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**Use of “fly-in, fly-out” (FIFO) work practices in regional Australia**

**Submission to the Standing Committee on Regional Australia**

**9 November 2011**

Frontier Services is the successor in the Uniting Church to the Australian Inland Mission founded by the Rev John Flynn in 1912, to provide a 'mantle of safety' to support the people of remote Australia. In 2012, we celebrate the Centenary of the organisation which was established to achieve Flynn's vision of sustainable community across remote Australia.

The advent of fly in, fly out is, perhaps, the antithesis of that vision. His dream of pastoral support, nursing care and good communication was about supporting community development, allowing families to settle across the remote areas with some security and confidence.

Flynn was absolutely determined that the presence of a Padre and nurses in the community would provide the core. The nursing homes, the original hospitals of remote communities, were deliberately intended as the community centres.

Flynn's dream of providing doctors to support the nursing services, which resulted in the establishment of the Aerial Medical Service of the Australian Inland Mission (and subsequently became the Flying Doctor Service and later the Royal Flying Doctor Service), was about adding specialist services to those which were present in community.

Flynn's vision was, and ours for the future is, of strong communities with appropriate professional services available to people locally.

Frontier Services is today the largest provider of aged and community care across remote Australia. Additionally we provide a wide range of migrant services, children's services, and family support services and a pastoral care network covering 85% of the continent.

Our philosophy continues to be that our staff live in the community, are part of the community, resource that community and provide services in their place, in their way. To that end, Frontier Services has used its National and Regional Offices in urban areas in order to undertake the administrative and support roles which allow people the freedom to engage with their own communities in the best ways possible.

For a century now we have resisted the temptation to fly services in and out.

When funding has been advertised for the establishment of counselling services in remote communities in the Pilbara, or the Kimberley, for instance, our submissions have been for permanent, full time staff, resident in the community. Almost always the funding has been allocated to organisations which fly in a psychiatrist from Perth.

We believe that without current, contemporary knowledge, and trust and respect in the community, it is more difficult to provide strong community building services.

Sadly, and over time, we too have had to compromise to some degree. Relieving staff are often brought from urban areas and the shortage of nursing staff across our aged care network has caused us to engage sessional or short term contract staff. While this might fall into the category of fly in, fly out, this would never be our preference and our focus is on training, training, training to ensure that a workforce is available in situ into the future.

22 Frontier Services Patrol Ministers provide pastoral support across the continent. Many of them have mines within their patrol areas. Increasingly mental health issues are presenting as a significant challenge for those who are living and working in remote communities and sometimes especially for those who are engaged in fly in, fly out.

Anecdotally, our Patrol Ministers would say that these are not 'real' communities; people gathered together for a particular purpose in rarified and extraordinary environments, living apart from their families and lacking the balance of normal everyday relationship between work and home.

It is of course recognised that for many people this lifestyle suits very well, (at least for a time) but for others, it does not, and the extent to which it is proliferating across remote Australia is of concern to us.

As part of the UnitingCare network across the continent, we are also acutely aware of the increasing pressure on UnitingCare supports and services from families left behind; families with patterns of community life which are not the norm, to which they are not used, and for which few supports are available.

Of concern also are the issues of balance in terms of resources.

I met at Melbourne airport, only weeks ago, a young farmer from Gippsland who had forsaken his tractor for driving heavy machinery in a mine outside Hedland. He is working 3 weeks on, 2 weeks off. His lifestyle, his connectedness to his community, his relationship with his wife and 2 small sons, and his parents, had all change irreparably and yet he found the lure of the remuneration too significant to ignore. He was aware that when he goes home he does not fit and that when he is in Hedland he does not fit either. The atmosphere in his family home is brittle and he knows that the whole arrangement is time limited. In the meantime, his farm is deteriorating.

Frankly, it reminded me of a conversation I had in another airport lounge only a few days earlier with a person who was providing security services in Afghanistan.

Frontier Services staff, by and large, are locals in the communities in which they work. The "locals" in communities like Karratha and Hedland, those who have worked for us for a decade or two, report that they cannot keep their children at school, 'Why would I, mum? I can earn \$85,000 in the mine' and that local services are impossible to access.

We know that the small businesses in the communities of the Pilbara have closed because it is completely impossible to staff them.

We are told that Kentucky Fried Chicken in Karratha is staffed by 457 Visa holders.

These communities, particularly Karratha, where Frontier Services started the very first services in caravan parks in the 1970's and continues to this day to provide community services, are no longer communities in the sense that we mean, because more people fly in, fly out than actually reside in them.

Those who fly in and fly out have no permanent commitment to the community, no reason to make a contribution and many of them in any case are working too hard to have time to do so. Church congregations and other community organisations struggle for numbers.

We are told that the effect on mining equipment and machinery is just the same as it is on community organisations – that nobody needs to make an investment. They fly in, operate the equipment for 2 or 3 weeks and fly out again, accepting no responsibility or ownership and developing no relationship with equipment which in another environment would be well loved and well cared for.

The cost to the mining companies and to the environment in the long term is reputed to be very significant.

We believe that the original model of the development of towns to support specific industries in remote areas was a good, strong, supportive one. Frontier Services was involved at the inception of Karratha, of Weipa, of Roxby Downs, of Tom Price, and we have been involved during the past 40 or more years in a number of other locations where mining companies made a commitment to develop community and provide housing and services for the people they needed to attract to undertake their extractive activity.

These communities were deliberately designed to connect young families, to allow young mothers and children to form friendships and networks of support. Church and other community buildings were provided and in many cases maintained. Mining companies argue now that the cost of such establishment is untenable.

We would argue that the taxpayer is carrying the cost of the development of the infrastructure which makes the alternatives possible. Qantas and other airlines are purchasing additional aircraft. Every airport in Australia is being expanded and the community bears the cost of providing the facilities and the infrastructure which make fly in, fly out possible. And the community generally is bearing the cost of fractured relationships and displaced workforces.

Increasingly, our whole community is clinging to the coast. More than 90% of the population lives within 50kms of the coast and our cities are sprawling across the arable coastal plains. The development of communities to support the resources industry could have significantly changed that pattern.

Across all of the communities affected by fly in, fly out, accommodation is at a premium. Frontier Services has found it necessary to purchase housing in order to attract staff, and retention continues to be an issue.

Staff who rent accommodation often live in extremely unsuitable arrangements – 4 couples in a 3 bedroom house in Karratha, 5 units of an extended family in a 3 bedroom house, caravan and garage in Port Hedland.

As fast as we can recruit staff to work in the community services sector and relocate them to Emerald or Mount Isa, to Karratha or Tom Price, they are “snapped up” into positions offering often spectacularly higher salaries, and often housing.

It is impossible to imagine that the mining sector in particular could be resourced now in any other way than by significant fly in, fly out. However, we believe that every effort should be made to create and to sustain permanent, connected community – especially in remote areas.

At Frontier Services we take the view that we need to be part of that community to provide effective services to it – we live as people live, we travel as people travel – we share life in community.

The disconnection which inevitably accompanies living and working in two places (and struggling to belong in either) must be recognised as a factor in the increasing disfunction apparent in the communities we serve.

The challenge for us is that it is increasingly difficult for us to provide the support services needed to address that very disfunction.

Rosemary Young AM  
National Director