

**Queensland
Mental Health
Commission**

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Research Director
Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources Committee
Parliament House
George Street
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Dear Sir/Madam

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to be involved in your inquiry exploring fly-in fly-out and other long distance commuting practices in regional Queensland.

As you are aware, the Queensland Mental Health Commission was established in July 2013 to drive system-wide reform of the mental health and drug and alcohol systems in Queensland.

We welcome the opportunity to provide input into the inquiry and have enclosed our initial written submission for your consideration.

Yours sincerely



Dr Lesley van Schoubroeck
Mental Health Commissioner
Queensland Mental Health Commission

Submission to the Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources Committee

Queensland Mental Health Commission

Inquiry into FIFO and other long distance work practices in regional Queensland

About the Commission

The Queensland Mental Health Commission was established to drive on-going reform towards a more integrated, evidence-based, recovery-oriented mental health and substance use system.

Our functions include:

- Developing and monitoring and supporting the implementation of the *Queensland Mental Health Drug and Alcohol Strategic Plan 2014-2019*
- Undertake research, reviews and evaluations and provide advice on issues impacting the mental health and wellbeing of Queenslanders;
- Support and promote awareness and prevention; and
- Community and individual mental health and well-being

Mental health and wellbeing extends beyond traditional concepts of 'mental illness'. The World Health Organisation defines wellbeing as a state when every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.

A number of factors contribute to good mental health and wellbeing including:

- Community connectedness;
- Improved socio-economic conditions such as increased education, training and employment, access to housing; and
- Healthy and functioning families.

Many of these factors impact both workers for fly in fly out, their families and the communities they work in.

There is no one single solution that can improve the mental health and wellbeing of both workers and communities. A collaborative approach that involves industry, all levels of government and workforce and the communities themselves is needed.

At this stage, the Commission does not provide a view on how the many and complex issues should be resolved. This Commission welcomes the inquiry as a way of hearing the views and experiences of all of those involved and impacted in Queensland communities. It represents a significant step in identifying issues and finding solutions to complex problems.

Community well-being

The economic and social benefits associated with mining and resources are significant and the Commission understands is largely welcomed by those living in regional and rural communities.

However, a number of issues have been well described by communities and reported in the media and through other inquiries. These include:

- concerns relating to levels of alcohol consumption and drug use which impact on community safety;
- a lack of community connectedness with FIFO workers not being invested in the local community;
- higher demands on services; and
- economic issues including inflated house prices.

Communities in resource areas grapple with issues of alcohol and drug use, associated with high discretionary incomes and long shift hours. When the predominantly male workforce finally gets time off, risky behaviour can be the norm. It is reported that 12 per cent of the mining industry workforce engage in illicit drug use, and the industry records a higher than average rate of short term risky drinking with 21.9 per cent drinking high levels of alcohol at least monthly¹. This can impact on the safety and management of public space in local communities.

Other community issues relate to the employment impacts for local residents. Where local residents are seen as missing out on employment opportunities, an us-and-them culture can be created that works against community cohesion and connectedness².

¹ <http://www.amsj.com.au/news/alcohol-and-other-drugs-in-the-mining-sector/>

² 2013, *Cancer of the Bush or Salvation for our Cities?* House of Representatives, Standing Committee on Regional Australia

Other issues raised by a report to the Standing Committee Standing Committee on Regional Australia include the erosion of community image and identity, the decline of community safety, declining engagement in community life and concerns about road safety as DIDO workers going home after long shifts add to the road toll.

Availability of support and health services

Social Impact Assessments examining the impact of resource projects on localities should take into consideration the mental health needs of workers and communities, and access to adequate health services. Health services in many rural and remote parts of Queensland have been established based on historical decisions about population and need, with commensurate resourcing. This need can change quickly with the influx of new workforce populations.

Reliance on public services can disadvantage both workers and local communities through higher than usual demand. Consideration should be given to whether local services are adequately resourced to respond and whether companies responsible for the FIFO workforce may need to supplement local resources.

Mental Health and wellbeing of FIFO workers

Australian Medical Association (WA) President Dr Richard Choong says that mining workers suffer significant health issues as a result of the FIFO and mining lifestyle³.

Duty of Care

In Queensland legislation, employers have a responsibility to workers to eliminate risks to health and safety as far as practicable. This needs to include consideration for the health and safety of staff staying in workforce accommodation while off duty⁴. I draw your attention to the Discussion Paper issued by the Parliamentary Inquiry underway in Western Australia⁵ that has identified the exclusion of some accommodation facilities from the responsibility of employers in relation to workplace health and safety. The Commission suggests that the Committee may wish to consider whether or not this is an issue in Queensland. The mental health and wellbeing of staff off-duty can be significantly impacted by the environment in which they are living while on-roster.

³ <http://www.amsj.com.au/news/alcohol-and-other-drugs-in-the-mining-sector/>

⁴ Work Health and Safety Act 2011

⁵ [http://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Parliament/commit.nsf/\(ReportsAndEvidence\)/AD292116C942943E48257D9D0009C9E6?opendocument](http://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Parliament/commit.nsf/(ReportsAndEvidence)/AD292116C942943E48257D9D0009C9E6?opendocument)

Access to services and support

The workforce culture and the approach to health and safety will have an impact on workers feeling supported to seek help when they need it. Companies should consider strategies to develop a strong culture in support of employees cultivating and protecting their mental health including awareness of available supports and coping strategies. This needs to be supported by managers and sub-trades through the supply chain. Industry specific programs such as Mates In Construction have demonstrated significant health and economic returns⁶.

Telephone-based and health services delivered by fly-in fly-out clinicians will be a necessary part of the health services service system however should not be seen an equal alternative to face-to-face service delivery. The Commission recently engaged a contractor to consult with people making use of tele-health services for mental health support. Feedback will be used to explore best practice principles and strategies to enhance the quality of mental health services for people in rural and remote areas.

The Australian Drug Foundation recommends the following strategies being considered in the workplace to ensure workers are supported to live healthier lives:

- Information sessions including monthly “toolbox” meetings with operational staff
- Additional training opportunities (managing finances, mental health, etc.)
- Regular evaluation of the strategies to ensure they are working
- A formal workplace policy for all levels of the organisation
- Clear and real consequences for breaking the rules
- Recreation opportunities (organised sport, etc)
- Counselling services
- Online training regarding risks and strategies

⁶ <http://www.matesinconstruction.org.au/Evidence-and-Evaluation>