



## **Centacare perspectives on the impacts of a FIFO workforce in the Narrabri Shire mine sites.**

### **About Centacare NENW**

Centacare is a key provider of mental health support initiatives to the Narrabri Shire; Personal Helpers and Mentors Program (PHAMS) and the Family Mental Health Support Service (FMHSS). Centacare also offers Family Mediation services through its Family Support Program which incorporates the Family Relationship Centre.

Centacare has five strategic target areas; Youth, Families, People from Indigenous and CALD backgrounds, People impacted by Mental Health and Homelessness. Centacare NENW sits on the Regional Homelessness Action Plan Steering Committee, the Policy Council of Homelessness NSW and the Narrabri Accommodation Committee. The writer of this submission served Narrabri for a decade in another agency as coordinator of a Homelessness service and served on Federal and State Boards and the Federal Consultations on homelessness. Issues of Housing and Homelessness are integral to social structure and human well being. A society that is stressed in terms of accommodation is stressed at its core.

The following points are of note;

- The impact of mining in a previously largely agricultural community cuts across the social and economic elements of the community. This Shire is increasingly becoming industrial.
- Although the Shire had previously had annual experiences of a massive workforce influx during the “Cotton Chipping Season” there are significant differences. First of all Cotton Chipping is all but non-existent since the recent introduction of more modern farming practices. As such the infrastructure to meet this demand

for accommodation (up to 2,000 people) has been non-existent for nearly ten years. Further, any such infrastructure was largely ad hoc as the nature of the majority of the Cotton Chipping workforce was casual, The FIFO workforce influx is highly structured and accommodation needs exceed that of camp sites and tents once popular with Chippers. Further, the Chipping season was for 3-4 months whereas the FIFO influx has no easing in demand in the yearly cycle.

- Planning for infrastructure for the area at the Government level was based on the previous census. Census results pointed to a declining population. Government infrastructure was prepared accordingly. No rapid response change process was available to be employed should a mining industry develop. The slow response by Government agencies and therefore Government infrastructure is key to resolving much of the impact.
- The concerns and issues raised by the impact of the FIFO industry has become a standing issue recognised by State, Regional and Shire groups.

### **Impact on Housing and Homelessness**

Changes to rural workforce operations previously had impact on the delivery of brokered accommodation and homelessness service assistance in the shire. Brokerage services are recognised to offer clients a level of flexibility and depth of case management that is considered to be more cost effective and efficient than refuge based services. But brokerage models require access to available beds in hotels, motels and caravan parks that can be purchased for client use. Competition for such bed space was challenging prior to the roll out of the FIFO mine workforce. Competition for such bed space has since become impossible. Bedspace is pre-booked well in advance by the mines and contracting companies. At times, particularly early on, the practise of hot-bedding was known to occur. Non-refuge based

models were rendered impotent to manage the needs of homeless clients experiencing a homelessness crisis. Temporary Accommodation provided by Housing NSW were similarly challenged.

The Homelessness field focuses on three main areas of service delivery; Early Intervention (preventing the incidence of homelessness), Crisis Management and Post Crisis Management. Early Intervention was largely a process of negotiation and brokerage assistance alongside specific supports. A usual practise in Early Intervention was to assist a client facing eviction by supports aimed at behaviour modification, brokerage assistance aimed at resolving any potential financial loss experienced by the land lord and negotiating any other difficulties between tenant and landlord. The demand for rental accommodation pushed rental costs to a premium and this financial pressure removed incentive for resolution of issues. The cost for non-resolution of issues has had the effect of reducing the capacity of the Homeless Persons Support Team and other services to prevent individuals and families from becoming homeless.

It is a primary aim of all services working with homeless people to prevent any incidence of homelessness where possible. Where this cannot be achieved the second goal is to reduce the period of homelessness experienced. These goals are important as the longer an individual or a household experiences homelessness, the greater the likelihood of social disengagement, higher risk of the incidence of a mental illness, development of substance abuse issues and legal problems. The costs of recovery increase the longer and the more frequent incidents of homelessness are experienced.

With rental accommodation being competitively sought by the mines and by miners, exit housing (housing for people moving from homelessness into accommodation) has also become challenging.

Rental costs had increased, accommodation availability reduced and anyone seen as a risk undesirably compared to the potential benefits of having miners as tenants..

Homelessness assistance is not characterised simply by the provision of crisis accommodation. Homelessness services have a duty to reduce or prevent the impact of an experience of homelessness. They also have a duty to assist those whose living skills, mental health and capacity for self care have been impaired by homelessness. The impact of the FIFO workforce's competition for any available accommodation in town was to render to nil the capacity of the non-refuge based services.

In particular Centacare has real concerns regarding the impact on those at the lowest levels of the socio-economic scales. We recognise that economic progress or change is unlikely to be impeded by the needs of the disenfranchised, but it is incomprehensible that Governments are not by now aware that the changes brought on by FIFO workforces do not automatically initiate specific responses to mitigate the damage to those least able to defend themselves.

The Narrabri Shire is a large shire with a number of smaller hamlets at its fringes. These smaller locales are becoming the resettlement points for people who are no longer able to afford accommodation in the main centres.

## **Mental Health**

The Narrabri Shire is approximately 200km from the nearest psychiatric facility. There are three services within the Shire focussed on specifically addressing mental health issues; Centacare, the Community Health Mental Health Team and the Division of General

Practise. All three services work together and with other relevant agencies to address mental health in the local population.

Narrabri has had a high suicide rate for several decades. The impact of the socio-economic changes brought on by the sudden influx of FIFO workers is unpredictable. Economic changes can have an impact on mental health. Centacare strongly advocates for research addressing the impact of the FIFO workforce and concurrent economic and social changes on the community. A clear understanding of these impacts could be of benefit to the industry as well as assisting Government, community and health agencies to prepare and manage changes as they occur in similar communities around Australia.

### **Alcohol & Other Drugs**

The increased population and increased availability of money in some quarters is expected to have implications on the wider community. Anecdotally, the impact of the mines and the FIFO population in the Upper Hunter was to increase consumption of more rapidly metabolised substances such as heroin and other opioids. Again, we recommend a distinct research project exploring this. It is vital that Health and community services that will certainly be required to deal with increased substance use and changes to the substance use profile are prepared for such changes. If predictable impacts on Health services, child protection services, policing services, housing services and mental health services are known then communities can be better prepared to manage change.

### **Violence and conflict**

As with the Cotton Chippers before them, there is a notable divide between the FIFO workers and the local community. Incidents of violence have been reported. The FIFO population is separate in many ways. They are usually identifiable by their safety jackets and,

in a small community, their not being otherwise known/ recognised, makes them strangers. Many are known to live in the Mac Village on the edge of town- sometimes referred to as "Christmas Island".

Conflict between a financially well off group with influence and impact but no commitment to the local community and that local community is inevitable. Local resentment towards the FIFO workers is both palpable but blurred by the economic benefits they provide.

Rumours and reports of sexual harassment and violence towards local women build on such resentment.

Centacare recommends a research project exploring social impacts, violence and conflict. We further recommend that the Government take the initiative along with the mines themselves and fund a community development project that aims to build better relationships and social capital between the FIFO workers and the local community.

### **Recommendations:**

- 1) That the opening of a mine in any regional area automatically overrides existing departmental strategies and expenditure relating to that area.
- 2) Research projects focussing on the impact of mines and FIFO workforces be implemented. Narrabri should be a starting point for such research and could be used as a template for wider studies. These research projects should look at the impact of the FIFO workforce and its socio-economic impact on;
  - a. housing and homelessness
  - b. mental health
  - c. Substance abuse/ misuse
  - d. Violence and conflict

3) That Government and mining companies recognise that the impact of mines and FIFO workforces cause serious change. That change can be mitigated if the facts are known and recognised. Therefore funding should recognise that impact and pre-emptively address it.

a) Social Housing services should be enhanced, not limited as they currently are in Narrabri.

b) Case management services should be assisted to find better solutions to increased and changing needs.

c) Community development projects should be in train to address, manage and reduce impact of changes.

d) Services such as (Housing & Accommodation Support Initiative) (HASI) programs, improved PHAMS services eg; with specialist homelessness and/ or Alcohol & Other Drugs (AOD) positions) and enhanced capacity to reach adjacent communities similarly effected by these changes (eg; Gunnedah)