

OCTOBER 2021

**WMW**  
WESTERN MINE WORKERS'  
**ALLIANCE**



# SUBMISSION

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## SUBMISSION ON PSYCHOSOCIAL HAZARDS IN THE WORKPLACE DRAFT CODE OF PRACTICE



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# WESTERN MINE WORKERS ALLIANCE

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the psychosocial hazards in the workplace draft code of practice ('draft code of practice'). The Western Mineworkers Alliance (WMWA) is providing comment from a view of worker safety in the mining sector.

The WMWA was established in 2013 bringing together Australia's two largest mining unions, the Australian Workers' Union, and the Mining and Energy Union (a division of the CFMMEU). The Alliance and its partner unions play a vital role in campaigning to improve the working lives of the workers employed by some of the world's largest iron ore miners including Rio Tinto and BHP in their Pilbara operations.

WMWA covers workers in roles including Mining Production Workers, Plant Operators, Equipment Maintainers, Supervisory Staff, Drillers, Shot Firers, Trades and Apprentices, Emergency Services Officers, Engineers and Laboratory Technicians.

The WMWA partner unions cover a much broader area within mining in Western Australia including the Fortescue Metals Group, Hancock Prospecting (Roy Hill) and Citic Pacific Mining (Sino Iron Cape Preston) mining operations.

The AWU in Western Australia covers workers associated with iron ore, gold, nickel, lithium and diamonds, and workers engaged in connection with the mining industry, such as mine site village caterers, cleaners, housekeepers and maintenance.

The Mining and Energy Union in Western Australia covers workers in coal mining and coal power generation as well as iron ore loco drivers and crane operators.

Through the WMWA partner Unions, the AWU and MEU have coverage of all of WA's FIFO mining workforce and represents thousands of mining industry workers in WA.

**CRAIG BEVERIDGE**  
Australian Workers Union  
Acting WA Branch Secretary



**GREG BUSSON**  
Mining and Energy Union  
WA District Secretary

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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**RECOMMENDATION 1:** Employers should recognise travel times, to and from the worksite and mess hall, as work hours, with a 12-hour daily limit on work. Safety Briefings and handovers should be classified as hours worked and arranged within the 12-hour span.

**RECOMMENDATION 2:** Mining employers in consultation with their workforce should take all reasonable steps to implement equal-time rostering practices with operational employees spending a maximum of 14 days away from their home and family/home for any swing. This would reflect the demanding nature of the work and isolation and allow for a sustainable lifestyle.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:** Employers should ensure that facilities and amenities (including internet) are able to cater for their maximum capacity of employees wishing to use them at any time, so that all workers can exercise, socialise and communicate with loved ones.

**RECOMMENDATION 4:** Mining industry employers should in consultation with their workforce consider implementation of staggered start and stop times for workers. Separate groups of employees, who work 5am-5pm, 6am-6pm, or 7am-7pm shifts, will allow employees to maximise time off work and unwind with full access to camp amenities and facilities.

**RECOMMENDATION 5:** Workers should be provided with permanent rooms in camp. Hot-bedding should only be used for emergency short term periods.

**RECOMMENDATION 6:** Mining and resource companies who provide worker accommodation and meals should be required to implement minimum food standards, including minimum portions of protein, fresh vegetables, and fruit. The resource industry needs to have a minimum budgeted monetary amount per worker per meal to ensure workers are provided with healthy nutrition. The minimum monetary standard should be \$14 per meal per workers for every meal the worker is in camp.

**RECOMMENDATION 7:** Supervisors and superintendents should undergo training in mental health awareness.

**RECOMMENDATION 8:** Mining companies should employ an onsite independent psychologist or professional counsellors for all large resource sector workplaces.

# THE IMPORTANCE OF MANAGING PSYCHOSOCIAL HAZARDS

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Employers have a duty of care to manage risks associated with exposure to hazards arising from work that could result in harm.<sup>1</sup> This extends beyond risks to physical safety to incorporate a range of psychosocial hazards.

Mining is an inherently dangerous field. WMWA members are dealing with heavy and hazardous machinery, often in very hot climates, and are susceptible to other risks including working from heights and rock and roof falls. While rostering practices vary, many employees work 12-hour shifts for 14 days in a row with only a one-week break in between work periods.

Constant travel and irregular shift work lead to a lack of sleep. Fatigue is a common by-product of both the mental and physical challenges mineworkers face and poses material risks to occupational safety and health in mines. Lack of attention caused by exhaustion in these hazardous environments have led to death or serious injury in the past. Addressing psychosocial hazards will vastly contribute to nourishing a safer and healthy workplace for all miners.

Many of the WMWA's members are part of fly-in fly-out (FIFO) mining workforces in the Pilbara. Many appreciate the financial and career opportunities that are made available through this work. However, FIFO workers experience significant time away from family and friends – with many travelling to work from Australia's east coast. Countless stories have emerged of drug use and family breakdown. In fact, one third of FIFO workers reported high or very high psychological distress, placing more than 20 percent higher than the Australian norm.<sup>2</sup> FIFO workers have been identified as being at higher risk of suicide than other groups of Australians. The COVID-19 pandemic has placed further stress on miners, as quarantine and longer swings mean more time away from family and support networks.

Psychosocial risks, like physical risks, pose material threats to the safety and well-being of employees. Work-related harm resulting from psychosocial hazards includes disruptions to work operations, increased absenteeism, and reduced productivity. Ultimately, it can translate into physical injuries or illness. Workplaces should take equal measures in mitigating mental harm and illness, as they do in avoiding physical injury.

1. [http://www.dmp.wa.gov.au/Documents/Safety/MSH\\_MHW\\_FIFO\\_COP.pdf](http://www.dmp.wa.gov.au/Documents/Safety/MSH_MHW_FIFO_COP.pdf)

2. <https://www.mhc.wa.gov.au/media/2547/impact-of-fifo-work-arrangement-on-the-mental-health-and-wellbeing-of-fifo-workers-full-report.pdf>

# MEASURES TO REDUCE PSYCHOSOCIAL HAZARDS

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In its current draft, the code of practice establishes a risk-based framework encouraging workplaces to identify, assess and manage risks, and monitor the effectiveness of those controls. The following are recommendations on the application of this framework to the mining sector. These recommendations are informed by our members' experiences of working in the sector.

## 1. Reduce excessive work hours

As noted above, the nature of work in the mining sector is very physically demanding. Mineworkers often work in the very hot climate of the Pilbara for long periods of time. They specifically work 12-hour shifts for 14 consecutive days, including both day and night shifts, and receive a one week break between rosters.

Miners often work overtime by default. After a shift is complete, a worker is expected to conduct a handover with an employee in the next shift. Miners are also expected to make trips to and from the worksite, before and after work hours. Moreover, briefings conducted before and after shifts, are not counted in paid work hours. This virtually turns a 12-hour shift into a 12-and-a-half-hour shift. In some cases, employees work as much as an additional hour while only getting paid for 12. With regulations specifying an upward limit of 14 hours of work per day, including travel times; supervisors and management attempt to stretch the amount of time that employees work by imposing expectations on workers to do these types of out-of-work activities. This means that practically, the already long shifts in the sector stretch out to well more than half a day, contributing to burnout.

The Mines Industry Advisory Committee and the Commission for Occupational Safety and Health already note the effects of excessive hours of work, and their effect on mental health, in the code of practice for working hours (published 2006). These effects include impaired physical and mental performance, work-related stress, exposure to hazards because of fatigue, and long-term health effects.

Accordingly, to manage these risks, employers should recognise travel times, to and from the worksite and mess hall, as work hours, with a 12-hour daily limit on work. Briefings and debriefings should also be classified as hours worked. If an employer requires an employee to do additional time, they should be paid penalty rates accordingly.

In addition, mining companies should take responsibility for providing transport arrangements that do not impinge on workers' ability to make full use of their R&R. Increasingly, we are seeing travel arrangements in place where workers can wait 12 or even 24 hours after their shift is finished before they can travel home. This means seven days off quickly shrinks to four or five once lengthy travel time is taken into account; with workers unable to catch up on sleep and family and social activities before they have to start the journey back to work.

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**RECOMMENDATION 1:** EMPLOYERS SHOULD RECOGNISE TRAVEL TIMES, TO AND FROM THE WORKSITE AND MESS HALL, AS WORK HOURS, WITH A 12-HOUR DAILY LIMIT ON WORK. SAFETY BRIEFINGS AND HANDOVERS SHOULD BE CLASSIFIED AS HOURS WORKED AND ARRANGED WITHIN THE 12-HOUR SPAN.

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Remote work presents serious psychosocial risks on resource workers, namely as FIFO employees are isolated from family and essential support networks. COVID-19 has further secluded workers due to quarantine requirements, which has additionally constrained time off with family. Some employers, like BHP, moved their FIFO workers to a 2-weeks-on 1 week-off roster to accommodate for remote work during the pandemic, and provided free accommodation for partners near worksites. With significant uncertainty carrying forward about the opening of the Western Australian border, these measures are likely to remain necessary for some time. But even outside of the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic, equal rostering practices ensure adequate breaks to allow workers to both physically and mentally recover.

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**RECOMMENDATION 2:** MINING EMPLOYERS IN CONSULTATION WITH THEIR WORKFORCE SHOULD TAKE ALL REASONABLE STEPS TO IMPLEMENT EQUAL-TIME ROSTERING PRACTICES WITH OPERATIONAL EMPLOYEES SPENDING A MAXIMUM OF 14 DAYS AWAY FROM THEIR HOME AND FAMILY/HOME FOR ANY SWING. THIS WOULD REFLECT THE DEMANDING NATURE OF THE WORK AND ISOLATION AND ALLOW FOR A SUSTAINABLE LIFESTYLE.

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## **2. Better camp amenities, with improved access**

Many mine sites have large numbers of employees working one shift. Shifts that end at 6pm see hundreds of workers arriving at the camp's mess hall at about 6:30pm, attempting to access amenities and facilities such as gyms, recreations and other facilities, as well as internet to connect with family and access TV networks. Many of these facilities do not accommodate for the considerable volume of workers trying to access them at once – even including accommodating them all in the mess hall.

Camp facilities must include facilities that can be accessed by all workers at peak times, including working internet. Efforts should also be made to make gym and recreational facilities accessible to all workers, including offering instruction on using equipment and offering personal training and fitness programs.

Shift start times should be staggered during peak operations – for example, running simultaneous shifts commencing at 5am, 6am, and 7am, and finishing at 5pm, 6pm and 7pm respectively – to allow employees to maximise time off work and unwind with full access to camp amenities and facilities.

And importantly, workers should have permanent rooms to return to each swing, rather than hot-bedding being norm. Permanent rooms allow workers to create a more home-like environment, being able to leave photos and personal belongings in.

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**RECOMMENDATION 3:** EMPLOYERS SHOULD ENSURE THAT FACILITIES AND AMENITIES (INCLUDING INTERNET) ARE ABLE TO CATER FOR THEIR MAXIMUM CAPACITY OF EMPLOYEES WISHING TO USE THEM AT ANY TIME, SO THAT ALL WORKERS CAN EXERCISE, SOCIALISE AND COMMUNICATE WITH LOVED ONES.

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**RECOMMENDATION 4:** MINING INDUSTRY EMPLOYERS SHOULD IN CONSULTATION WITH THEIR WORKFORCE CONSIDER IMPLEMENTATION OF STAGGERED START AND STOP TIMES FOR WORKERS. SEPARATE GROUPS OF EMPLOYEES, WHO WORK 5AM-5PM, 6AM-6PM, OR 7AM-7PM SHIFTS, WILL ALLOW EMPLOYEES TO MAXIMISE TIME OFF WORK AND UNWIND WITH FULL ACCESS TO CAMP AMENITIES AND FACILITIES.

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**RECOMMENDATION 5:** WORKERS SHOULD BE PROVIDED WITH PERMANENT ROOMS IN CAMP. HOT-BEDDING SHOULD ONLY BE USED FOR EMERGENCY SHORT TERM PERIODS.

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For FIFO workers, life revolves around meals. Mining companies endeavour to outsource free meals provided to employees to the lowest bidder, in order to save on costs. The lack of nutritious food for weeks on end leads to poor physical health outcomes for workers. Some workers actively avoid meals provided by employers, and instead go to the nearest pub or fast-food joint. Poor physical health is often associated with poor mental health outcomes. With a surge in iron ore prices over the last decade, companies have no excuse to forgo the physical wellbeing of workers.

Mining companies should implement minimum food standards, including minimum portions of protein and veggies, and providing higher budgets per meal for workers. The minimum standards should be around \$14 per meal.

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**RECOMMENDATION 6:** MINING AND RESOURCE COMPANIES WHO PROVIDE WORKER ACCOMMODATION AND MEALS SHOULD BE REQUIRED TO IMPLEMENT MINIMUM FOOD STANDARDS, INCLUDING MINIMUM PORTIONS OF PROTEIN, FRESH VEGETABLES, AND FRUIT. THE RESOURCE INDUSTRY NEEDS TO HAVE A MINIMUM BUDGETED MONETARY AMOUNT PER WORKER PER MEAL TO ENSURE WORKERS ARE PROVIDED WITH HEALTHY NUTRITION. THE MINIMUM MONETARY STANDARD SHOULD BE \$14 PER MEAL PER WORKERS FOR EVERY MEAL THE WORKER IS IN CAMP.

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### **3. Providing adequate mental health support**

There is substantial evidence that FIFO workers face heightened mental health risks due to fatigue and isolation.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is essential that accessible and confidential mental health

3. <https://www.mhc.wa.gov.au/media/2547/impact-of-fifo-work-arrangement-on-the-mental-health-and-wellbeing-of-fifo-workers-full-report.pdf>



support is available for workers.

Companies usually engage external employee assistance providers, or EAPs, to provide mental health services for employees. Unfortunately, many employees are not comfortable engaging these services, which are remote, impersonal and perceived as being aligned with the company. Confidentiality is a key obligation for all counsellors, with limited legal exceptions for a patient who poses a risk of harm to themselves or others.

We have received feedback from members that they feel EAP providers do not always understand circumstances at remote mine sites, do not always provide prompt and appropriate support and may not always respect personal confidentiality. We also understand from our members that they fear being stigmatised if they are identified by management as requiring mental health support.

We are aware that EAPs sometimes provide feedback to companies on trends in psychological hazards in a particular workforce – for example, workers feeling bullied to meet production targets. While it's appropriate for EAPs to provide de-identified data about the prevalence of particular issues in a workplace, there must be a corresponding onus on employers to take action to address these issues.

Large worksites should have a counsellor or psychologist on site in order to support workers as and when they need it. These mental health support specialists should be located on site away from supervisors so that workers can access them with true confidentiality and can be confident they will receive continuity of support.

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**RECOMMENDATION 7: SUPERVISORS AND SUPERINTENDENTS SHOULD UNDERGO TRAINING IN MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS.**

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**RECOMMENDATION 8: MINING COMPANIES SHOULD EMPLOY AN ONSITE INDEPENDENT PSYCHOLOGIST OR PROFESSIONAL COUNSELLORS FOR ALL LARGE RESOURCE SECTOR WORKPLACES.**

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