



The OzHelp Foundation Ltd
Submission
to the
Education and Health Standing Committee
of the
Western Australian Legislative Assembly
For the Review of
The Mental Health of Fly in Fly out Workers

26 September 2014

The OzHelp Foundation

Who we are

OzHelp is a not for profit organisation that provides front-line services in suicide prevention and promotion of personal wellbeing and resilience in the construction, mining and other industries.

OzHelp was established 12 years ago by the two major construction industry employer and employee organisations to address the prevalence of youth suicide amongst the apprentices in the industry. We have grown substantially since then and now provide wellbeing services and training to all workers in the sector. We deliver services on behalf of the Federal Government as part of the National Suicide Prevention Program in New South Wales, Northern Territory and the Pilbara.

What we do and how we do it

We deliver training and outreach services specifically tailored to the needs and communication styles of blue collar workers. Our outreach service is based on a peer support model where field officers visit work sites to connect with the workers. We also offer '*Tradies Tune Ups*', a health and wellbeing assessment conducted by a field officer and a registered nurse and delivered at the work site.

The purpose of the Tradies Tune Up is to connect with the workers during a twenty minute assessment of their mental outlook and their basic health indicators such as blood pressure, cholesterol level and diabetes risk. This service provides the opportunity to share health information and to open up referral pathways to a work group which is often reluctant to seek help. The program is highly successful and an example of how reaching out to this group of men can make a real difference to their lives. The program has been delivered to more than 7,000 workers since it was introduced in 2009.

Our philosophy is to be proactive and innovative and to view mental and physical health holistically. We design and deliver our services and products in the most appropriate way for the individual workplace.

Terms of Reference

We have extensive experience in the suicide prevention space working with predominately male blue collar workers in the building, mining, automotive and related industries. It has given us a great insight into the pressures faced by workers who must follow the work and travel great distances and spend long periods away from family, friends and their community.

We would like share our experience and our concerns with the Education and Health Standing Committee. We deliver services in the Pilbara and believe the issues we see there are typical of the issues faced by Fly In Fly Out (FIFO) workers where ever they are.

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

Research conducted by the Australian National University, Relationships Australia, Griffith University and many other reputable organisations indicates disconnection as a common factor in poor mental health and suicide ideation. FIFO workers become disconnected from family, friends and many of the social and community based activities familiar to them.

The remoteness of the work locations and the lack of normal routine for workers can create a sense of disconnection that is difficult to overcome given the time spent away from home. The long periods of absence by the worker can place stress on the family left behind and create tensions in relationships and cause the FIFO worker to miss out on significant events that he or she would otherwise have participated in.

Alcohol, poor diet, gambling and irregular sleep patterns and fatigue contribute to a deterioration of general health and wellbeing and adds to the overall burden of the FIFO lifestyle. Time off work often involves travelling for many hours and in some cases days, to go home and reconnect with family and friends and attend to general living tasks and responsibilities. The FIFO workers lifestyle is broken into intense periods of work, family engagement and social dislocation followed by social re-connection.

Some feedback on the work OzHelp has conducted with the FIFO worker population is;

Difficulties OzHelp staff are faced with:

- Gaining access to FIFO workers, even those that live in town in accommodation camps is difficult because the only time you can see them is after hours and most people want to do their own thing, like go to the gym, eat or sleep after 12.5 hr shifts. I know some of them want to get involved in the local sports groups, however don't know how to access the services and often don't know that they are able to join the teams.
- Sometimes our hours of work (8am-4pm) makes things difficult too. We often start early (6:30am) to make sure we are able to deliver our HHCs on site at pre start/ toolbox meetings, however support services that are available after 6pm pretty much don't exist here in Karratha, which makes it hard for the FIFO/DIDO worker to access support services outside of work hours.
- Hours of work (most people work 12 hr shifts, most with night shift in there too) make it difficult for the men/ women to participate in sporting teams, however we do know that in Karratha there are games that are scheduled later in the evenings to try to cater for this, which is a good thing. I have a girl in my netball team who is FIFO and she's able to make most games and trainings.
- FIFO workers who do 4/1 shifts will get Sundays off, however most times they are stuck at their accommodation camps because they don't have access to vehicles. Many companies do offer activities and games nights but local services could get involved in taking some of the workers out of the camps and site seeing, BBQs off site, team games/ basketball sessions off site.

Common issues that we provide support for:

- People will often leave things until they become a crisis, rather than dealing with things and getting some assistance when the issue first arises.
- Employees are still 'scared' to use the EAP services provided by their employers as they still believe that it is not confidential and their Supervisor/ Manager will find out and then they will lose their job. Some also don't know how to access the service or the number to call.
- Workplace bullying is something that we do come across quite often, so educating people on what is/ what's not and the processes to follow in the event that they feel that they may be a victim of workplace bullying, so they know what their rights are. Also, people in higher level- Supervisor/ Manager level roles also need to have an understanding of what constitutes as workplace bullying too.
- We also come across many people with financial difficulties and people in contract roles losing their jobs, or not knowing when the next job will be coming. This creates stress within the family and places pressure on the employee in industry.
- Relationship break ups is another one. Providing families with information about the FIFO or DIDO lifestyle that they are entering so they are aware of the long hours ect. For residential people, allowing them a site visit as a family to see where their Dad/ Husband will be working prior to relocating. Also for FIFO partners/ wives/ girlfriends, a site visit is also beneficial so you can see where your loved one sleeps, the environment that they are living in, where they eat. Also knowing your rights as a father when your relationship does break down- we come across many guys that have had everything taken from them and sometimes their children too, which is heartbreaking for them. Information on the legal side of things is important for the Fathers who are working away too.
- A lot of the time, people/ men, just need someone that they can talk to- someone that will listen, someone that can point them in the right direction, someone that will follow up and call them to see how they're going, which is what OzHelp is able to do for them; rather than 1 hr slots, once a week for 6 sessions.

All these factors are well known contributors to poor mental health

B. The current legislation, regulations, policies and practices for workplace mental health in Western Australia

OzHelp has engaged with Western Australian workplaces since 2009 through our National Suicide Prevention Programme (NSPP) project, Real Engagement and Linking for Men in Industry. This project delivers services to workplaces in the Pilbara. The services delivered as part of this project are:

- ALERT training sessions – a 45 minute mental health and suicide awareness session
- Hard Hat Chats – a 15 minute presentation on one of fifteen health topics delivered

- Mentoring training
- Conversations for Life - a 3 hour suicide prevention awareness workshop
- Life Skills Toolbox training – delivered to apprentices and trainees to help equip them with basic life skills to improve their capacity to cope with working and living independently
- Mental Health in the Workplace – a workshop building awareness of mental health issues in the workplace
- Outreach visits to workplaces to offer support and information to workers
- Crisis interventions

Delivering services in the Pilbara presents some challenges for OzHelp. The remoteness of the location and the transience of the working population makes it difficult to establish long-term working relationships with workplaces and decision-making staff. This can mean we are not granted access to workplaces and therefore not able to deliver the services to all eligible workers. The service is federally funded and there is no charge to the employer so the barrier is understanding the purpose of the service and believing it is worthwhile.

In these industries, Mental Health is not considered a workplace issue and not part of the current Workplace Health and Safety (WH&S) remit. We believe mental health in the workplace is as much an WH&S issue as a trip hazard and if included in the WH&S remit would be properly addressed in workplaces. The FIFO worker has a greater risk of developing mental health issues because the lifestyle is contrary to what we know to be healthy physically and mentally.

The OzHelp project in the Pilbara is geographically limited to that area by funding. The service can be delivered anywhere, however, when considering the remoteness of the locations involved, a collaborative approach by Federal and State government, employers and service delivery agencies would be the only way to build the capacity to deliver consistent services to FIFO workers and their families in the workplace and in their hometown.

The mental health issues associated with the FIFO worker impact on their families as well. Commonly, FIFO workers leave their families in urban towns and cities and the expectation is that they will continue to live their lives unaffected by the stress of the FIFO lifestyle. The separation of the family brings about stress for partners and children which is not properly understood in this context. A national support programme to help workers families understand and deal with the issues relating specifically to the FIFO lifestyle would complement the support for FIFO workers.

An increased awareness of the issues and the affect of those issues beyond the remote working locations would help professional service providers develop and deliver more effective strategies to help workers and their families cope with their circumstances.

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

The OzHelp project in the Pilbara is an example of a service that can help workers improve their general wellbeing and therefore cope better with their circumstances. This project meets many of the objectives of the national LIFE Action framework.

To improve access to services for FIFO workers, a concerted effort to change employer attitudes to mental health services and the need for programmes in workplaces to improve personal resilience is essential.

OzHelp works hard to normalise discussions about feeling down or disconnected and encourages workers to look out for each other. This is more important for FIFO workers as they do not have family and friends to support them. Awareness workshops and field officer visits can help get conversations started which will improve outcomes for FIFO workers.

Male blue collar workers generally have poor help seeking behaviour, to overcome this, services should be delivered in the workplace. A positive and proactive approach to general health and wellbeing will encourage workers to make healthy changes and support each other through the process by linking mates together with personal goals and normalising positive change to build a different culture.

Support visits by field officers provide an opportunity for the worker to express his or her concerns about their health and well being. The field officer can support the worker and refer them to an appropriate service to get the help they need.

Ozhelp works collaboratively with many other community service agencies to link services and support networks in the local area. The field officer remains in contact with the client throughout the journey. This approach reduces the feelings of isolation and dis-connection.

Information about the FIFO lifestyle should be made available to potential workers so they understand the lifestyle issues before the commit to the job. Employers do outline the conditions and entitlements for potential employees, however, they do not discuss the mental health and wellbeing issues that have emerged in this work group. Web based information sessions delivered by FIFO workers, mental health workers and family counsellors would help families prepare for the challenges of the FIFO lifestyle. It could be presented as a monthly webinar with standard items and guest speakers.

Better information and services for families coupled with a broader understanding of the issues in schools and the community sector across Australia will help families adjust to the lifestyle and reduce the pressure on FIFO workers.

OzHelp is committed to the health and wellbeing of blue collar workers and their families, we are keen to collaborate with government and employer groups to expand our service beyond the Pilbara to all FIFO workers.

More information

We have attached some information on the services we currently provide in the Pilbara and the Northern Territory. It includes:

- ALERT training
- Life Skills Training Course
- Tradies Tune Ups
- Hard Hat Chats

If you would like to discuss any part of this submission please contact the OzHelp Foundation Chief Executive Officer, Tony Holland.

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This submission does not represent the views of any other organisation other than the OzHelp Foundation Ltd.

Tony Holland

Date