solving, goal setting and dealing with worries. Importantly, the program provides people with self-help techniques, that enables them to lead their own recovery.

The program is currently being piloted and evaluated in three Medicare Local regions across Australia – Canberra, Central Adelaide and Hills, and North Coast New South Wales. It is the result of four years of research and collaborative discussion in Australia and has been adapted from the highly successful UK Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) initiative. IAPT is a National Health Service program rolled out across England and proven to improve mental health outcomes. By the end of the pilot in December 2015, *beyondblue* intends to have proven the effectiveness of New Access for a national rollout. The initial evaluation findings for the New Access pilot have been promising - the non-medical model is making it easier for men to get help and we are obtaining similar mental health outcomes to those achieved in the United Kingdom.

While NewAccess is currently not being delivered in Western Australian FIFO communities, **this unique service delivery model has the potential to provide preventative and early intervention services to meet the needs of FIFO workers.** It can be delivered either face-to-face or over the phone, which makes it suitable for FIFO workers. The program could also be delivered to the partners of FIFO workers, to help them better manage the challenges of a FIFO lifestyle.

Programs and services for FIFO families

beyondblue provides a suite of programs, services and resources which support the mental health and wellbeing of the partners and children of FIFO workers. This includes:

- **pregnancy and early parenthood information and resources** – www.beyondblue.org.au/resources/for-me/pregnancy-and-early-parenthood - through the National Perinatal Depression Initiative *beyondblue* has developed a range of tools to support parents during pregnancy and early parenthood.
- **Youth beyondblue** – www.youthbeyondblue.com - *beyondblue*'s youth program aims to empower young people and encourage them to share their experiences with their peers. One example of a Youth beyondblue resource is the BRAVE program, which is an online prevention and treatment program for anxiety (see: <https://brave4you.psy.uq.edu.au/>)
- **Parenting Information** - <http://www.beyondblue.org.au/resources/family-and-friends/parents-and-guardians> - *beyondblue* has a range of information resources for parents regarding how to support healthy child development and respond effectively to children experiencing emotional or behavioural difficulties.
- **Separation resources** – information booklets on separation have been developed, targeting both [women](#) and [men](#). These booklets provide practical information and tips on how to better manage the separation process and where to go for further assistance.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that the Western Australian Government:

- 1) Views the issue of the mental health and wellbeing of FIFO workers, their families and their communities as a national, all government issue, and seeks to facilitate a national response. This response should incorporate the recommendations from the 2012 Commonwealth inquiry on FIFO work practices. A national approach to improving the mental health of the FIFO workforce is essential, as many FIFO workers travel interstate, and FIFO employers work across multiple states/territories.
- 2) Funds research with respect to:
 - a) the mental health impacts of FIFO work, to better understand worker experiences, including what the stressors are for these workers, and what helps them to function effectively
 - b) suicide risk and behaviours among FIFO workers, including the role of relationship problems prior to death
- 3) Meets with *beyondblue* to discuss the NewAccess Program and its potential value as a model for FIFO communities, with the view to possibly conducting a pilot.

It is recommended that FIFO employers:

- 4) Demonstrate via their senior management team an active commitment to the mental health of their workers as an industry priority.
- 5) Create mentally healthy workplaces, through developing a Heads Up mental health action plan. This practice should also be extended to all sub-contractors.
- 6) Integrate the Heads Up mental health action plans into existing safety management systems of their operations and those of any sub-contractors.
- 7) Develop an emergency response system for any worker experiencing a mental health crisis similar to that provided for physical injuries.
- 8) Promote awareness of the *beyondblue* Man Therapy website.
- 9) Promote awareness of the *beyondblue* Support Service and resources available for FIFO families.

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