



**SUBMISSION TO THE
2014 WESTERN AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT FIFO MENTAL
HEALTH INQUIRY**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Local Governments in Western Australia play a significant role in supporting their communities' well-being through the planning and investment of infrastructure, programs and service delivery.

Increasingly Local Governments (particularly in regional and remote areas of Western Australia) are providing health services that are traditionally provided by the State Government or other service providers. The provision of such services impacts on other services that could be provided to the community. It is a challenge to manage competing considerations. Local Government must balance the needs of the community against legislative requirement and emerging social imperatives.

The work practice of fly in fly out (FIFO) and drive in drive out (DIDO) is common in Western Australia due to State's natural resources and has resulted in the demand for flexible and cost effective workforce solutions in regional and remote areas across the State.

There are mental health and wellbeing concerns surrounding FIFO practice in Local Government due to factors of isolation, high compression of work hours, extended periods of time away from spouses, children and family, the pressure of high financial commitments and alleged drug and alcohol abuse.

BACKGROUND

The Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA) is the united voice of Local Government in Western Australia. The Association is an independent, membership-based group representing and supporting the work and interests of 138 Local Governments in Western Australia.

The Association provides an essential voice for over 1,200 elected members and approximately 14,500 Local Government employees as well as over 2 million constituents of Local Governments in Western Australia. The Association also

provides professional advice and offers services that provide financial benefits to the Local Governments and the communities they serve.

On the 20th August the Western Australian Parliament's Education and Health Standing Committee commenced an inquiry into mental illness in FIFO workers. The inquiry was called after nine FIFO workers took their lives in the past year in the Pilbara region of WA.

During the inquiry public consultation period, the Association sought comment from the Local Government sector to inform a representative submission to the Inquiry. This submission reflects the main issues and concerns raised by WALGA members through previous submissions together with those of the Association.

WALGA views the inquiry into FIFO and Mental Health as an opportunity to progress the key recommendations of the *2013 House of Representatives Standing Committee Senate Inquiry report Cancer of the bush or salvation for our cities?*¹, which called for the Commonwealth Government to commission a study on the impact of non-resident workers in regional resource towns on the provision of medical services and develop a health policy of regional medical services, removal of impediments to the provision of residential housing in regional communities, commission a comprehensive research study to determine the actual economic impact on the demand for and consumption of local government services and infrastructure from FIFO workforces and review the Zone Tax Offset arrangement to ensure that they are only claimable by permanent residents of a zone or special area.

DISCLAIMER

The comments contained in this submission have not yet been considered or endorsed by WALGA's State Council, as such, please be advised that this is an interim submission and that the Association reserves the right to modify or withdraw the comments as directed by State Council.

¹ The recommendations of the *2013 House of Representatives Standing Committee Senate Inquiry report Cancer of the Bush or Salvation for our Cities* recognised the rapid growth of the FIFO/DIDO workforce and the impact on the communities. Significant consultation with Local Government across the nation was undertaken including key resource areas in Western Australia.

Spheres of Government Responsibility

In Western Australia Local Governments are governed by the *Local Government Act 1995*. In its broadest terms the role of Local Government is to provide good governance for their communities.

State and Territory Governments are principally responsible for the provision of public hospital infrastructure and services, community health services, mental health programs, patient transport and population health programs. Local Governments also contribute to the delivery of health programs.²

Local Governments in Western Australia play a significant role in supporting their communities' well-being through the planning and investment of infrastructure, programs and service delivery. Increasingly Local Governments, particularly in regional and remote areas of Western Australia, are providing health services that have traditionally been provided by the State Government or other service providers including mental health programs.

Local Governments however face a number of challenges in supporting their communities' access health care services, and these challenges differ greatly across the State.

Impact of FIFO/DIDO on Local Government and their communities

It is noted that the issue of FIFO/DIDO practices are considered differently across Local Government areas; this reflects the non-homogenous nature of Local Government. In previous inquires, Local Governments in Western Australia have argued that FIFO can be destructive to local communities if they are unable to meet the infrastructure and service demands generated by a non-resident workforce;

² Australia Bureau of Statistics *Series B Population Projection Catalogue 3222.0*

erosive to local communities where there has been a shift from a permanent resident workforce to a largely FIFO workforce if it reduces the economic viability of the local infrastructure, services and businesses; and erosive to the communities or regions that are bordering host or home communities if workers relocate to take advantage of FIFO work arrangements.³

Equally the local economic impacts of FIFO have an adverse impact on housing availability and affordability; funding shortfalls for infrastructure generated from FIFO; adverse impact from mining companies purchasing goods and services from suppliers outside local mining based communities, which threatens the economic viability, survival, growth and diversity of local businesses; reduction in employment opportunities for local residents; and increases in costs of living and per capita costs of supporting existing townships and ancillary support services in mining based communities, which has contributed to regional population decline.

In terms of the impacts on Local Governments, it is argued that a services and infrastructure footprint is created by both resident and non-resident populations, so it is the effective population, not just the resident population, that places pressures on Local Governments to respond to the infrastructure and service needs of mining companies and their FIFO workforce.

Financial considerations for Local Government

Many Local Governments are involved in the provision of health services because the service is not provided within easy access for their community. Local Governments do not receive any specific financial compensation or remuneration for supporting health services.

Local Government fund such services from their operating revenue and Financial Assistance Grants (FAGs). The financial impost is considered to be increasingly burdensome. This can be directly attributed to Western Australia's population growth, changing demographics and vast distances. This is further compounded in

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areas where there is a higher transient population due to resource operations or tourism destinations.

The introduction of the Western Australian Royalties for Regions program in 2009⁴ has provided some assistance in reducing the backlog of infrastructure projects needed in the regions and accelerating and initiating new regional projects such as the Pilbara Cities project.

It is argued, however, that the costs of infrastructure and services associated with FIFO cannot be met from either local rate revenues or the Royalties for Regions program alone.

For example, the FAGs are calculated on the basis of resident population estimates, with only a small allowance for effective or serviced population—residents and non-residents. FAGs were introduced by the Australian Government in 1974-75 as a way of distributing taxation revenue to Local Government. The primary objectives of FAGs are to improve the capacity of Local Government to provide their residents with an equitable level of service, improve the financial capacity of Local Government to provide certainty of funding, and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of Local Government. At present the Australian Government annually adjusts the quantum of FAGs using an escalation factor based on inflation and population growth. While important, these factors do not accommodate the quantum growth generated in many of Western Australia's Local Governments by the resources boom in the past decade.^{5 6}

FIFO employment generally provides strong financial benefits to the individual and their respective partner and family. Underlying issues of isolation and other mental health risks do exist but are not unique in this industry in comparison to other types of employment. Recently, several tragic cases have been in the media highlighting

⁴ The Royalties for the Region Act 2009 is intended to ensure that an amount equal to 25 per cent of the state's mining and onshore petroleum royalties is applied to the regions.

⁵ Mayor Troy Pickard, Transcript Evidence 2013 House of Representatives Standing Committee Senate Inquiry report *Cancer of the Bush or Salvation for our Cities*. Accessed 24/9/2014

⁶ Paul Schollum 2013 Interim Submission to the Commonwealth Grants Commission: Review of Financial Assistance Grants. WALGA [https://www.cgc.gov.au/attachments/article/152/FAGs%20Review%20-%20WALGA%20interim%20submission%20\(2\).pdf](https://www.cgc.gov.au/attachments/article/152/FAGs%20Review%20-%20WALGA%20interim%20submission%20(2).pdf)

the potential linkages with mental health issues and FIFO work; however they do not necessarily reflect the workforce situation as a whole.⁷

Local Government understands the prevalence of comorbid diagnosis associated with mental illness and how this impacts on community. Most resource sites have zero tolerance policy for alcohol and other drugs but facilitated access to excessive consumption offsite.⁸ However anecdotal evidence suggests that Local Government are spending significant dollars addressing vandalism and clean-up costs as a result of antisocial behaviour caused by excessive alcohol and drug abuse when FIFO workers are off site and in town on rostered time off.^{9,10}

Concerns have been noted in several communities near resource camps of possible tension between locals and FIFO workers.⁹ This includes alleged cases of excessive alcohol consumption, vandalism and assault^{9,10}. The infrequency of a high ratio of FIFO workers into host communities may be detrimental to the sense of community. There has been some anecdotal evidence of several fights occurring between locals and FIFO workers due to alleged disrespect of the host community combined with binge drinking and drug use^{9,10}. Research has found that judgmental and derogatory community attitudes surrounding FIFO work can negatively impact on FIFO families and negatively affect their willingness to form relationships within their local community.¹¹ Thus, for the family members of FIFO workers who remain at home and depend on family and community for support, this can be particularly isolating.**Error! Bookmark not defined.** Sense of community is critical to the

⁷ Lenney (2010) concluded that many of the claims about the effects of FIFO work practices at both levels are anecdotal and drawn from media reports with little empirical support based on rigorous research being available. Lenney, J (2010) Research into the impacts of Fly-in/Fly-out on Western Australian Communities. Perth WA, Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA).

⁸ Carrington et al. (2011) suggests that the conditions in some work camps in which drinking alcohol is one of the only forms of recreation and where 'courtesy' buses take workers offsite to licence areas in surrounding towns. Carrington, K., Hogg, R., & McIntosh, A. (2011). The resource boom's underbelly: Criminological impacts of mining development. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 44(3), 335-354. doi: 10.1177/0004865811419068

⁹ "Fly in Communities" from the (API 2012):

http://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary_business/committees/house_of_representatives_committees?url=ra/ifodido/report/chapter3.htm

¹⁰ House of Representatives (2013) Standing Committee Senate Inquiry Report Cancer of the bush or salvation for our cities?

¹¹ Kaczmarek, E. A., & Sibbel, A. M. (2008). The psychosocial wellbeing of children from Australian military and fly-in/fly out (FIFO) mining families. *Community, Work & Family*, 11, 297 – 312.

survival of Local Government within rural and remote parts of Australia. It is the sense of community and that allows a high volunteering rate, youth, staff and workforce retention in rural and remote Local Governments. Thus, it is very important to take into consideration the potential adverse impact of FIFO within local communities.

The Western Australian Network of Alcohol and other Drug Agencies' (WANADA) Parliamentary submission¹² stated that a culture of alcohol and drug use may also be prevalent in local communities and further encourages substance abuse with FIFO workers. According to the submission, many agencies reported that FIFO workers are not aware of the health impacts of excessive alcohol consumption and drug use, and that the culture in many mining and construction communities supports such patterns of excessive alcohol or drug use (AOD). Agencies believe that FIFO workers often do not access treatment because they believe their AOD consumption is "normal" when in reality it places them at risk of short- and long-term health conditions.¹² Agencies also report that because FIFO workers are generally on a higher income, AOD use may not be recognised as a problem because the user can afford to continue.

This is supported in recent research undertaken by Curtin University and Lifeline WA into the physical safety of workers, which highlighted that there was a limited focus on the emotional and mental health of employees with one in five workers claiming their industry did not have on-site mental health or counselling facilities.¹³ Until physical health and mental health are on the same level in regards to the attention and priority they receive, the mining and construction industry will experience an increase in sub-standard productivity, stress claims, absenteeism, and diminished returns.¹⁴

¹² FERRIS, Ms Deanne Marie, Communications Officer, ZANELLA, Ms Debra, Board Member Western Australian Network of Alcohol and other Drug Agencies , Standing Committee on Regional Australia - 17/04/2012 - Fly-in fly-out work practices

<http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22committees%2Fcommrep%2F82b76e7e-5b20-47d9-b2cd-699ec8b212e5%2F0011%22>

¹³ Fiona Kalaf, Lifeline WA chief executive <http://www.miningaustralia.com.au/news/harden-up-culture-affecting-mental-health-of-fifo> accessed 24/9/2014

¹⁴ Bowers, J. & Inglis, T. (2012). Implementing a mental health strategy can be an opportunity not a challenge (Unpublished abstract). Retrieved from the Australasian Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health website: <http://www.acrrmh.com.au/assets/Uploads/Abstract-HRMining2012.pdf>

Local Government, FIFO & Sense of Community

Research conducted by Curtin University¹⁵ indicated FIFO lifestyles do not necessarily cause problems such as drug alcohol abuse and domestic violence but have the propensity to exacerbate them. The report conducted case studies in the Local Governments of Busselton and Mandurah. It was found that the majority of individuals and families who choose a FIFO lifestyle are content. However, there is also a considerable number who intensely dislike parts of the FIFO lifestyle but are trapped by heavy financial commitments made on the basis of an ongoing FIFO income or by lack of viable employment alternatives at their place of residence.

The research found no conclusive evidence that the FIFO population cohort has a lower than average level of participation in community and organizational life, yet higher levels of school truancy, lack of parental involvement in children's sport are cited by service providers as issues. According to the Lifeline study, most FIFO workers had minimal knowledge of the realities of FIFO work before starting. The number one stress of FIFO work was family/home separation²².

A significant dimension of the stress of family/home separation related to FIFO rosters; longer periods at work were more stressful, particularly for workers with young children. The transference of such effects from the workplace to employees' home lives also posed a significant safety concern to workers.

This is an area that Local Government have identified and tried to address through the introduced of services aimed to reconnect FIFO workers to their communities of origin. For example FIFO playgroups, recreational centre memberships that reflect FIFO rostering, programming of family events and flexibility for volunteering roles within the community.

¹⁵ Hoath, A. & Haslam McKenzie F (2013) The socio-economic impacts of long distance commuting on source communities. Perth, Co-operative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation and Curtin Graduate School of Business

A significant proportion of the general FIFO population is highly skilled and volunteer groups are targeting this. A recent example is the recruitment for the Baldivis Volunteer bushfire brigade who identified that FIFO workers are regularly available during the day, are an ideal match for the brigade as they often have skills and qualifications needed in the brigades like HR licences and understanding of Occupational Health and Safety. In some cases, FIFO workers are particularly useful for volunteer roles as they are often available during the week, and they often have things like HR licences.¹⁶

Where possible, Local Governments work collaboratively with the resource sector and non-for-profit groups to support better mental wellbeing of the FIFO workforce and their families. It is important to acknowledge that there is a significant gap in mental health services in the mid-west region of Western Australia. The isolation and difference in service delivery proximity to FIFO workers in the Pilbara as compared to metropolitan facilities may be a contributing factor to the wellbeing of FIFO employees. This is the case with some areas in the Pilbara and the Kimberley region where there are currently no mental health organizations such as Headspace services. There is a need to consider how such services can be supported to deliver services to these communities. 17

Local Government, telecommunication infrastructure & FIFO accessibility

Resource camps access to internet and telecommunications facilities enables FIFO individuals to remain in contact with their spouses, children and families. During the (2012) Parliamentary Inquiry into FIFO and Mental Health Committee Hearing, Dr Clovers stated that there was increased use of telecommunication facilities in the camps by FIFO workers who wanted to talk to people frequently due to their relatively long shifts and extended isolation in the mining town. Increased use of

¹⁶ <http://www.inmycommunity.com.au/news-and-views/local-news/Brigades-want-FIFO-recruits/7649714/>
accessed 24/9/2014

¹⁷ The community partnership Forum's purpose's is to develop, implement and review policy which delivers better community outcomes by strengthening the partnership between the community, and the public and Not-for-profit sectors. 2014 WA Department of Local Government and Communities.
<http://www.partnershipforum.dpc.wa.gov.au/Pages/Default.aspx>

Skype, mobile and internet use is not evidence of mental health issues yet it can be seen as a possible precursor to seeking assistance with mental health issues. Several Local Government Community Strategic Plans¹⁸ have advocated for increased telecommunication infrastructure from the State Government, including the National Broadband Network Rollout, mobile phone coverage and accessibility. According to research by Lifeline WA (2013), older workers were less likely to talk to friends during times of stress. Tradespersons and professionals were more likely to access hometown mental health services. Single respondents working high compression roster rotations were more likely to access telephone crisis lines as support structures²².

Developing Better Mental Health Strategies

The need to develop and implement better mental health strategies is widely acknowledged in the industry yet not effectively executed by the sector. The Not for profit sector has developed excellent support programs that provide a 'wrap around' services for FIFO workers and their families.¹⁹ Despite this there is stigma associated for seeking help in competitive, masculine environment.²⁰

Several case studies^{21,22} show that there is low awareness amongst the FIFO workforce of these 'wrap around' services and are not in use. There are a number of

¹⁸ The objective of Government Community Strategic plans (CSP) is to engage the community in planning for the future of the Local Government Area (LGA). It involves setting priorities with the community for the future through aligning the community's vision with a clear strategic direction for Local government. A CSP generally spans 4 years. All local governments in Western Australia are required to plan for the future under Section 5.56(1) of the Local Government Act 1995. WA Department of Local Governments and Communities <http://integratedplanning.dlg.wa.gov.au/Page.aspx?PID=13> (accessed 25th September 2014)

¹⁹ Beyond Blue's Community has several mental health support programs that may be applicable to mental health for FIFO workers. These are modelled on person-centred supports and services, improved coordination between services, and a more balanced investment across the mental health sector. <http://www.beyondblue.org.au/about-us/programs/workplace-and-workforce-program/programs-resources-and-tools> accessed 25th September 2014

²⁰ <http://www.miningaustralia.com.au/news/harden-up-culture-affecting-mental-health-of-fifo>, accessed 24 September 2014

²¹ Hoath, A. & Haslam McKenzie F (2013) The socio-economic impacts of long distance commuting on source communities. Perth, Co-operative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation and Curtin Graduate School of Business

barriers that contribute to men's willingness and ability to seek help for depression and anxiety – these include high levels of self-stigma, a perceived lack of skills and support, a need for control, and a preference for action over introspection. These barriers to using mental health services may be exacerbated the FIFO workplace²³. According to a research study by Lifeline WA and the Sellenger Institute²² one in five workers claimed their industry did not have on-site mental health or on-site counselling facilities and one in ten reported their industry as not having an Employment Assistance Program.

A productive and successful mental health strategy should be well thought out, have real commitment at a broad level, would tackle all possible challenges including cultural resistance, and should be a robust element of an organization's culture and policies. Bower argues that the benefits from rolling out a 'whole-of-business mental health strategy' include increased stability and lower turnover rates, improved morale, reduced rates of absenteeism, improved standing as a preferential employer, better recognition and management of risk, improved occupational health and safety procedures and policies and enhanced profitability and production.²⁴

SUMMARY

WALGA views the inquiry into FIFO and Mental Wellbeing as an opportunity to highlight ways to improve mental health outcomes for FIFO Workers and their communities through greater collaboration between government, Not for Profit and the resource sector. While there are real concerns about the mental health of FIFO workers, there is little available research to provide a clear correlation of FIFO, mental health and suicide rates. There is a need for a comprehensive survey of quantitative and qualitative data on FIFO, mental illness and suicide available to all

²² Pamela Henry, Karine Hamilton, Stuart Watson, and Nicole Macdonald (2013) FIFO/DIDO Mental Health Research Report. Lifeline WA and Sellenger Centre for Research in Law, Justice and Social Change at Edith Cowan University

²³ Beyond Blue Inquiry into the use of 'fly-in, fly-out' (FIFO) workforce practices in regional Australia submission (September (2012)). <http://www.beyondblue.org.au/docs/default-source/policy-submissions/bw0174.pdf?sfvrsn=0> Accessed September 25th 2014

²⁴ Lifeline, etal., 2013

FIFO/DIDO+MentalHealthResearchReport, <http://www.lifelinewa.org.au/download/FIFO+DIDO+Mental+Health+Research+Report+2013.pdf> accessed 24/9/2014

stakeholders including Local Government. Such data would provide evidence to support government and non-government policy formulation, targeted funding for mental health services based on need and support strategic planning and investment decision making processes. It is also important to refer to the recommendations of the previous 2012 Parliamentary FIFO inquiry (mentioned earlier in this submission) for consideration of future policy development and implementation.