

24th September 2014

The Committee Secretary, ¶Education and Health Standing
Committee, Legislative Assembly, ¶Parliament House.

¶Perth WA 6000

Dear Committee Secretary,¶

INQUIRY INTO MENTAL ILLNESS IN FLY-IN, FLY-OUT WORKERS

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the inquiry
into mental illness in fly-in, fly-out workers.

We are representatives of a group of positive psychology
practitioners (Master's of Applied Positive Psychology MAPP
students/graduates) based in Perth who are concerned about the
recent suicide deaths and the overall wellbeing levels of fly-in, fly-
out (FIFO) workers.

We would like to comment on:

- (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; and*
- (c) *current initiatives by government, industry and community, and recommend improvements.*

To date, the limited research that has been conducted is predominantly concerned with exploring the factors contributing to a high prevalence of mental illness and suicide risk within this population. Whilst we acknowledge it is crucial to determine these factors and take steps to prevent the burden of mental illness, we feel it is equally as important to look at what can be done to promote **mental health** and **enhance wellbeing**. We feel alternative research approaches and these issues are being overlooked, and the focus needs to be broadened for substantial progress to be made.

The notion of *positive deviance* has been used in many health related fields internationally over the last twenty years to identify those people who flourish in exactly the same circumstances where the great majority do not. Closely studying and adopting the everyday behaviours of positively deviant people in problematic health populations has provided innovative and plausible solutions to entrenched problems. Looking closely at those FIFO workers and their families who exhibit excellent mental health and are otherwise flourishing, could help to determine positive helpful behaviours that could in turn, be promoted and developed in others. A greater emphasis on this type of action research is needed.

We also believe that the field of positive psychology has much to offer in promoting wellbeing amongst FIFO workers and their families, thereby addressing many of the mental health concerns.

Broadly speaking, the field of positive psychology looks scientifically at how individuals, groups, communities and

organisations can function optimally. It moves the focus of wellbeing from concentrating on illness and how it can be prevented to a focus on thriving and how mental health and wellbeing can be promoted¹.

Positive psychology uses the PERMA wellbeing model: Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment². Each of these is essential to wellbeing and satisfaction with life.

Numerous interventions ^{3,4,5} have been empirically shown to optimise individual and group wellbeing. Strategies including gratitude exercises, using character strengths exercises, practicing

¹ Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55, 51–82.

² Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. NY: Free Press.

³ Sin, N. L., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2009). Enhancing well-being and alleviating depressive symptoms with Positive Psychology Interventions: A practice friendly meta-analysis. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 65, 467-487.

⁴ Bolier, L., Haverman, M., Westerhof, G. J., Riper, H., Smit, F., & Bohlmeijer, E. (2013). Positive psychology interventions: a meta-analysis of randomized controlled studies. *BMC Public Health*, 13:119.

⁵ Seligman, M. E. P., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychologist*, 60, 410–421.

mindfulness and coaching, have significantly improved wellbeing and reduced depression with sustainable results over time. These approaches have been delivered across a variety of platforms including face-to-face, individual and group therapies, online and using bibliotherapy, in diverse settings across cultures.

The New Economics Foundation (NEF) has a set of evidenced based actions to promote wellbeing including Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning, and Give. The Five Ways to Well-being⁶ were developed by NEF from evidence gathered in the United Kingdom's government's Foresight Project on Mental Capital and Wellbeing.

To offer a case study for the application of positive psychology at work we turn to the work of international oil and gas company Shell. Alistair Fraser, Vice president of Shell, recently shared the work of their organisation at the European Positive Psychology Conference in 2014. Shell is committed to enhancing the resiliency and performance of its many thousands of employees and has

⁶ Visit: <http://www.neweconomics.org/projects/entry/five-ways-to-well-being>.

created a range of flexible programs to teach leaders, employees and their families about mental health, wellbeing, positive mindsets, coping, relationships, engagement and more. This program has increased the wellbeing and productivity of staff in measurable ways and demonstrates an example of best practice where positive psychology is being successfully applied to enhance wellbeing at work in a population closely related to FIFO workers.

In conclusion, we suggest that when considering FIFO worker's mental health, further research is undertaken on identifying the behaviours that support those workers and families who are flourishing and a broader definition of wellbeing is considered which takes into account the PERMA model. The PERMA model could be used to assess need, develop organisational strategy, and measure impact in innovative ways. Furthermore, we urge the inquiry to examine international examples of best practice where a positive psychology approach has been successfully applied to enhance worker resilience. As qualified specialists in this field we would be prepared to support any work of this nature taking place

in Western Australia.

We look forward to receiving the outcomes and recommendations of the Committee's inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

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