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28th January, 2015

Western Australian Legislative Assembly, Education and Health Standing Committee,
The Parliament of Western Australia,
Perth.

To whom it may concern,

Re. Inquiry into mental health impacts of FIFO work arrangements

I have been researching long distance commuting (LDC), and fly-in/fly-out (FIFO) and drive-in/drive-out (DIDO) practices in particular, for more than fifteen years. My expertise is the socio-economic impacts of this workforce management practice and how it impacts people, businesses and communities.

There appears to be a presumption that FIFO is peculiar to the resources sector and that all companies have similar swings (rostered time on and off work sites), company policies and support services. This is not correct. Long distance commuting in all its variations is not a new workforce arrangement, nor is it limited to the resources industries. It is correct that the practice in Australia has accelerated in the last two decades, coinciding with national public policies which have favoured rationalisation and centralisation of infrastructure and services and the escalation in demand for Australian resources. It is a generalisation to claim that long distance commuting work practices are eroding liveability in some regional communities as has been claimed by the *Cancer of the bush or salvation for our cities?* Report (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Australia, 2013). This was occurring long before long distance commuting became common practice due to the cumulative effects of lack of investment in rural, regional and remote Australia. As identified in the KPMG/Minerals Council report (KPMG for the Minerals Council of Australia, 2013), long distance commuters are not the majority of the resources work force but their socio-economic impacts attract undue and often unfair, media scrutiny. Even within the resources industries there are significant differences in the way workforce mobility is managed and how it impacts on workers. Many companies take the health of their employees, including mental health, extremely seriously. A healthy workforce is usually a productive workforce. However, not all companies, especially contracting companies or public policy decision makers

understand the economic, social and health costs associated with poor workforce management.

As is always the case with complex social issues and multiple stakeholders, there are both positive and negative impacts. The following comments are made with particular reference to the experiences of long distance commuting and the resources industries.

Costs and Benefits for Individuals Choosing a FIFO/DIDO workforce

- Families are often reluctant to relocate themselves in remote and rural communities where jobs for partners, and education, health, recreation and other social services are limited. Over the last 25 years there has been minimal government or corporate investment in mining town aesthetics and/or infrastructure. The cost of living in many mining communities exceeds that of cities and other regional centres (see Department of Local Government and Regional Development (2007)).
- LDC arrangements limit risk of capital investments for both companies and individuals over uncertain mining cycles, so there is a preference by both companies and individuals to invest housing and other capital in more predictable, stable markets.
- LDC enables workers to be flexible, giving them choice about who they work for, how long and where, particularly in a tight labour market.
- LDC workers are usually remunerated at a higher rate than residential workers.

Big salaries and big spending

A FIFO/DIDO work arrangement enables mining employees greater job flexibility and during times of skills and labour shortages, workers are able to 'job hop' depending upon which company is offering the best 'swing' (roster) arrangements and wages and conditions. Problems arise however when employees become financially trapped by their level of spending commensurate with the high resources industry salaries, commonly referred to as "*the golden handcuffs*". Many employees, especially those with skills and experience which is specific to the resources industries, have little choice but to work in the sector. While some employees intensely dislike aspects of the workplace or lifestyle, they feel trapped by heavy financial commitments made on the basis of a high income, or by the lack of viable employment alternatives in their home community. When their financial commitments are so tied to the industry, these employees have no choice but to continue to work the long hours, arduous toil and often lonely work arrangements.

When employees feel “*the golden handcuffs*” pinching and they see no way out but to continue in a situation they do not like, this is often when mental issues manifest.

Time away from home

Long distance commuting (LDC) enables workers to have a well-paid job in remote areas while at the same time retaining family and friendship ties in their residential communities, taking advantage of facilities and leisure opportunities there in the furlough period which are not available in remote and small communities. For many FIFO/DIDO workers, it is the time away from family, friends and social routines which they miss. Furthermore, especially for contractors in the construction industry, the uneven work/life balance, the absence of routines and long periods with tough working conditions and inadequate furlough cause problems.

How long the block of work is, and the regularity of time off, as well as other factors, strongly affect the sense of wellbeing and ability to transition smoothly between home and work. For those employees working on ‘family friendly’ swings, i.e. eight days at work and six days at home, our research (Hoath & Haslam McKenzie, 2013) found there was general satisfaction that they were able to be a regular part of their community and family, often contributing to family activities and volunteering to organisations and clubs etc at home.

For some industries, for example, the oil and gas industry, short work swings are not feasible, but generally, the industry provides generous periods of time at home/furlough. The exception to regular swings and predictable rosters is often the construction industry which is heavily oriented to contractors. The work is highly competitive and time and deadlines are extremely important. Employee conditions, including rostered time away from work are highly variable.

Leaving home, coming home flashpoints

There has been considerable research regarding the social and domestic arrangements of LDC workers and how this impacts on the home communities and families (Hajkowicz, Heyenga, & Moffat, 2011; Hoath & Haslam McKenzie, 2013; Kaczmarek & Sibbel, 2008; Sibbel, Sibbel, & Goh, 2006). In research conducted by Dr Aileen Hoath and myself regarding the social and domestic impacts of FIFO on *source communities*, we also interviewed the spouse of LDC workers, as their experience as primary homemaker was often key to the success of the work arrangement. Their approaches to managing intermittent contact, fatigue, and loneliness often determined whether the LDC arrangement was short lived or long term. The evidence suggests that the direct links between domestic violence and mental health issues and long distance commuting are tenuous (Department of Justice, 2013; Hoath & Haslam McKenzie, 2013).

Our research showed that if a relationship was experiencing difficulties, long distance commuting was likely to exacerbate the problems and inevitably the relationship would not last. Similarly, mental health issues, such as anxiety associated with loneliness, long working hours or separation often escalated to serious problems and if not treated, could lead to substance abuse or other relationship breakdown.

There was consensus among service providers however, that although the stresses particular to LDC arrangements are not necessarily the primary cause, they do have a propensity to exacerbate a range of pre-existing issues (Hoath and McKenzie 2013). However individual and family characteristics and circumstances and life stages, all play a role in the quality of the LDC work experience. One child psychologist interviewed for our research observed that families with well-developed routines tended to cope well with the particular demands of LDC; 'chaotic families' tended 'to fall apart'. Domestic violence support professionals also identified the separations and reunions at the beginning and end of each work roster as typically dangerous flashpoints of heightened tension for those in abusive relationships. The strength and scale of local support networks, both formal and informal, and levels of embeddedness in community, were considered significant to the wellbeing of both the workers and their families (Hoath and Haslam McKenzie 2013a).

There is no denying that regular commuting and separation are not easy, especially when children are part of the scenario. Challenges are thrown up by these arrangements, however many workers and their families work through them and achieved a satisfactory routine. While some families reported that domestic arrangements and routines, and the career development of the spouse, are disrupted by LDC patterns, others valued the 'personal time' and reinvigoration of time apart, as well as the stability and community continuity that LDC affords the families of highly mobile workers (Hoath and Haslam McKenzie 2013a). In our research, many, both workers and spouse, clearly relished their LDC lifestyle, and a significant majority indicated a strong disinclination to return to 9 to 5 work. Most admitted that there were difficult adjustments to make initially, but with time they had developed strategies to manage intermittent physical contact, fatigue, periodic separations from children, and loneliness.

Relationship breakdowns and mental health issues

As discussed above, relationships are put under pressure by separation and arduous work but this is not limited to LDC in the resources industry – the same pressures apply across a range of work arrangements where there are long hours and regular separations. Careful assessment of the census data regarding marital breakdown

shows that employees employed in the mining sector do not stand out for their rate of marital breakdown. While census data is not necessarily reliable because specific data is not collected for employees who FIFO and DIDO, particularly in the resources industries, the data suggests that relationship breakdown is no more prevalent in the sector than any other. In the intercensal period 2006 – 2011, the highest relationship breakdown appeared to be for people employed in government services. Data is also skewed to some extent by the median age of resource industry employees and their gender. It is accepted that young men between the ages of 18 and 30 years are a vulnerable suicide and mental health demographic from across all sectors of Australian society. Young males are a highly represented demographic in some sectors of the resources industry. This is not to disregard or under-estimate the incidence or importance of mental health in remote Australia or the resources industries, but it is important that the links between relationship breakdown, mental health and work circumstances are clearly understood.

Initiatives to address mental illness and suicide amongst FIFO workers

Our research indicates a role for improved pre-employment preparation, in order that potential employees and their families have a clear understanding of the strenuous work arrangements and the inevitable individual, family and relationship pressures. The value of the vital role of the spouse cannot be under-stated. Their role could be more explicitly recognised through tailored orientation programmes for spouse and ongoing direct communication of worker and spouse benefits and entitlements.

Financial management and the need to plan for the future when boom conditions are curtailed is very important. It is difficult to know whose responsibility that is nonetheless, the seductive high salaries can draw people into unsustainable debt arrangements which contribute to high levels of anxiety and even mental illness. Employees are especially when the long distance commuting work arrangements are no longer bearable for them or their families.

It is also evident that the length of the swings has an impact on individuals, families and communities. The most family-friendly arrangement appears to be eight days at work and six days at home. However, the longer the commute, the less time spent at home recovering. Adequate and regular rostered time away from work is very important.

It is important that the current focus on mental health across all sectors of the community continues and that adequate community and medical support is available to assist all long distance commuting, not just those in the resources industry, and their children and spouse. Furthermore, it is important to promote

optimal physical and mental health for all employees and there should not be a stigma attached to seeking medical assistance or counselling for any complaint.

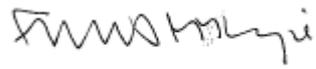
Communities also have a role. The presumption that long distance commuting workers do not contribute to their community is often fallacious. Our research shows that many LDC workers want to contribute their time and skills to volunteer organisations such as the SES, local fire brigade and ambulance organisations. Many are also keen to be involved in their family's leisure and learning activities. Communities have a potential role to make them and their families welcome and to be flexible in their membership arrangements. Local organisations could develop creative and flexible approaches to ensure the LDC worker is able to participate when on furlough and that the family at home is also encouraged to participate in local activities, rather than stigmatised which is often the case. LDC workers are not necessarily cashed-up bogans and should not be financially penalised by local businesses for working hard and earning more than some. While this is not a regular occurrence, it does occur and causes social and local divides between the 'haves' and have nots' which is not useful.

Concluding remarks

FIFO and DIDO are now accepted practices in the Australian work environment and long distance commuting workers have an ongoing role to play (Haslam McKenzie, 2011; Haslam McKenzie, Rowley, Phillips, Birdsall-Jones, & Brereton, 2009). FIFO and DIDO strategies have an important and legitimate role in meeting the workforce needs of the mining industry and are the preferred option for many workers. They are particularly suitable where the labour force requirements are time limited, such as during the construction phase of a project or the mine life is expected to be relatively short or the work site is remote with no nearby amenities. Other significant factors include the preference of workers and their families to be based in capital cities or other, usually seaboard, centres.

By contributing to a greater understanding of the dynamic challenges and potentials of long distance commuting, this submission aims to provide a balanced understanding of the contribution and the challenges associated with mobile labour force arrangements. It is not easy, the work is often hard, the conditions and hours spent working are not easy and families and LDC workers are often lonely. The important contribution government, the community and business sectors can make is to understand the tensions and develop creative and flexible approaches to deal with a number of specific and very real challenges posed by commuting over large distances for long periods of time.

Long distance commuting has provided individuals and communities considerable benefits and opportunities but it also brings with it challenges which need to be carefully managed at all levels if the benefits are to be enduring.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Fiona Haslam McKenzie'. The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Professor Fiona Haslam McKenzie

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