

Ms Libby Mettam MLA
Chair
Community Development and Justice Standing Committee
Legislative Assembly, Parliament of Western Australia



6 August 2021

Dear Ms Mettam,

Cancer Council WA submission to the Inquiry into sexual harassment against women in the FIFO mining industry

Cancer Council WA commends the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee for inquiring into the sexual harassment against women in the FIFO mining industry. Everyone has a right to feel safe and protected in their community, and particularly in their place of work. The issue of sexual harassment against women is an important issue in workplaces across Australia, including in the FIFO mining industry.

Cancer Council WA is a non-government, not-for-profit cancer organisation that has no religious or political affiliations. Cancer Council WA is WA's leading charity working across every aspect of every cancer. Cancer Council WA has a specific interest in workplace health and takes a holistic approach to worker health. We believe that workplace health is more than simply the absence of ill-health, injury, or disease. We encourage workplaces to use a range of policy, environment, and education strategies to address physical inactivity, unhealthy eating and drinking, alcohol use, and smoking in the workplace. One way Cancer Council WA supports workplaces in development of comprehensive programs is through the LiveLighter® Workplace Health Hub.¹

We recognise that the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee will inquire and report on the sexual harassment against women in the FIFO mining industry. We believe that a broad and holistic view should be taken when considering workplaces, existing workplace cultures and their role in sexual harassment against women in the FIFO mining industry.

We are aware that media coverage of this inquiry and related issues has drawn attention to the role of alcohol on mining sites and in sexual harassment. While Cancer Council's primary interest in alcohol issues is preventing alcohol-caused cancer, we take a broad view and support effective approaches to preventing and reducing all forms of alcohol-related harm. Cancer Council WA supports the National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines for low-risk drinking.² The guidelines recommend that to reduce their risk of harm from alcohol, healthy adults should drink no more than 10 standard drinks a week and no more than 4 on any one day.

In our submission, we will focus on the second and third terms of reference: ii) do existing workplace characteristics and practices – including but not limited to workplace cultures, rosters, drug and alcohol policies and recruitment practices – adequately protect against sexual harassment and iii) are current legislation, regulation, policies and practices adequate for FIFO workplaces in Western

¹ LiveLighter. Workplace Health. Available from: <https://livelighter.com.au/For-Professionals/Workplace-Health>

² National Health and Medical Research Council. Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol. NHMRC; 2020. Available from: <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/health-advice/alcohol>

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cancerwa.asn.au

**Cancer Council
Western Australia**

ABN: 15 190 821 561

420 Bagot Road
Subiaco WA 6008

T: 08 9212 4333

F: 08 9212 4334



@CancerCouncilWA



@CancerCouncilWA



@CancerCouncilWestAus

Australia. We recognise that the mining industry is diverse and there is substantial variation in mining companies' policies, practices, and operations; therefore, our comments and recommendations are general in nature.

Workplace culture is important

Cancer Council WA recognises the importance of social and community engagement, alternative activities to drinking alcohol, appropriate rostering, and access to support services on FIFO mining sites, which are crucial for the mental health and wellbeing of people on sites, and in supporting a positive work culture. We encourage the Committee to consider the role of the broader workplace environment on sexual harassment in FIFO mining sites. In particular, consideration should be given to the role of lifestyle coordinators, ensuring there are adequate social sporting activities and facilities that allow for meaningful connections, and ensuring that appropriate support services are easily accessible to people on mining sites, including through on-site services. These activities will not only create a healthier work culture, but also assist with improving worker health more broadly.

Previous recommendations remain relevant

The 2015 WA Parliament inquiry into mental health impacts of FIFO work arrangements provided important and relevant recommendations. We invite the Committee to review the *Impact of FIFO work arrangements on the mental health and wellbeing of FIFO workers* report³, which was produced by the Centre for Transformative Work Design for the WA Mental Health Commission. The report aligns with and deepens the findings of the 2015 WA Parliament Inquiry Report *The impact of FIFO workplaces on mental health*. We believe the findings of the 2015 inquiry and the report by the Centre for Transformative Work Design are closely linked to the current inquiry, in particular in relation to the role of alcohol on workplace health and culture and worker wellbeing, impact of social isolation, and lack of opportunities for meaningful connections that do not involve alcohol use.

Recommendations we wish to draw to the Committee's attention include:

- Recommendation 1: Develop a culture that prioritises mental health, including through engaging and employing trained specialists in workplace mental health and wellbeing.
- Recommendation 5: Educate and promote a broad range of support services.
- Recommendation 7: Increase mental health literacy through information and training for all workers, including alcohol and other drug education to encourage alternatives to and the effective management of alcohol use, tranquilisers, and sleeping pills.
- Recommendation 13: Build community and social connections, including through activities that are social in nature and cater to different interests (e.g., sporting activities, music and entertainment events, games and quizzes).

Consideration should be given to the role of alcohol

It's important to consider the role of alcohol in sexual harassment and the broader workplace culture in mining sites. We are aware and concerned that on some sites, opportunities for social connection are limited to the wet mess where alcohol may be a focus.

³ Centre for Transformative Work Design. Impact of FIFO arrangements on the mental health and wellbeing of FIFO workers. Report produced for the WA Mental Health Commission. September 2018.

The Centre for Transformative Work Design report⁴ presented concerning information about the impact of alcohol use on mental health. We won't repeat the comprehensive findings here, however, we wish to reiterate that FIFO workers are significantly more likely to drink alcohol at risk of harm (short and long-term) and to score in the risky or hazardous category of the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test, and that perceived masculinity roles, stigma, loneliness, home-work life conflict and difficulty with psychological transitioning to and from work were associated with riskier drinking patterns.

While the use of alcohol does not cause family and domestic violence, alcohol is an important reinforcing factor that contributes to family and domestic violence in the WA community more broadly.⁵ For example, West Australian research has shown that for every 10,000 additional litres of pure alcohol sold by an off-premises outlet such as a bottleshop, the risk of violence in homes increased by 26%.⁶ The report of the Australian Human Rights Commission on sexual harassment in Australian workplaces also found that while alcohol does not in itself cause violence against women, alcohol is a "factor that can interact with the gendered drivers of violence against women...to increase the probability and severity of such violence."⁷

Cancer Council WA does not wish to suggest that addressing alcohol availability and use on mining sites is a silver bullet that will solve the issue of sexual harassment, however, we believe it's an important contributing factor to consider given the close intersection of sexual harassment, alcohol, masculinity norms, and mental health. Therefore, Cancer Council WA supports and encourages workplaces to develop comprehensive workplace alcohol policies. Workplaces should have alcohol policies that are tailored to the risks and circumstances of the type of work and workplace. A comprehensive policy would help not only in reducing immediate harms from safety risks, but also long-term risks relating to mental health and chronic disease such as cancer. We strongly encourage workplaces to consult with staff in the development of workplace alcohol policies. Engaging all staff in the development of policies and interventions will help with negotiating and agreeing upon goals, have a more enduring impact, and will help ensure ownership of policies by all staff.

Thank you for considering our submission. Should you have any queries, I invite you to contact Julia Stafford, Alcohol Program Manager at

Yours sincerely,

Ms Melissa Ledger
Director Cancer Prevention and Research

⁴ Centre for Transformative Work Design. Impact of FIFO arrangements on the mental health and wellbeing of FIFO workers. Report produced for the WA Mental Health Commission. September 2018.

⁵ WA Department of Communities. Path to Safety: Western Australia's strategy to reduce family and domestic violence 2020-2030. Government of Western Australia; July 2020. Available from: <https://www.wa.gov.au/government/publications/family-and-domestic-violence-reduction-strategy>

⁶ Liang W, Chikritzhs T. Revealing the link between licensed outlets and violence: Counting venues versus measuring alcohol availability. Drug and Alcohol Review. 2011; 30(5): 524-535.

⁷ Australian Human Rights Commission. Respect@Work: National inquiry into sexual harassment in Australian workplaces. 2020.