

### **About MIFWA**

Mental Illness Fellowship of Western Australia (MIFWA) offers comprehensive information and support services to people with mental illness, their families, carers and friends. We regularly update more than 30 fact sheets about mental illness diagnoses – including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorders, serious depression and anxiety disorders. There is also information about managing mental illness and navigating WA's legal and health service systems.

We work with individuals, families, carers, community groups, health services and government to promote understanding of mental illness in the community, reduce stigma and increase awareness of the rights of people with mental illness. We also advocate for meaningful mental health research.

We are part of a national alliance of mental health service providers – the Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia (MIFA). MIFA is a not-for-profit, grassroots, self-help, support and advocacy organisation of people with serious mental illnesses, their families and friends.

### **Response to Terms of Reference:**

(a) the contributing factors that may lead to mental illness and suicide amongst FIFO workers;

- Lifestyle stressors associated with separation from family and existing communities to work community
- Drug and alcohol risks associated with high income
- Down turns in the economy and mining and risk of loss of relatively high income
- Predisposition or existing mental illness
- Social isolation
- Relationship challenges
- Limited knowledge and coping strategies to maintain mental health

(b) the current legislation, regulations, policies and practices for workplace mental health in Western Australia; and

- Generally, mental health is an issue that is still considered by many to be a personal responsibility rather than a workplace responsibility. Both employees AND employers have a legal responsibility for workplace Mental Health. Mental Health does come under the WA Occupational Safety and Health Act (1984). There is a clear Duty of Care responsibility on the part of employers as well as employees in that OSH Act.
- The legislative frameworks exist for employers to promote and pay attention to mental health and general wellbeing however in practice the resource industry (like many others) is still dominated by culture with front line managers ill equipped to address emerging mental health challenges. However there are some examples of programs that are improving this situation

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

- More investment in adapting current community infrastructure like sport and recreation, education to cater for Fly In Fly Out. (For example many FIFO workers are not catered for in sporting competitions that tend to be based on registering a team that will play on a weekly basis).
- More investment and incentives to support FIFO workers to understand and address mental health.

**This FIFO Life Project**

In 2013/14 MIFWA, funded by Mental Health Commission, undertook a project to explore and improve the mental health of FIFO workers and their families. The project was undertaken by two mental health professionals Julie Loveny and Sue Crock and resulted in the recent launch of This FIFO LIFE [www.thisfifolife.com](http://www.thisfifolife.com)

**Below is some key information from the interim report on the project.**

The FIFO Mental Health project is funded by the WA Mental Health Commission auspice by the Mental Illness Fellowship of WA.

The FIFO workforce has grown enormously in recent decades and there is limited empirical data regarding the numbers, economic and social circumstances of the workforce. Nevertheless it is generally agreed that the FIFO lifestyle can place additional pressure on individuals and families and this has the potential to increase the risk of mental health problems. This project aims to understand the experience of FIFO workers and their families and develop strategies and resources to build and support a mentally healthy FIFO workforce.

The project draws on the lived experiences of FIFO workers and their families in adapting to the FIFO lifestyle. It highlights their strengths and resilience and the strategies used to maintain positive mental health. It will result in the development of practical resources to promote a healthy FIFO lifestyle. The FIFO workforce is predominantly male and they have wide ranging skills and educational levels. However the mental health literacy of most employees is relatively low. This project seeks to have maximum impact within the resources allocated and significant consideration is being given to developing relevant and effective information for the target audience of both the FIFO worker as well as their families. The project seeks to partner with the resource industry to raise awareness and commitment to developing a mentally healthy workforce.

The project had three phases:

Consultation and resource development

Promotion, feedback and partnership pilot

Partnership development and maintenance of the online resources

**1. Consultation & Resource Development**

Phase 1 of the project has provided rich information regarding the FIFO lifestyle and has reinforced the need to raise awareness and support to achieve and maintain mental health. The key issues identified include:

- A lack of awareness and the absence of clear, integrated strategies to promote mental health within the resource sector.
- The male dominated, 'macho' culture and the stigma associated with mental health (often confused with mental illness) contributes to a reluctance to talk about emotional challenges.
- 'Toughen up' is still a common response from workmates and managers to those facing difficulties. This is likely to add to stress levels and fear of job loss or being perceived as 'soft' prevents mental health issues being raised.

From the information gathered at this stage of the project, more than fifty 'topics' have been identified and are of importance to the mental health and wellbeing of FIFO workers and their families. These broad themes will be prioritized and distilled to be included in the website and resource development.

Consultation to date has identified several themes.

- **A need to improve awareness and commitment across the resource industry**

Mental health is beginning to be recognised as an issue for the resource sector. The impact of FIFO on mental health has had increasing profile in recent years and there is evidence of some initiatives; for example the Chamber of Minerals and Energy of Western Australia (CME), the peak resources sector representative body in Western Australia, 2014 Safety and Health Conference had a keynote presentation 'FIFO mental health in the resource industry –separating the fact from the fiction', Rio Tinto is introducing a peer support program at some of its sites and has signed an MOU with the Mental Health Commission, Fortescue has chaplains on site and ESS has partnered with Beyond Blue to raise awareness on the mining camps and villages they manage.

The understanding of mental health is 'patchy' and very much in its infancy in the resource sector. Despite some attention to mental health in the health and safety context, there is a general lack of expertise within the industry, from peak bodies to workers on the ground. Many workers are employed in remote places, work in harsh conditions and encounter a tough "macho" culture. High suicide rates, and alcohol and drug abuse highlight the vulnerability of people employed in the resource sector. Partners and families experience their own challenges too, for example lack of emotional and practical support, loneliness and isolation and difficulties transitioning between co-parenting and solo parenting.

- **Practical guidance/support that is relevant and reaches the target audience**

There is limited information and practical advice to promote mental health or to support those in the recovery to mental health in the resources sector. Information about mental wellbeing and support services can be hard to navigate. It is evident that people need information in engaging, straightforward and understandable terms that is positive, strength based and solution focus. Within the industry there are parallels to be drawn from physical health and safety. This is now widely recognised and promoted via policies, procedures, strategies, prevention and health promotion both on site and in villages/camps. There is much to be learned from this journey. The challenge ahead is how to expand this commitment and knowledge to mental health.

Consultation and research also indicates that web based and social media is the best way to reach our target audience. Frequent postings, with short text based information in a conversational style with links to resources especially video has been recommended by our target audience and industry experts. Evidence that Facebook has a significant role to play in connecting the FIFO community and raising awareness of mental health can be seen on the Fifo Man Facebook page. This was established a few months ago and has a following of 11,000 plus and growing daily.

Other Key issues identified:

- Mental health awareness and understanding is limited within the resource sector and especially amongst mine workers.
- The male dominated, macho culture contributes to a reluctance to talk about mental health issues.
- Stigma associated with mental health is highly prevalent.
- Women (more likely to be the partners) are more aware of mental health issues and more likely to actively seek help and engage in an on line interactive resource.
- Shame and embarrassment is prevalent.
- 'Toughen up' is still a common response from workmates and manager to others facing difficulties.

- Fear of losing their job or being perceived as 'soft' prevents mental health issues being raised.
- Mental health issues can escalate to crisis point because of a lack of awareness and no prevention or early intervention strategy (higher than average incidence of suicide).
- Information needs to be relevant and presented in a way that reaches a wide audience from families in source communities, support agencies, HR, leaders and managers, professionally qualified employees and less educated/qualified workers and those with limited awareness and literacy skills (a significant number of FIFO workers).
- A 'guide' has to be readily accessible as many will not actively be seeking mental health information or will be put off if it is framed as such.
- Resource companies are keen to support mental health initiatives, but personnel are not equipped with an appropriate background or skills and in many instances are quite fearful of mental health issues and how to respond.

From the information gathered at this stage of the project, more than fifty 'topics' have been identified and are of importance to the mental health and wellbeing of FIFO workers and their families (Appendix 2). These broad themes could be distilled to many more subsections.

It is also evident that people want or need information in simple and understandable terms about each area (e.g. awareness needs to be raised, tips and strategies given) as well as links to resources or agencies for support and help. The opportunity for prevention, resilience building and early intervention is huge and badly needed.

Within the industry there are parallels to be drawn from physical health and safety. This is now widely recognised and promoted with integrated policies, procedures, strategies, prevention and health promotion on site and villages/camps. There is much to be learned from this journey.

It is also clear that people have been very keen to share their stories, to talk about their challenges and their capacity to deal with them and ideas for this project.

## **2. The design and development of a website**

The website design is in the final stages of development and will be completed by the end of August. It will be called 'This FIFO Life'. The website is interactive and targeted to the FIFO workforce and families. Blog topics and relevant links to resources have been selected based on earlier phases of consultation. It includes video interviews of the lived experiences of FIFO workers and their families. The website is searchable by topics of interest and new blogs will be posted on a daily basis growing the 'bank' of information. They will also be posted on 'This FIFO Life' Facebook page. Blog posts also enable information to be current and topical, for example addressing some of the current media attention regarding suicides in the Pilbara amongst the resource and construction workforce.

## **3. The recording and production of short videos**

Many FIFO workers and family members volunteered and proved keen to share their story. Eight interviews have been conducted and filmed. As well, three service providers have agreed to be interviewed and have now been filmed.

## **4. The creation of a supporting, downloadable e-guide**

One of the deliverables in Phase 1 is the website and online resources, including information on the challenges faced by FIFO workers and their families and strategies to support their mental health and wellbeing. These are presented as blogs and developed based on the

topics identified by FIFO workers and family members. Over 100 blogs have been written and a new one will be posted daily on the website and Facebook page. The e-guide provides comprehensive information about where to get help and is downloadable.

## 5. Relevant support services and links to online resources identified and developed

The research and identification of resources and support agencies has been completed and is being curated for the website and online resources. A wide range of resources in different formats have been identified to meet the different interests and learning styles of the target group and to have wide appeal. These include:

- Books relating to topics & themes
- Relevant research
- Films
- YouTube videos
- TED talks
- Links to relevant websites
- Services and agencies providing support to FIFO families
- Sources of further information
- Self-help courses and education programs

These resources will be covered extensively on the website via the blogs and hot links made to them. The online resource will provide important information and include emergency numbers. The promotion of the website in the magazine and vice versa will be well publicized.

### Summary of Project Deliverables Phase 1

Deliverables	Current status of work
Invitations to FIFO workers & families to participate	Completed
Consultation with stakeholders (See Appendix 1)	Completed
Forums 8 regional mine sites (4 in the Pilbara, 2 in the Goldfields) 2 metro (Kwinana & Perth)	Completed  Total no attending: 1200+
Identification of FIFO challenges (see Appendix 2)	Completed
Recording video interviews with FIFO workers and family members	Completed
Editing interviews	Completed
Website design	Completed
Development of online resources & e-guide	Completed
Identification of relevant support services	Completed

## Identified Challenges for FIFO Workers & Families

Anxiety  
Bullying and harassment  
Career planning and keeping interested in the job  
Contracting and FIFO  
Cultural diversity  
Depression  
Domestic Violence  
Drug, alcohol and other addictions  
EAP and other counselling services  
Economic cycle and the resource industry  
Family, parenting and kids  
Fatigue and poor sleep  
FIFO vs residential  
Financial stress  
Gambling  
Getting help on site  
Getting help off site  
Happiness  
Home alone with young children  
Indigenous issues  
Isolation and loneliness  
Keeping in touch and good communication  
Kids' issues  
Life on camp  
Looking out for mates and peer support  
Meditation and mindfulness  
Men's issues  
Mental health and stigma  
Mental illness  
Parenting (young children, older children, adult children)  
Physical health and wellbeing  
Pornography  
R & R and transition back home  
Redundancy  
Relationships, dating, romance and sex  
Resilience  
Self-assessment tools  
Separation and divorce  
Setting goals  
Sexual assault and harassment  
Sexuality and gender issues  
Social life  
Special occasions and FIFO lifestyle  
Spirituality and religion  
Starting out in FIFO  
Stress  
Suicide  
Trauma and critical incidents  
Trust, jealousy and affairs  
Women's issues  
Working away from home  
Workplace conflict