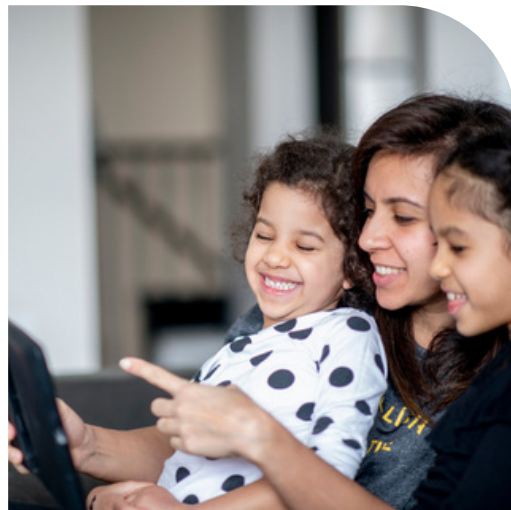


THE IMPACT OF FLY-IN FLY- ON FAMILY OUT WORK MEMBERS

**BUILDING SUSTAINABLE SUPPORT SYSTEMS
FOR WELL-BEING AND QUALITY
RELATIONSHIPS**



SAMANTHA BAHAN FEHR, FOUNDER & PRESIDENT

Samantha has studied at the University of Victoria and York University and holds a BSc in psychology, BA in humanities, and a certificate in HR Management. She has academic publications for qualitative research and experience as a primary researcher using survey methodology.

Samantha has a decade of experience delivering support services and leadership in the areas of mental health and disability. She is also the spouse and parent of a family in a fly-in-fly-out work arrangement. Her family's lived experience with remote camp work inspired Long-Distance Family to remove barriers to support for other families.

Abstract

Growing awareness of the stress associated with fly-in fly-out (FIFO) jobs has led to support services to assist Canadian workers, but the focus and delivery methods are limited, and largely overlook the needs of family members back home. Time away from loved ones is the most stressful aspect of remote camp work, yet many families also struggle with transitions home between work rotations. Marital discord is a significant stressor, but seeking support for mental health in camp worksites remains stigmatized. Spouses left behind frequently experience depression and feelings of isolation, with limited opportunities to make meaningful connections with other remote worker families. The impact of remote work on children is not studied in Canada, and requires attention to ensure adequate support is available for FIFO children. Long-Distance Family (LDF) Services offers a first of its kind platform with support services designed to help family members navigate this lifestyle with increased strength and adaptability. LDF offers an opportunity for companies of remote projects to boost employee retention and for unions to make specialized services for workers' families standard in collective agreements for FIFO work in Canada.

The Impact of Fly-In Fly-Out Work on Families

Remote camp work has become a common employment arrangement in various industries, offering opportunities for career growth and financial stability. This lifestyle comes with unique challenges for worker's personal and relational well-being, though minimal research has been conducted on its effects for family members back home. While growing awareness of the stress associated with fly-in fly-out (FIFO) jobs has led to supports to assist Canadian workers such as Employee Family Assistance Programs, health and wellness services, and mental health resources, the focus is limited and almost exclusively on the remote worker. The need for support of family members left behind is equally significant. This white paper explores the effects of remote camp work on family members including workers, spouses, and children, delving into its impact on personal well-being and the quality of relationships within the family unit. It emphasizes that support services for family members should be standard within FIFO industries and are necessary for sustainability of remote camp work arrangements.

FIFO Workers

Remote camp work involves an extended period of separation between workers and their families, with frequent periods of transition during weeks off between rotations. Researchers at the University of Alberta conducted the Mobile Work and Mental Health (MWMH) study assessing well-being of 72 FIFO workers in the oil sands and found that "distance and time away from home/family is the most stressful of FIFO conditions" with 87% of participants reporting this as a stressor (Dorow et al., 2021, p. 5). A separate qualitative study of 22 FIFO male workers in the mining sector found that men present poor health from FIFO requirements including being physically away from family members, with special note that marital separation represents a catalyst for suicidal risk (Labra et al., 2022). Workers feel a weight of responsibility to provide financially for their family and endure the hardship that accompanies FIFO lifestyles to do so. They frequently miss out on meaningful milestones and celebrations with their loved ones and may experience a sense of helplessness when a family member is ill or in crisis back home without support.

The effect that distance has on family relationships is not easily remedied on days off, with 39% of participants in the MWMH study reporting that transitions back home were somewhat more difficult than transitions to work, largely due to fatigue and role transition. Workers typically travel many hours on the journey home right off a shift and may need to acquaint themselves with new family routines and dynamics upon arrival. According to the BC Work Camp Survival Guide (n.d., para. 6), workers reported

that having only one week off between work rotations leads to “pressure to ‘pack in’ quality time, childcare and romance” and can leave some workers feeling inadequate in their roles back home. In addition to family time, workers also struggle to maintain quality friendships while they’re away at work and can face difficulties balancing time with family and friends during their short period home. For some workers, negative impacts on well-being for themselves or their loved ones are deciding factors to leave or stay in remote camp jobs long-term.

Mental health and overwhelm are increasingly impacting Canadians’ abilities to work. According to a recent survey reported by Future Skills Centre, about 500,000 Canadians across industries are unable to work due to mental health on any given week (Wilson, 2023). The unique aspects of FIFO work make mental health challenges prominent, though more than 40% of participants in the MWMH study disagreed that there is good communication about psychological safety in remote camp projects (Dorow et al., 2021). The FIFO workforce generally is comprised of individuals between ages 15-44, a demographic considered to be vulnerable to mental distress and suicide (Labra et al., 2022). Yet mental health cultures on remote worksites remain stigmatized, with workers’ reporting fear of judgment or repercussions for their employment as ongoing barriers to seeking help.

A key recommendation from Dorow et al. (2021) who conducted the MWMH study is to establish trusted third-party mental health services and adopt alternative forms of mental health resource delivery that consider FIFO realities and challenges. If remote camp employment offered an external service provider for family members back home to lessen the strain on relationships, alongside peer support and counselling resources for workers, mental well-being may be supported for FIFO employees without fear of consequence for their professional relationships.

An external service provider supporting workers and their families can support mental well-being of FIFO employees without fear of consequence for their professional relationships.

FIFO Spouses

Spouses of FIFO workers must navigate an unequal share of family, financial, and household responsibilities, often in addition to their own professional careers, while separated from their partner; depression and feelings of isolation are common as a result (“Australasian Mine Safety,” 2017; Boyd, 2023; Taylor & Simmonds, 2009). The mental load that spouses back home carry can lead to a chronic state of

overwhelm, with families just trying to survive day-to-day life. These effects are compounded if the spouse does not have a support network of extended family members or friends close by to lean on. Unresolved family or marital conflicts can contribute to chronic stress, mental health concerns, and strained relationships.

Communication challenges and reduced opportunities for shared experiences can affect emotional connection and the ability to maintain a strong sense of familial togetherness. Families struggling with

Research supports perceptions that FIFO work schedules place strain on the balance between work and family, hindering marital satisfaction and stability.

ongoing communication challenges may benefit from counselling support to develop conflict resolution skills and effective communication patterns (Hodge, 2023). Regular contact can be difficult, with challenges ranging from time changes, scheduling conflicts, and limited internet and cellular connectivity. Poor communication between partners can have adverse effects on mental health, contributing to feelings of resentment that are further exacerbated by physical distance apart. Research findings support the

perception that FIFO work schedules and inflexible hours place strain on the balance between work and family, hindering marital satisfaction and stability (Taylor & Simmonds, 2009). These challenges are further captured in a finding from a 2017 analysis of U.S. census data which determined that jobs associated with long stints of work leading to time apart from partners are those with the highest divorce rates (Bowden, 2020).

Like workers, transitions to and from home are identified as the most emotionally challenging periods for families, and can strain intimacy between couples (Boyd, 2023; Taylor & Simmonds, 2009). While reunions with the working partner can be joyful, they may also be spoiled by unmet expectations, causing stress and anxiety to be heightened if the working partner does not pick up the slack of home or parenting responsibilities during the time off between work rotations (“Australasian Mine Safety,” 2017; Taylor & Simmonds, 2009). While the FIFO worker is fatigued from coming off a strenuous stint of work, so too is the partner back home fatigued from solo parenting and managing the demands of family and career without their partner’s help. Couples that struggle to express their needs effectively can find these periods particularly difficult.

Spouses of FIFO workers may also struggle to have their emotional needs met by social connections, if they do not have friends or family members in similar arrangements who can empathize with the unique challenges that come with this lifestyle. Consequently, they may experience feelings of loneliness in their own networks and minimize their need for support services, such as house cleaners or snow removal, if it appears that other families can handle the household load in addition to family and work responsibilities. Peer support, a form of social-emotional support offered by an individual with a shared lived experience, has not received the funding and attention it deserves, with growing evidence suggesting its value for improving mental well-being and efficacy of self-help groups (“Mental Health Commission,” 2023; Pakk & Baek, 2021). It is an effective means to improve mental health outcomes for various demographics. Apart from informal Facebook groups, making meaningful connections with spouses and parents of remote worker families can be difficult. An industry shift in FIFO worker’s onboarding procedures that includes connecting families to peer support services can offer powerful possibilities for improving mental well-being and making remote camp lifestyles more sustainable.

Children of a FIFO Parent

While further research is required to fully understand the effects of FIFO work on children, an Australian study identified potential impacts to include negative emotions, increased behaviour problems and occurrences of bullying at school, as well as pressure to perform academically (Meredith et al., 2014). Rituals and routines for children, particularly at home, are essential for providing a predictive and safe environment and the development of healthy habits and boundaries (“Melbourne Child Psychology,” n.d.). Parents coming and going on work rotations with remote projects has the potential to disrupt this, and therefore supporting partners and their efforts to maintain household routines can serve as a protector of children’s well-being. This is especially true when a child who is used to having both parents at home is adjusting to a new FIFO arrangement. For some young children, this period may include the onset of separation anxiety or sleep disruptions.

Building resiliency in children requires that their families have access to resources and supportive connections to make remote work arrangements manageable.

Navigating behavioural changes that come with this transition can add to parenting overwhelm for FIFO spouses at home, shifting between solo parenting and co-parenting, and offering consistent

emotional support, structure, and discipline to children throughout these periods (Boyd, R., 2023). Building resiliency in children requires that their families have the necessary resources and connections to make remote work arrangements manageable. There is no existing research that investigates the impact of FIFO work on children’s well-being in Canada. Understanding and addressing its effects within Canadian families is necessary to fill the gap in support for this population.

Support Services for Families of FIFO Workers

The impact on family members back home is multifaceted, encompassing emotional, psychological, and relational aspects. The Future Skills Centre report identified the current design of employers’ benefits as insufficient, recommending greater flexibility in mental health benefits for diverse types of care (Wilson, 2023). The MWMH study conducted by researchers at the University of Alberta recommended that union and community organization leadership prioritize responses to gaps in mental health for FIFO workers, and the pursuit of further research investigating FIFO effects on families (Dorow et al., 2021). Many unions currently offer Health and Welfare Benefits which typically include counselling services to workers and family members on matters such as: life coaching; work-life balance; stress management; legal and financial assistance; parenting; eldercare; and substance use, among others (Christian Labour Association of Canada, 2023; Construction Labour Relations Alberta, 2022; IUOE Local 115, 2023; LiUNA! Local 1611, 2019; Power Workers’ Union, 2021). Peer support for mental health of workers is also

Long-Distance Family Services is tailored to the unique needs of families of remote workers, designed to help families across the country make FIFO lifestyles more sustainable.

advocated for by the Canadian Labour Congress (2021). These services are incredibly valuable and should continue to be made accessible. However, there is an opportunity for Canadian unions and companies of remote camp projects to expand existing programs to specialize in the needs of FIFO workers’ families. The most intense period requiring support is in the first year of remote work arrangements. Families that successfully cope and adapt to FIFO lifestyles are those who will be able to sustain remote camp employment longer-term (Sibbel, 2001).

Addressing the Need: Long-Distance Family Services

Long-Distance Family (LDF) Services is the first online platform to offer tailored services to the unique needs of families of remote camp workers, with specific focuses on the impacts to well-being (health,

happiness, and comfort) and quality of relationships. LDF Services is founded on lived experience of remote camp lifestyles and has been developed to fill this gap in Canadian industries relying on FIFO workers. LDF Services is designed to help families across the country connect to resources that will make FIFO lifestyles more sustainable. For companies of remote projects, LDF can boost employee retention and offer data collection via surveys to help leadership gain insight into how their remote projects are impacting the families of their workforce. Partnerships with unions can help ensure more comprehensive care for the families of every member for which they are bargaining. Family services will also benefit workers, offering peace of mind knowing that their loved ones have access to support to reduce stress related to their absence.

The impact of remote camp work on family members is significant and requires attention by unions and employers of FIFO workers. Prioritizing the well-being of family members can contribute to a healthier and more fulfilling work-life balance, enhancing job satisfaction and success in career endeavors. By fostering emotional resilience, strength, and adaptability in family members, and offering coping mechanisms and tools for using empathy and mutual support, workers and their loved ones will be better suited to navigate the challenges of remote camp work. The experiences of families of remote workers have long been overlooked, and LDF Services is designed to fill the gap in support for this population. The demands of FIFO lifestyles are felt by every family to varying degrees, and therefore comprehensive programs designed specifically to meet these needs should be standard for all collective agreements and benefits programs pertaining to remote camp work in Canada.

References

- Australasian Mine Safety Journal. (2017, September 12). *FIFO and the effects on family life*. [FIFO and the effects on family life - Australasian Mine Safety Journal \(amsj.com.au\)](https://amsj.com.au)
- BC Work Camp Survival Guide. (n.d.). *Employee self care*. [Employer Employee Self Care - BC Work Camp Survival Guide](#)
- Bowden, O. (2020, February 12). *These jobs are linked to high divorce rates – here’s how to keep work out of love*. Global News. [These jobs are linked to high divorce rates — here’s how to keep work out of love - National | Globalnews.ca](#)
- Boyd, R. (2021, November 11). *The impact of fly-in-fly-out on couples relationships*. Energetics Institute. [Impact of Fly-In-Fly-Out on Couples Relationships | Energetics Institute](#)
- Canadian Labour Congress. (n.d.). *Promote peer support*. [Promote peer support | Canadian Labour Congress](#)
- Christian Labour Association of Canada. (n.d.). *Live well. Be well*. [Wellness \(clac.ca\)](#)
- Construction Labour Relations Alberta. (n.d.). *Construction employee family assistance program (CEFAP)*. [CEFAP – Construction Labour Relations \(clra.org\)](#)
- Dorow, S., O’Leary, V., Hilario, C., Cherry, N., Daigle, A., Kelly, G., Lindquist, K., Mosquera Garcia, M., & Shmatko, I. (2021, October). *Mobile work and mental health: A preliminary study of fly-in fly-out workers in the Alberta oil sands*. University of Alberta. [Microsoft Word - Mobile Work and Mental Health Report - Dorow et al. 2021.docx \(ualberta.ca\)](#)
- Hodge, K. (2023, June 6). *How does family life affect mental health? Building blocks or barriers*. Mental Health Center. [How Does Family Life Affect Mental Health? Building Blocks or Barriers - Mental Health Center](#)
- IUOE Local 115. (n.d.). *Member assistance*. [Member Assistance - IUOE Local 115 \(iuoe115.ca\)](#)
- Labra, O., Brouillette, C., Gringas-Lacroix, G., Cousineau, T., & Quiron, J. (2022). The overall health of men who do fly-in-fly-out work in the mining sector. *American Journal of Men’s Health*, 16(5). doi: [10.1177/15579883221126310](https://doi.org/10.1177/15579883221126310)
- LiUNA! Local 1611. (n.d.) *Homewood health*. [Member & Family Assistance Program - Liuna Local 1611 \(cswu1611.org\)](#)

- Melbourne Child Psychology & School Psychology Services. (n.d.). *The importance of routine in childhood*.
[The Importance of Routine in Childhood \(melbournechildpsychology.com.au\)](https://melbournechildpsychology.com.au)
- Mental Health Commission of Canada. (n.d.). *Peer support*. [Peer Support - Mental Health Commission of Canada](https://www.mhcc.ca/peer-support)
- Meredith, V., Rush, P., & Robinson, E. (2014). Fly-in fly-out workforce practices in Australia: The effects on children and family relationships. *Child Family Community Australia*. Retrieved August 9, 2023, from [Fly-in fly-out workforce practices in Australia: The effects on children and family relationships \(aifs.gov.au\)](https://aifs.gov.au)
- Pahk, Y., & Baek, J.S. (2021). A relationship approach to the design for peer support. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(5): 2596. doi: [10.3390/ijerph18052596](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18052596)
- Power Workers' Union. (n.d.) *Health and welfare benefits*. [Health and Welfare Benefits - Power Workers' Union \(pwu.ca\)](https://www.pwu.ca/health-welfare-benefits)
- Sibbel, A. M. (2001). *The psychosocial well-being of children from fly-in/fly-out mining families*.
http://ro.edu.au/theses_hons/899
- Taylor, J.C., & Simmonds, J.G. (2009). Family stress and coping in the fly-in fly-out workforce. *The Australian Community Psychologist*, 21(2), 23-36. Retrieved August 10, 2023, from [\(PDF\) Family Stress and Coping in the Fly-in Fly-out Workforce \(researchgate.net\)](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312511117)
- Wilson, J. (2023, June 23). *1 in 3 Canadian workers taking time off work for mental health issues*. HR Reporter. [1 in 3 Canadian workers taking time off work for mental health issues | Canadian HR Reporter](https://www.hrreporter.com/1-in-3-canadian-workers-taking-time-off-work-for-mental-health-issues)