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Employee Relations

The Hon Bronwyn Bishop MP
Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Family and Human Services
House of Representatives Standing Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Chairperson

**RE: SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE INQUIRY ON BALANCING
WORK AND FAMILY**

I refer to the above inquiry with particular reference to "making it easier for parents who so wish to return to the paid workforce". The following submission is made in relation to the Northern Territory Public Sector.

The forecast skill shortages and reduction of workforce entrants over the next 10 – 20 years are widely reported and to some degree, already being experienced within the Northern Territory. The ability to maintain our current level of workforce participation, particularly in regional and remote areas, will become increasingly difficult.

Equally acknowledged is the desire of employees to reduce the pressures of work and to place greater emphasis on social and family commitments. People wishing to re-enter the workforce are also faced with the dilemma of balancing work and life commitments.

The Northern Territory Government is committed to providing employees a variety of work life balance options whilst ensuring that the productivity of public sector workplaces is not compromised. A range of initiatives have been implemented and further initiatives are being considered that will assist employees to meet their needs outside of work, eg. employees with caring responsibilities, social and cultural commitments and phased in retirement.

Such a balanced approach was reflected in the joint State and Territory Governments submission to the Family Provisions Case in the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC), to which the Northern Territory Government was a party. The Australian Council of Trade Unions' (ACTU) made application in the AIRC to enhance the minimum standards of parental leave and hours of work provisions on the basis it would provide flexible choices for employees to achieve a balance between work and family life.



The ACTU's claim for flexible work options and leave entitlements was supported in general by the States and Territories with variations to ensure a more balanced approach between the needs of the employer and the needs of the employee.

A copy of the full submission is available at: [http://www.e-airc.gov.au/familyprovisions/stories/storyReader\\$13](http://www.e-airc.gov.au/familyprovisions/stories/storyReader$13)

One of the unique characteristics of the Northern Territory is its small and widely dispersed population. Twenty eight percent (28%) of the NT population lives outside the major centres of Darwin, Alice Springs and Katherine. The NT Government employs 2,139 people (or 13% of the total NTG workforce) across 132 remote localities performing diverse and challenging roles. The value of the remote workforce cannot be underestimated.

A major review of employment conditions for rural and remote employees of the Northern Territory Public Sector was undertaken in 2002. A package of improvements to employment incentives was approved by Cabinet in 2003 representing an additional investment of close to \$1.4M per annum. A Remote Workforce Development Strategy is the centrepiece of the package with \$1M dedicated to the recruitment, retention and development of staff in remote localities. Initiatives which support work life balance include: more flexible use of 'fares out of isolated localities' which enable employees and family members respite from the remote locality, better resourced staffing, replacement of employees during leave periods, and building greater community support networks for employees.

Given the extent and uniqueness of regional and remote work locations within the Northern Territory, their capacity to accommodate some work life balance initiatives may be limited.

In addition, we have a distinct transient population, for example, Defence Force Personnel, whose partners may work away for extended periods of time. The spouses do not have the support of immediate family members living nearby to share child care responsibilities. This places a strain on the limited numbers of child care facilities currently available and can be a deterrent to this catchment group to seek employment.

In 2002, the Northern Territory Public Sector was the first jurisdiction to improve maternity leave provisions by increasing the entitlement to 14 weeks. Two options are available for employees, ie. 12 month or 6 year. The 12 month option includes 14 weeks paid maternity leave or adoption leave and access to accrued leave entitlements. Further enhancements now allow eligible employees to access paid maternity leave at full pay, half pay or a combination of both. Under the 6 year option, paid sick leave entitlements may be accessed for the 14 week maternity leave period. This option also allows the use of accrued leave entitlements prior to commencing unpaid parental leave up to the child's sixth birthday. In the case of adoption, accrued leave entitlements may be used prior to commencing unpaid parental leave up to the child's sixth birthday.

Other significant work life balance initiatives include provisions in Northern Territory Public Sector Certified Agreements to support flexibility in employment arrangements and implementation of a public sector-wide Work Life Balance Policy.

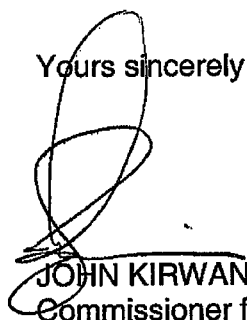
Our Work Life Balance Policy is currently being piloted across three Northern Territory Public Sector Departments at the request of the Northern Territory Government. The pilots include training aimed at line managers to assist them in assessing business cases for flexible work options presented by employees and how to effectively manage work life balance arrangements in the workplace, thereby improving recruitment and retention rates. Workshops have also been designed for employees to assist them in developing business cases when putting forward requests for flexible work options.

This office hosted a Work Life Balance Conference in Darwin in 2004 which included keynote speakers such as the Human Resources Manager with the Australian Federal Police, ACCI/BCA National Work and Family Award Winners 2004. A broad range of contemporary issues were considered at the conference, such as how anti-discrimination legislation applies to work life balance; building the Business Case for work life balance; making it work for Indigenous staff; improving recruitment and retention rates through work life balance and guest speakers from best practice organisations were also invited to participate.

All of the documents mentioned above that relate to the Northern Territory Public Sector may be accessed on the Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment web site at: <http://www.nt.gov.au/ocpe/>

I appreciate the opportunity to make a submission on this important and contemporary issue of work life balance.

Yours sincerely



JOHN KIRWAN
Commissioner for Public Employment

5 May 2005