

Submission Number: 48
Date Received: 7/10/2011



FIFO Families

Submission to the Federal Inquiry into FIFO

Nicole Ashby

Director

FIFO Families Pty Ltd

6th October 2011

ABOUT FIFO FAMILIES

FIFO Families is a new and unique organisation, launched in October 2010, providing social and supportive networks for employees and their families who work on a fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) or drive-in-drive-out (DIDO) basis in the resource sector.

FIFO Families creates connections, networks and new levels of support for families who experience long work related absences of one or both parents. When registering with FIFO Families, members have access to other local area or interstate FIFO families who are able to offer assistance, advice, support, guidance and social connection when needed.

This gives members rare and valuable access to other people who live and experience the unique way of life that comes predominantly with working in the resource sector especially those who operate on a fly in fly out basis.

FIFO families can access regular social events, chat forums and newsletters which prove to be invaluable in terms of dissolving feelings of loneliness and isolation that many FIFO families experience. Families get to come together, meet and talk about their unique way of life and challenges that are faced on a daily basis. Through this level of connection members feel confident of sharing experiences, health issues and high stress levels. Others are rejoicing in simply connecting with like-minded people who share the same lifestyle.

The FIFO Families website is very interactive and members from all over Australia contribute to requests, offer assistance to new families or share priceless wisdom gained over years of FIFO lifestyles.

Director of FIFO Families, Mrs Nicole Ashby, is a FIFO wife herself. For the past three years Nicole's husband Joe, has been working off shore on a roster of 4 weeks on and 4 weeks off. For six months of the year Nicole plays sole parent to their three young children aged between 2 and 6 years.

In the past twelve months, FIFO Families has come in contact with approximately 600 FIFO/DIDO families across Australia. It is from the interaction and feedback from these families that gives FIFO Families the expertise in being able to specifically address how FIFO employee's and their families are impacted by the FIFO lifestyle and what strategies can be implemented to address these impacts.

Recent Research Summary

Research over the past ten years has shown that the four most pressing issues facing FIFO partners are:

1. Isolation

2. Loneliness

3. Trust

4. Resentment

FIFO Families addresses the first two points by building local community groups where there are significant numbers of FIFO families and partners living. Feedback have received from members is that they struggle with the loneliness and isolation and that they find great benefit and value in being able to connect with others living the FIFO lifestyle through FIFO Families.

Research into the effects and impacts that FIFO has on individuals and families has also repeatedly stated that there needs to be communities that families can tap into on a needs basis and also some form of website that connects families. This is exactly what FIFO Families emulates.

Over the past 12 months Nicole Ashby has seen large resource companies begin to acknowledge and recognise the importance of looking after workers and in particular their families. There has been a real shift in thinking and some companies can now see and again acknowledge the real links between the families and the worker, thus directly effecting retention of FIFO workers and productivity.

Terms of Reference

-Costs and benefits for companies, individuals, choosing a FIFO/DIDO workforce as an alternative to a resident workforce.

Firstly, due to geographical isolation, not all families can live in the same place as the FIFO parent. This is especially so in the case of oil and gas rigs and exploration and construction in mining.

A main factor that inhibits some families moving to residential towns is that the cost of living is so highly inflated that it counteracts the high wage. Therefore they feel they are no better off financially if they live in the same town. This only applies to some residential towns.

Other reasons why families and individuals chose to live outside of the residential workforce area are because in city areas they have access to all the amenities, education and health facilities and entertainment that they desire. Again, this does not apply to everyone.

-The impact on communities sending large numbers of FIFO/DIDO workers to mine sites

FIFO Families members openly share their experiences of being a FIFO partner and the experiences seem to replicate and are shared by so many partners/families. The main impacts on the non-FIFO partner are feeling isolated, lonely, highly stressed and at times exhausted from being the sole carer for children whilst the FIFO parent is working away

There can be a feeling of disconnect between the FIFO worker and partner at home and also between the FIFO worker and children. This disconnect has the potential to seed family breakdown. This is amplified even more so when the FIFO worker is away for more than two weeks at a time and

works away for longer times than they are at home.,i.e. a 2 week on/1 week off roster or a 4 week on/1 week off roster.

A common occurrence for FIFO families is to be negatively stereo-typed by non-FIFO workers and families. The assumption that the high wages should cover any shortfalls or hard ships experienced, adds to the feeling of isolation and this is why so many families feel “safe” expressing themselves with in FIFO Families as they have a community at hand who understands them.

At the end of last year, the Australasian Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health reported that the rate of suicide of male miners is **4 times** greater than that of the general male population. This figure is staggering and worth investigating on its own merit. The common thread between people who attempt and who commit suicide is that they feel isolated. It is not only the non-FIFO worker that feels this level of disconnect and isolation but also the FIFO workers themselves.

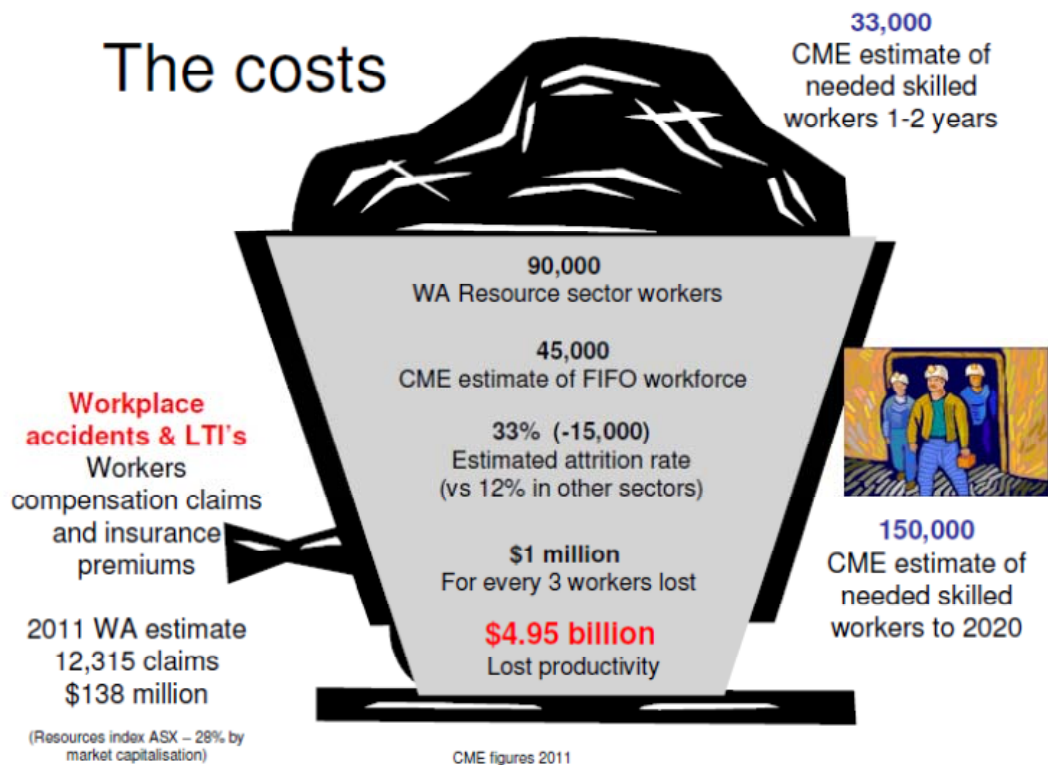
-Key skill sets targeted for mobile workforce employment, and opportunities for ongoing training and development

FIFO Families has recognised and highlighted the massive gap in preparedness for FIFO. This is not only for the worker but also for the family. Many workers are sent off to their FIFO employments, without any knowledge of how the disconnect from family and friends and the loneliness and isolation will impact them. Many are not sure how to deal with issues that rise on the home front when they are away as there is physically nothing they can do about it as they are often thousands of kilometres away from home. It also puts the non-FIFO workers in a heightened level of stress as they have to deal with issues on their own.

FIFO Families now offers workshops to resource companies and to FIFO families that will prepare FIFO workers for the challenges of FIFO and also equip them with the solutions to these challenges. FIFO can certainly be a sustainable lifestyle if the associated individuals are prepared for the expectations. We are doing this because we can see the direct link in the cost to companies in terms of recruiting, training and developing FIFO workers only to have them leave within a relatively short period of time due to family stressors.

Many companies state that they simply do not have the time for their FIFO employees’ to attend these workshops. We think it is astounding that they do not make the time as the benefits will come straight back to the companies.

The following diagrams illustrate some of staggering costs for Western Australia in terms of lost productivity, revenue and workers compensation. The CME refers to the Chamber of Minerals and Energy WA of whom FIFO Families has a good working relationship with.



If the workers and families can be prepared for the very real impacts of FIFO, then so much more can be achieved in terms of keeping these FIFO workers as career focused and productive.

-Strategies to optimise FIFO/DIDO experience for employees and their families, communities and industry

FIFO Families recently met with some representatives from the Cairns Defence Families unit. FIFO workers and Defence employee's and their families experience the same issues in their working life and there is much synergy between the two groups. Both FIFO families and Defence families deal with transition cycles, being a sole parent for extended periods of time and both also experience issues with disconnect from loved ones and communication challenges.

In our recent conversations with Defence families, we saw how well prepared these and supported Defence families are. There is much government funding that goes into Defence Families and into workshops *and* services to support these families as it is openly acknowledged that issues of separations and disconnection affect the individuals and families. One of their mottos is "strong community; strong force".

Yet what level of government funding is there for FIFO/DIDO families? Where are their support services and local community groups? These are the families that are holding up the strength of the Australian economy. This is as equally important as the Defence force.

There must be funding provided to companies and organisations such as FIFO Families so they can continue to provide the essential services of community and support to the FIFO families. This will promote and sustain healthy Australian families who live the FIFO lifestyle and who are an essential for the strong Australian economy.

To be a parent can be a challenging role at the best of times, but being a sole parent for extended periods can be extremely difficult and exhausting; especially if you don't have a strong support network around you. By introducing families to FIFO Families and the local community groups that we are building then families don't have to feel so isolated and lonely. By attending our unique and tailored workshops families can be fully prepared to live the lifestyle. It is a win-win situation for the resource companies as they will have focussed and productive workers and the families will know how to deal with any home issues AND have the local community support to back it up. Funding in this area is crucial to allow us to grow and expand our local community groups across the country and to offer our workshops to families in need.

Rosters are one of the most contentious issues around FIFO and are no doubt responsible for many of the FIFO problems that occur from on-site incidents and accidents, to fatigue and family breakdown. The oil and gas industry has a policy where equal time off must occur in relation to equal time away. While this is a fantastic policy, many of the rosters are too long. Being separated on a regular basis for 4-6 weeks at a time is so very hard for many families and workers. Yet this is a better situation than families and workers who have to endure rosters where the FIFO worker spends more time at work than away. For example a common mining construction roster is 4/1, and other common mining rosters are 2/1 or 3/1 (weeks on and off). I have seen FIFO Families members experience great levels of family disconnect and dis-association with family on these rosters and higher incidents of reported post-natal depression from women who live these FIFO rosters.

There is no doubt that these rosters should be capped or made equal time off to equal time on. If it cannot be made equal time off then workers should work no more than 2 weeks away from family and friends as this time away is sustainable and families can cope with this time.

Not only would this assist in keeping connected and resilient families, but it would also improve retention and productivity and lower on site incidents and suicides. These rosters and the lengths of them must be looked at in this inquiry. Many workers and families put up with pain and suffering of these rosters as the money is great, but what is the long term gain if it ends in broken and disconnected families, depression, substance abuse and potential suicide. Again, I make the comparison of Defence families who offer so much support, training and hands on workshops to their families to FIFO families who are often left with no support.

Companies are now acknowledging that shorter rosters are beneficial for the company, workers and families and have introduced an 8 day on, 6 day off roster. FIFO Families has had positive feedback from this roster and that it is family friendly and it is fantastic to see it implemented.

Partnership with the Shire of Kalamunda

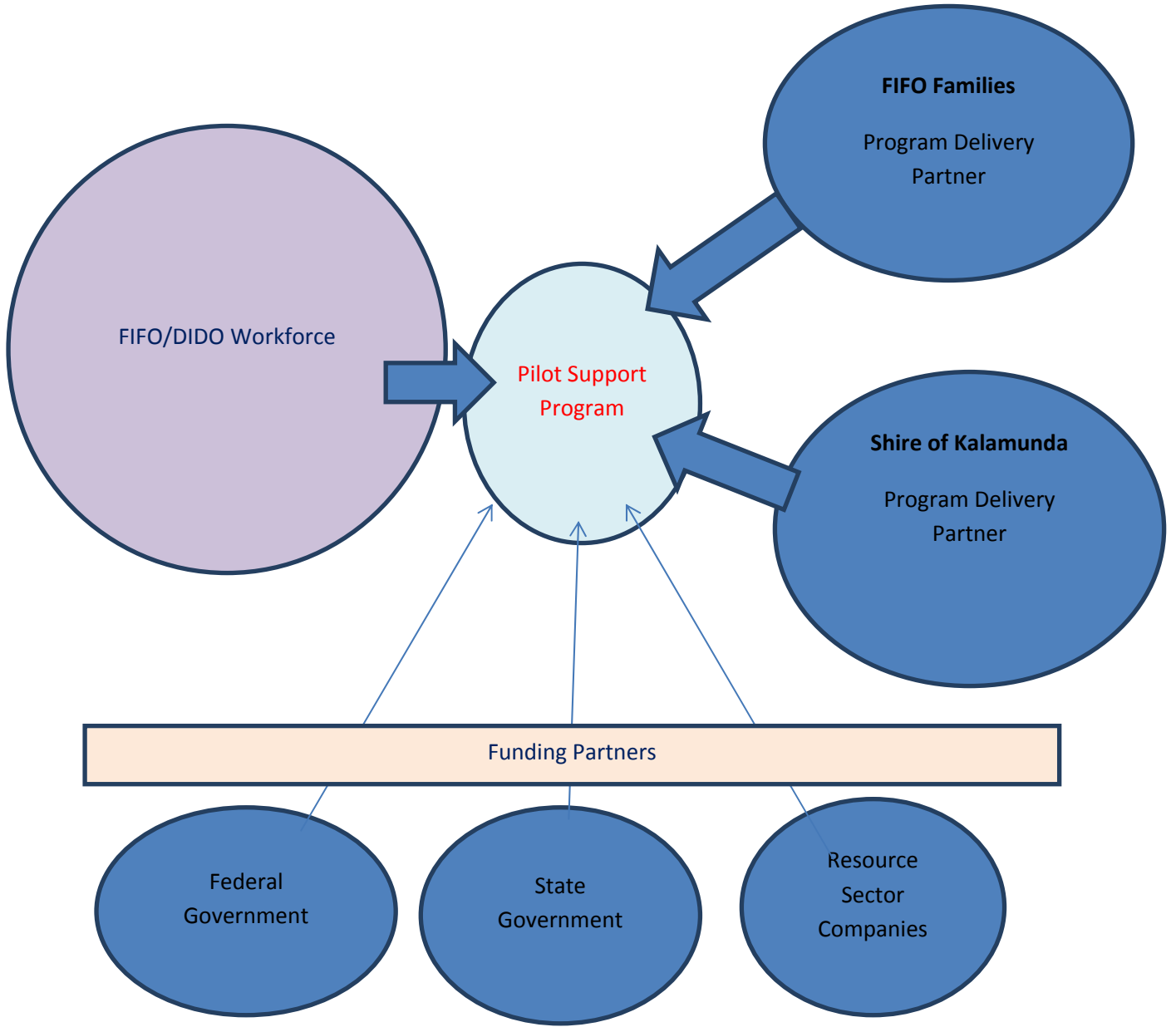
FIFO Families is partnering with the Shire of Kalamunda, a local WA council. The partnership that the Shire is currently developing with FIFO Families is to build community capacity for FIFO families currently living in the Shire's suburbs and then to undertake research to better understand the ongoing needs of this sector. It is envisaged that Local Government can then play a more integral role in providing targeted support services to this sector of its community.

In 2010 the State's Valuer General's Office undertook a revaluation of properties across the Perth region. The impact on suburbs in and around the airport was so significant that it has led the Shire of

Kalamunda to conclude that the impact is being propelled by FIFO workers wanting to live in suburbs close to the Airport and this in turn has increased the demand for rental properties and pushed rental accommodation prices up by significant amounts.

The Shire has begun to investigate and to look for partners to further pursue this notion and to through a research program seeks to quantify the impact of FIFO workers upon the real estate markets. Furthermore the Shire seeks to better understand the motivators and the thinking processes that FIFO workers make in their decisions around where they live and locate their families. FIFO Families is looking forward to partnering with the Shire of Kalamunda and rolling out services for the local FIFO families.

Model for Collaboration Figure 1



FIFO Families acknowledges that working with local shires and councils is an effective and productive way to not only reach local FIFO families but to assist in extending services and programs to councils. We hope to access funding for this pilot program and be able to replicate something similar with other councils across Australia.

Conclusion

There is much debate and controversy around FIFO presently. Much work needs to be done to make it family friendly and so much more can be done, and quite easily, to improve the productivity and retention of FIFO workers.

FIFO Families is pleased to see the Federal Government conduct an inquiry into FIFO and we look forward to the results and a sustainable FIFO working future.

Nicole Ashby

Director

FIFO Families

www.fifofamilies.com.au

PO Box 24

Hamilton Hill

6963 WA