



Australian Youth
Affairs Coalition

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Submission in response to
House Standing Committee on Regional Australia:
Inquiry into the use of 'fly-in, fly-out' (FIFO) workforce
practices in regional Australia

March 2012

Australian Youth Affairs Coalition

The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) is Australia's non-government youth affairs peak body, which seeks to represent young people aged 12-25 and the sector that supports them.

AYAC boasts a growing membership of State and Territory Youth Peak Bodies, National Youth Organisations, researchers, policy makers and young people themselves, who are all passionate about creating an Australian community that supports and promotes the positive development of young people.

AYAC aims to:

- Provide a body broadly representative of the issues and interests of young people and the youth affairs field in Australia
- Advocate for a united Australia which respects and values Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage, promotes human rights, and provides justice for all
- Represent the rights and interests of young people in Australia, at both a national and an international level
- Promote the elimination of poverty and to promote the well being of young Australians, with a particular focus on those who are disadvantaged.
- Recognise the diversity of Australian society, to promote the cultural, social, economic, political, environmental and spiritual interests and participation of young people in all aspects of society
- Advocate for, assist with and support the development of policy positions on issues affecting young people and the youth affairs field, and to provide policy advice, perspectives and advocacy to Governments and the broader community
- Facilitate co-ordination and co-operation within the youth affairs field

AYAC and its members are dedicated to working for and with young people and seek to ensure they have access to mechanisms, which allow them to make decisions about issues that affect them in the Australian community.

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Recommendations

In addressing the Terms of Reference as indicated by the House Standing Committee on Regional Australia, AYAC purports to focus on the impact of 'fly-in, fly-out' (FIFO) workforces on young people, with particular emphasis on youth support service delivery in regional, rural and remote Australia, as well as providing significant input to strategies to optimise FIFO workforce practices for young people and youth specific services.

AYAC believes that young people have the right to access adequate and appropriate programs and services regardless of geographic location, race, gender, sexuality, physical ability or disability, social religious or economic circumstances. We believe that current strategies relating to youth support services, including FIFO and DIDO practices, are falling short and failing Australia's young people living in regional, rural and remote Australia, as the current model lacks the capacity to address the level of need.

We urge the Federal Government to use this inquiry as a catalyst for action that enables and supports the wellbeing of young people, via access to services in a fair and equitable manner. We endorse the following recommendations to assist with achieving this:

1. That Government recognise there are significant gaps faced by young people in rural and remote Australia in regards to appropriate and relevant support services
2. That Government look to innovative examples of remote service delivery, particularly within the nongovernment sector that are sustainable, long term, and that use best practice principles in working with young people
3. When developing service delivery programs that affect young people, Government must ensure young people are meaningfully consulted
4. That the Government ensure that in situations where FIFO services are proven to be appropriate and relevant to meet the needs of young people, these services work in close partnership with local community-based programs
5. That the Government should prioritise accessible, appropriate and relevant training to build a rural and remote workforce capable of meeting the needs of young people and that enables local capacity building
6. As youth workers and youth programs have a significant impact on engaging young people in education, training and work, Government should look to diverting resources to support and sustain local initiatives with qualified workers

AYAC looks forward to the findings of this committee and to working with governments to ensure that the particular barriers that rural and remote young people face are acknowledged and addressed.

Introduction

Young people living in rural and remote Australia face particular barriers and challenges, but very few resources go to addressing these issues for young people in smaller communities.

It is important to understand that FIFO arrangements are not restricted to the mining and resource industry, and are utilised across industries such as health, social service, and education delivery for young people. In some communities, FIFO workforce practices have been a crucial aspect of the provision of relevant services to young people, but the effectiveness of FIFO employees is seriously diminished by the lack of practices that research shows to be essential when working with young people¹. At the core of best practice principles in working with young people is the capacity to focus on the person as the primary client², and the ability to build a professional relationship with the young person, based on trust and values, that is long term and sustainable³. FIFO and DIDO workforces characterise service delivery to young people in these regions and are often at the expense of providing training and community capacity building.

In Australia young people constitute one-fifth of the population. Approximately 26% of young people aged between 14 and 25 years reside in inner and outer regional, with over 2% resident in remote and very remote locations⁴.

It should also be noted that Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) population is overwhelmingly young. In 2008, almost half (49%) of the Indigenous population was aged under 20 years and a further 16% were aged between 20 and 30 years⁵. This trend is predicted to continue for some time⁶. Young ATSI people are 11 times more likely to live in rural and remote areas than other young people⁷.

Many young people in Australia are vulnerable, more so in rural and remote Australia. Young people who face particular disadvantage include young people with disability, young ATSI people, CALD young people, those disengaged from education and more. The 1,120,000 young Australians living in rural and remote Australia are currently facing compounded circumstances of disadvantage and poverty: discrimination, homelessness, overcrowding, cultural dislocation, violence, as well as huge gaps in services, especially relating to education, employment, mental health, disability, suicide, childcare, and more.

Young ATSI face an even greater 'gap' regarding health, education and wellbeing than the non-Aboriginal population, exacerbated by access issues and the 'tyranny of distance'. Most recently the report into youth suicides in the Northern Territory has highlighted the unacceptable rate of youth suicide and in particular the growing divide of completed

1 Such as Cooper & White, 2009; Bruce, Boyd, Campbell, Harrinton, Major, & Williams, 2009; Sercombe, 1997; 2 Sercombe, H. (1997). The youth work contract; Professionalism and ethics. In R. White (Ed.), Concepts and Methods of Youth Work (Vol. 16, pp. 75-84). Hobart: Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies.

3 Bruce, J., Boyd, K., Campbell, J., Harrinton, J., Major, D., & Williams, A. (2009). Youth work that is of value: Towards a model of best practice. *Youth Studies Australia*, 28 (2), 23-31.

4 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2011). *Young Australians: Their health and wellbeing 2011*. Canberra: AIHW. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009)

5 Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2009, October 10). 4714.0 - National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, 2008. Retrieved March 15, 2012 from Australian Bureau of Statistics:

[http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4714.0Main%20Features42008?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4714.0&issue=2008&num=&view=Australian Bureau of Statistics](http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4714.0Main%20Features42008?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4714.0&issue=2008&num=&view=Australian+Bureau+of+Statistics). (2006).

Experimental estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. ABS.

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2006). Experimental estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. ABS.

⁷ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, op. cit. p. 7

suicides in aboriginal populations compared to non-aboriginal populations.⁸ It is crucial to note here that suicide rates of people aged 15-24 increases with remoteness, as young people in regional, rural, remote, and ATSI communities are over represented in suicide statistics. Whilst mental health is important to address in service delivery to address suicide, a whole-of-life approach is required in supporting young people, given that mental health presents in only 50% of completed suicides⁹.

Young people have inherent strength and resilience. However young people lack the opportunities, not capacity, to reach their full potential. At least 20% of young people (aged 14-25) in regional, rural and remote Australia experience a mental health or substance use problem. Young people in these areas face significant barriers to obtaining age-appropriate advice and care in relation to these issues, and only small percentages ever receive care from professionals¹⁰. This poses significant questions - given the enormity of the population of young people in these areas - of how best to serve and enhance the wellbeing of young Australians.

On the ground: what's needed

Whilst FIFO/DIDO workforces can be an important part of regional and remote youth service delivery, they do not and cannot employ techniques that are known to be essential when working with young people on issues effecting their health and wellbeing, such as the establishment of trust and relationships through services that are sustainable, and on-going.

These concepts have been established in a plethora of research¹¹, including in a 12-year longitudinal study of Australian rural young people. The longitudinal study has posed implications for the way services for young people are established. Wierenga iterates, "In particular, respondents [young people] have highlighted the importance of stable community resources and long-term nurtured networks. At particular times of change and crisis, we saw all respondents drawing only upon their allies, and the relationships that they already trusted. Findings of this study suggest that in practice we can give young people all the information and opportunities in the world, but without trust relationships based upon individual and group history, they may be unable to make use of these resources at all"¹².

Wierenga also highlights the need for 'human bridges'. There are a number of known barriers relating to help-seeking behaviours in young people, including lack of knowledge about what services are available and appropriate, transportation issues, stigma associated with accessing help, costs involved, attitudes of staff to young people, confidentiality and anonymity (especially with family GP's) and the anxiety of disclosing personal issues.¹³ Youth workers and other community workers that are trained to work with young people have a strong understanding and ability to bridge and negotiate these issues, and link young people in with the correct and necessary service.

⁸ Select Committee on Youth Suicides in the NT. (2012). *Gone Too Soon: A Report into Youth Suicide in the Northern Territory*. Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory. p12.

⁹ *Ibid.* p67

¹⁰ Crockett, J. (2012). 'There's nothing the *@#! wrong with me'. *Youth Studies Australia*, 31 (1), 53-59

¹¹ Such as Cooper & White, 2009; Bruce, Boyd, Campbell, Harrinton, Major, & Williams, 2009; Sercombe, 1997; Stuart, 2009;

¹² Wierenga, A. (2009). *Young People Making a Life*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan

¹³ Select Committee on Youth Suicides in the NT, *op. cit.*, p141

One-off interventions, check-ups and Tele/DIDO/FIFO do have a strong place in servicing remote and rural communities, but this should not be conducted at the expense of face-to-face services built on strong relationships, community partnership and trust, and ongoing sustainable services. These workforces should be supplemented and complimented by workers whose experience and training qualifies them to work with young people, as their primary client; who have built a relationship with a young person based on trust, respect, and culturally appropriate values; who can consider the multiple needs of young people and appropriately inform, refer, advocate and support, acting unambiguously in their interest¹⁴.

The lack of sustainable and on-going youth specific services have been identified, and is even more significant in regional, remote and rural areas.¹⁵

In remote ATSI communities, people are accustomed to being subject to a “revolving door” of services that arrive without their prior knowledge. If young people are not meaningfully consulted about service delivery, it is far less likely that they will engage with these services. It is crucial that organisations involved in future service delivery seek to consult beyond standard approaches.

Case Study: Wilurarra Creative

Wilurarra Creative is a youth arts centre. Wilurarra Creative has established itself within the small community of Warburton, WA, providing services in consultation with community that are culturally appropriate, sustainable, and based upon well established relationships and community trust, as is possible when a service is established and longterm. FIFO/DIDO workforces that partner with the centre in their service delivery are more successful in delivering services that are relevant and appropriate for both young people and the wider community.

The Wilurarra Creative is a youth arts centre, in Warburton WA, which facilitates a diverse range of creative programs and provides space and support for self-directed learning, for Ngaanyatjarra people aged 17-30. The centre houses a number of facilities from a music studio and library to an internet café which provides the space for people to engage in meaningful projects which provide training and pathways to new opportunities.

Through applying practices that are flexible, responsive and culturally appropriate to their community the centre has managed to engage demographics, like young Indigenous adults, who in the past have been difficult to engage. By building these relationships, the centre has been able to address issues around mental and sexual health in young adults in culturally appropriate ways.

A wide range of organisations work with Wilurarra Creative to deliver services, such as Ngaanyatjarra Health Service (NHS), in its delivery of primary health care services. NHS recently stated, “NHS has been privileged in these collaborations to gain access to the considerable expertise that Wilurarra displays in creatively, meaningfully and respectfully engaging both young and old people living on the Lands”

14 Sercombe, H. (2009). Youth work: The professionalisation dilemma. In R. White (Ed.), Concepts and Methods of Youth Work (pp. 117-128). Hobart: Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies.

15 Select Committee on Youth Suicides in the NT. (2012). Gone Too Soon: A Report into Youth Suicide in the Northern Territory. Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory. p5

The provision of these services in Warburton, which is one of the poorest towns in Australia (with one of the highest costs of living), is invaluable to building the capacity of the greatest resource of the community: its people.

Recommendations:

1. That Government recognise there is significant gap faced by young people in rural and remote Australia with regards to appropriate and relevant support
2. That the Minister for Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government, look to innovative examples of remote service delivery, particularly within the non government sector that are sustainable, long term, and that use best practice principles in working with young people
3. When developing service delivery programs that affect young people, the Government must ensure young people are meaningfully consulted
4. That the Government ensure that in situations where FIFO services are proven to be appropriate and relevant to meet the needs of young people, these services work in close partnership with local community-based programs

Alternative approaches: a shift to capacity building

Rather than providing essential services as intended, FIFO workforces can actually be obstructive to building community capacity. Research shows policy direction in this area has not always best served local communities.¹⁶ Policy focusing on efficiency has, “served to undermine populous, vibrant communities,”¹⁷ and there is inconsistency in policy delivery where government is prepared to heavily intervene to support industry development, but not to address the resulting transactional costs on rural communities.¹⁸ Historically, governments have overlooked the capacity of existing resources in remote communities, namely the people, opting instead to impose outside structures that are not designed for the culture within which they are being implemented. Top down approaches, including current FIFO workforce practices, have limited capacity to address the specific needs of communities and can create dependence, which serves to diminish rather than grow individual, and community capacity.

There are inherent risks in focusing on FIFO/DIDO arrangements, instead of alternate models of capacity building from within local communities. Hogan and Young (2012) argue that a key policy focus should be the development and implementation of localism as a strategy designed to develop rural and regional Australia. Hogan et al. (2012) observe that localism is seen as the mechanism to take the regions to a new level by unleashing their potential, addressing four key policy objectives:

- Delivery of concrete economic and social benefits;
- Commitment to innovation and building capacity in local communities;
- Linking regional communities across traditional boundaries; and

¹⁶ Hogan, D., & Young, M. (2012). Scoping a Vision for the Future of Rural and Regional Australia. A discussion paper developed for the Rural Communities Conference 2012.

¹⁷ Smith and Pritchard, as in Hogan, D. & Young, M. op. cit.

¹⁸ Hogan, D., & Young, M. op. cit. p9

- Ability to leverage additional funding across government and the private sector

A recent report, *Gone Too Soon: A Report into Youth Suicide in the Northern Territory*¹⁹, investigated and posed recommendations for the alarming and increasing high rates of youth suicides in the Northern Territory. Great emphasis is placed on recommendations for the development of strong, healthy, and resilient communities, through community and place based solutions and capacity building. FIFO services were highlighted here as being costly and ineffective, noting, "...the current model lacks the capacity to address the level of need of young people at risk."²⁰ The inquiry also noted FIFO practices as a method of service delivery to youth people as an issue that "...currently impedes the development and implementation of community and place based strategies... considerable review needs to occur to how they might improve to align with the needs of communities."²¹

Reportedly, provision of youth services in Aboriginal communities in Central Australia have generally been ad hoc, irregular, and based on the assumption that Aboriginal young people have the same aspirations, needs and interests as mainstream young people. Those services that do exist tend to be subject to the vacillations of community functionality, insecurity of sustainable on-going funding, and difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified youth workers and other staff.

Case Study: Mount Theo Program

The Mount Theo program, however, developed by the Warlpiri Youth Development Aboriginal Corporation (WYDAC) is an outstanding example of remote communities developing innovative, local solutions to the issues facing their community. Developed according to the needs, interests and values of the local community WYDAC have tackled social issues such as substance abuse, communal or domestic violence and more.

By building programs such as the Mt Theo Outstation and the Jaru Pirrjirdi project they have engaged young people from the Yuendumu community and created a space for cultural and personal rehabilitation of underlying issues through culturally appropriate measures that are meaningful and long-term. From this point the programs then provide mentoring and support for young people to receive training and become empowered as leaders in their community and in the programs.

Programs such as the Jaru Night Club provide education relevant to students and are taught at a time when young people are receptive to learning, rather than maintaining culturally inappropriate Western attitudes to education. Subsequent participation in cultural bush trips or constant daily project work such as film making, painting projects, health workshops and more, further develop the capacity of Jaru Pirrjirdi members. Senior Jaru Pirrjirdi members participate in these activities as well as adopting a mentoring role or move on to employment within other community organisations.

Mount Theo is an example of best practice in building sustainable services run by and for the communities they serve to ensure the survival of their culture and their hopes in the next generation of Indigenous leaders.

19 Select Committee on Youth Suicides in the NT. (2012). *Gone Too Soon: A Report into Youth Suicide in the Northern Territory*. Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory.

20 Select Committee on Youth Suicides in the NT, op. cit., p87

21 Select Committee on Youth Suicides in the NT, op. cit., p187

By adopting a strategy favouring localism and therefore capacity building at a local level, there is a strong cry from the sector for relevant, flexible and accessible training that enables this place-based capacity building.

New approaches need to be trialled that support youth workers in regional and rural areas' through mechanisms such as mentoring networks, underpinned by formal qualification delivery. Without relevant, accessible, and flexible training, Australia's most at-risk young people will continue to be served by the least qualified and skilled. Young people may continue to find that none of the services available to them are unambiguously acting in their interests, that they do not have access to services, or have developed the relationships and the trust that are key to introducing young people to other support services, and that the information, referral, advocacy and support they need continue to be unavailable.

The ability to leverage funding across government and the private sector needs to be enhanced, as clearly, sustainable and long term services are best placed to serve the needs of young people, rather than expensive FIFO/DIDO arrangements which are often ineffective and sometimes counter-productive and damaging.

One group of young people living in rural and remote Australia, working with ABC's Heywire program, have provided their own solution in response to the transactional costs FIFO workforces have on their communities:

Proposed New Model: Fly-in, Stay-in Strategy

Fly in, fly out practices are unsustainable for our regional communities as FIFO employees do not bring their families to settle in the area and thus do not support the economic and social growth of the community. This issue presents with the use of mining FIFO workforces, but is the case with other FIFO arrangements across health, education and community services.

Our solution is the 'Fly In – Stay In' Strategy. We propose that government use a percentage of the mining royalties to encourage FIFO workers to relocate their families to regional centres. The strategy will target specific rural and regional towns that could support this growth. The strategy will bring resurgence to rural communities by boosting population, generating more spending locally, and most importantly enhancing the already vibrant social life of our rural communities.

The funds could be distributed by local councils or regional development groups that understand the needs of their local communities with the aim of attracting and retaining families to rural communities. The funds could be spent on basic needs that we already know some rural communities are lacking – better roads, affordable housing, adequate healthcare, and service provision. Likewise the funds could be spent to enhance the community lifestyle – things such as sporting and leisure facilities like pools and parks or entertainment.

Developing cross-sectoral partnerships is crucial to the initiative, including mining companies, local and State governments, and the non-government sector, in close and genuine consultation with young people and local communities.

We call on State governments to implement this strategy, in a similar way to the Royalties for Regions program in place in Western Australia. We are also calling on the Federal Government to nationalise the strategy.

Recommendations:

5. That the Government should prioritise accessible, appropriate and relevant training to build a rural and remote workforce capable of meeting the needs of young people and that enables local capacity building
6. As youth workers and youth programs have a significant impact on engaging young people in education, training and work, Government should look to diverting resources to support and sustain local initiatives with qualified workers

Conclusion

There needs to be a significant shift in focus to invest in services that compliment specialist workers, as used in FIFO arrangements. Youth workers assist young people in all areas of life and act as a conduit between the young person and professionals in their community (for example, if a mental health referral is needed). They also become trusted and valued members of the community in which they work, particularly in rural and remote communities, which include a high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

However, while youth workers can add immense value to the lives of rural and remote young people, there are not nearly enough qualified youth workers in these areas. This is attributed to geographic location, inherent difficulties of the work and economies of scale, among other reasons. Furthermore, there is a significant gap in provision of youth programs in remote communities; in many places the provision of a youth worker (beyond sport and recreation) simply does not exist, or is limited to the role of sport and recreation.

Governments need to invest in capacity building within communities, that provides long term, sustainable and appropriate services to its constituents, rather than models that are 'efficient' – but are often ineffective and unsustainable. These new approaches should be based on innovative place-based practices that have been proven to work effectively, and work especially for and with young people.

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