

House Standing Committee on Regional Australia  
House of Representatives,  
PO Box 6021,  
Parliament House, Canberra ACT 2600



### **Inquiry into the use 'fly-in, fly-out' (FIFO) workforce practices in regional Australia**

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission to the Inquiry into the "The use of 'fly-in, fly-out' (FIFO) workforce practices in regional Australia."

I have experienced both residential and FIFO mining lifestyles in Western Australia, Queensland and Tasmania as the wife of a mining employee over the last 40 years. I remember when FIFO was introduced into land based mining operations in Western Australia the late 1980s. As a Community Psychologist I have undertaken research with FIFO and residential employees and their families during the last 10 years.

I submit the following comments:

1. In any discussion on FIFO it is important not to stereotype FIFO but rather to acknowledge there is no generic FIFO profile – FIFO practices are diverse and as such different profiles have different impacts on individual, families and communities for example the impacts of construction FIFO employment are different from those of operations FIFO rosters (Sibbel, 2010).
2. Current Western Australian research to date has established that:
  - a. FIFO and residential employment have both negative and positive impacts on individuals, families and communities. Overall the wellbeing of the FIFO population is similar to that of the general Australian population, however particular FIFO profiles have particular issues (Arnold, 1995, Bradbury, personal communication, 2011; Clifford, 2009; Gent, 2004; Keown, 2005; Sibbel, 2001, 2010; Taylor & Simmonds, 2009).
  - b. FIFO families generally make informed choices to have FIFO employment based on work and lifestyle factors. Work factors include income, career opportunities, and reduced exposure to boom/bust cycles of mining industry. Lifestyle factors include separation between work and home lives, extended periods of time at home, opportunities to change employers with minimum disruption to families, the family's better access to health and education facilities, greater opportunities for employment for family members and access to family and friends (Arnold, 1995; Clifford, 2009; Keown, 2005; Sibbel, 2001, 2010; Taylor and Simmonds, 2009; Watts, 2004).
  - c. Some mining employees will only ever choose residential employment, some will only ever choose FIFO and others will move between FIFO and residential as their work and family needs change (Sibbel & Kaczmarek, 2005).
  - d. Some FIFO employees extend their time doing FIFO because of the "golden handcuff".
  - e. In one study, when compared with residential employees FIFO employees reported more effective and positive coping strategies, and there was no significant difference between the general and physical health of the two groups (Keown, 2005).
  - f. Many FIFO families believe they face different rather than more stressors than non-FIFO families (Sibbel 2011).
  - g. There is no evidence that FIFO employees have a higher divorce rate than the general population (Clifford, 2009).
  - h. There are various interacting company, individual and community factors that impact on the experiences of FIFO, these include length of rosters, size and location of the worksite, standard and location of FIFO accommodation, availability of psychosocial support, access to this support, reasons

for taking FIFO employment, individual coping strategies, presence and age of children, community attitudes and so on (Sibbel, 2010).

- i. For FIFO employees there are work and family related challenges associated with the FIFO lifestyle. These include long rosters (eg 4/1), fatigue associated with long working hours, air and work safety concerns, loneliness and social isolation while on site, maintaining ongoing personal and family relationships, issues related to male dominated workforces; concern for family at home, continually changing roles in the family associated with regular comings and goings, extended periods of time away from family and friends; sense of institutionalisation (Arnold, 1995, Clifford, 2009; Gent, 2004; Keown, 2005; Pirotta, 2009; Sibbel, 2001, 2010; Taylor & Simmonds, 2009, Watts, 2004).
- j. For the partners and families of FIFO employees issues include: the lifestyle can be more difficult for the at home partner; the mother often provides a buffer for the rest of the family; sole parenting fatigue, availability of communication with the FIFO partner; loneliness; access to emergency family support; parenting issues and managing children's behaviour (Beach, 1999; Gallegos, 2006; Reynolds 2004; Sibbel, 2001, 2010; Taylor & Simmonds, 2009; Torkington et al., 2011)
- k. There is evidence that derogatory and judgemental community attitudes regarding FIFO can impact negatively on FIFO families, influencing their ability and willingness to form relationships and links within their local community. Those at-home family members who rely on family and community support while their FIFO partner is away can be particularly vulnerable (Sibbel, 2010; Sibbel & Kaczmarek, 2005).
- l. There has been limited research undertaken with children of FIFO parents. Sibbel (2001) found no differences between non-FIFO and FIFO primary school-aged children on measures of psychological wellbeing. Issues included the FIFO parent missing special events such as birthdays and school or sporting functions, inconsistency in household routines and roles when the FIFO parent was home and away, and differences between the FIFO and at home parent's behavioural expectations.
- m. For adolescents it was found the majority demonstrated successful adaptation to paternal FIFO employment; they were aware of the benefits of extended quality time with their fathers and some felt the time apart from their FIFO parent actually improved the quality of interaction with that parent. They acknowledged the opportunities associated with the good income from the FIFO lifestyle but were also aware of the restrictions of the lifestyle and loss of physical and emotional support when their father was away. Boys reported more emotional-behavioural difficulties than girls; many demonstrated increased responsibility in household and greater independence; some believed the relationship with their FIFO father was either no different or stronger compared to friends who had non-FIFO fathers; a number were aware of negative community attitudes to FIFO and some reported that FIFO could at times be more stressful for their at home parent (Bradbury, 2008, 2011; Macbeth, 2008).

The location of the FIFO accommodation ie adjacent to a remote mining site or close to an established town impacts at the individual, family, company and community levels. These impacts are recognised but little has been done in the past at government or company level to mitigate the negatives and enhance the opportunities for all stakeholders.

The so-called "fly-over effects" off FIFO on regional communities are well documented (see eg Storey 2001) however the positive impacts on communities are less well known. For example during the last 20 years the town of Manjimup in South Western WA has suffered from loss of local employment opportunities due to government imposed restrictions on the local logging industry and downturns in local agricultural products. However access to FIFO flights from local regional centres such as Busselton has allowed Manjimup families to remain in their preferred or home town close to family and friends while still having the option of well paid employment.

The above research findings indicate there is a need for a coordinated approach to the provision of support for FIFO families and communities – currently any support that is available is ad hoc and provided at an individual organisation or community level. Recommended support includes:

1. Ensuring potential FIFO employees and their families have the opportunity to be fully informed about the impacts of the lifestyle before taking on FIFO employment.
2. Comprehensive induction for FIFO employees explaining individual and family impacts and offering strategies to manage these.
3. Support made available in the home communities for those families of FIFO workers who need access to such support.
4. Support for FIFO workers on site to manage for example mental health issues such as loneliness and work place stress.
5. Comprehensive education and training for health and other professionals who work with FIFO employees and their families so they have accurate understandings of the impacts of FIFO employment and work from an informed perspective.
6. Development of guidelines for use by local government and companies to facilitate integration of FIFO workers into the communities in which their FIFO accommodation is located.
7. Separation of the public discussion of the need for public funding of regional development from the individual's right to choose FIFO employment.

Please contact me if you need further explanation

Yours sincerely

Anne Sibbel PhD

## References

- Arnold, P. (1995). *Long distance commuting and working in remote locations: The impact on psychological well-being, and work performance*. Murdoch, Western Australia: Murdoch University, Division of Psychology, Institute of Research into Safety and Transport.
- Beach, R. (1999). *The impact of intense work schedules on family structure: A case study of a 4:1 fly-in/fly-out schedule in the Australian mining industry*. In Collis, M., Munro, L. and Russell, S (Eds.), *Sociology for a new millennium: Challenges and prospects* (pp. 289-300). Churchill, Victoria: CeLTS.
- Bradbury, G. (2008). *Children and the fly-in/fly-out lifestyle: The psychosocial implications of occupational parent absence*. Presentation at the Fly-in/fly-out Seminar conducted by the Housing and Urban Research Institute of Western Australia, Perth Western Australia. Available: [http://ahuriwa.curtin.edu.au/research/Fly\\_In\\_Fly\\_Out.cfm](http://ahuriwa.curtin.edu.au/research/Fly_In_Fly_Out.cfm)
- Clifford, S. (2009). *The effects of fly-in/fly-out commute arrangements and extended working hours on the stress, lifestyle, relationship and health characteristics of Western Australian mining employees and their partners*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, The University of Western Australia.
- Gallegos, D. (2006). *Aeroplanes always come back: Fly-in fly-out employment: Managing the parenting transitions*. Perth, Western Australia: Centre for Social and Community Research, Murdoch University.

- Gent, V. M. (2004). *The impact of fly-in/fly-out work on well-being and work-life satisfaction*. Unpublished honours thesis, Murdoch University, Perth W.A.
- Keown, N. (2005) *Digging deep for better health: A study of the health status of men in the Goldfields mining industry of Western Australia. Overview report*. Kalgoorlie, W.A.: Goldfields Men's Health Inc.
- Macbeth, M. (2008) *"He's My Best Mate": Fathers, Sons and the Fly In/Fly Out Lifestyle*. Unpublished honours thesis, Edith Cowan University, Western Australia
- Pirotta, J. (2009). An exploration of the experiences of women who FIFO. *The Australian Community Psychologist*, 21(2), 37-51.
- Reynolds, S. (2004). *The effects of fly-in fly-out employment in the oil and gas industry on relationships in Western Australia*. Unpublished masters thesis, Notre Dame, Perth, W.A.
- Sibbel, A. M. (2001) *The Psychosocial Well-being of Children from Fly-in/Fly-out Mining Families*. Unpublished honours thesis, Edith Cowan University, Perth.
- Sibbel, A.M. (2010) *Living FIFO: The Experiences and Psychosocial Wellbeing of Western Australian Fly-in/Fly-out Employees and Partners*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Edith Cowan University, Perth.
- Sibbel, A. M., & Kaczmarek, E. A. (2005) *When the dust settles, how do families decide? Residential or FIFO?* Paper presented at the 14th Biennial Australasian Human Development Conference, Perth.
- Storey, K. (2001). Fly-in/Fly-out and Fly-over: mining and regional development in Western Australia *Australian Geographer*, 32(2),133-148.
- Taylor, J. C., & Simmonds, J. (2009). Family stress and coping in the fly-in fly-out workforce. *The Australian Community Psychologist*, 21(2), 23-36.
- Torkington, A.M., Larkins, S & Gupta, T. S. (2011). The psychosocial impacts of fly-in/fly-out and drive-in/drive-out mining employees: A qualitative study. *The Australian Journal of Rural Health* 19, 135-141.
- Watts, J. (2004) *Best of both worlds: Fly in- fly out research project final report*. Karratha, W.A: Pilbara Regional Council.