

WITNESS STATEMENT OF ANNETTE WHEATLAND

I, Annette Wheatland, of Traralgon, Victoria, state as follows:

Personal Background

1. I have lived in the Latrobe Valley for most of my life. I was born in the Latrobe Valley and have lived in Traralgon for the last 25 years.
2. I am currently employed as the Gippsland Regional Manager of Southern Cross Care Victoria. I have worked in that position at Southern Cross Care since 2001.

Southern Cross Care

3. Southern Cross Care Victoria is a member of many peak aged care bodies, and Southern Cross Care Australia (Inc). Southern Cross Care is a not for profit organisation that was founded by the Knights of the Southern Cross and provides residential care and community services to older people in the community.
4. Southern Cross Care in Gippsland has two main sources of funding. The Commonwealth Government provides funding for Home Care Packages and the home care service derives income from government and private agencies and individuals .
5. The Southern Cross Care Gippsland Regional Office is located at 241 Princes Drive, Morwell. The Office services around 350 clients in the Gippsland Region, of which approximately 154 are residents in the Latrobe Valley and 41 are residents of Morwell.
6. Our clients are people aged mostly over 65 years old who require extra assistance to live independently in their home. Most client s have a case manager who works with the client to develop an individual care plan. Services that we provide include personal care, respite care, home care, shopping assistance, assistance to get to appointments, socialisation and gardening.
7. There are approximately 45 health professionals and 13 office based staff including 5 case managers and 2 care co-ordinators in the Morwell office. The health professionals include registered nurses, psychiatric nurses and

social workers. In addition there are around 38 staff who are out in the community around Gippsland, of which 5 of these are primarily based in Morwell.

8. The staff members who are out in the community are generally employed on a permanent part time basis. They do not have fixed hours of work because the work load can vary from week to week depending on the clients' needs.

My experience with the Hazelwood Mine Fire

Living in Traralgon

9. During the fire, the smoke went up and down the valley depending on the wind direction which meant that we could smell the smoke in Traralgon.
10. My house in Traralgon was covered in a fine dust. I wore a mask to clean it.
11. The smoke did not cause me any breathing difficulties when I was at home in Traralgon. It was bad, but certainly nowhere near as bad as it was in Morwell.

Working in Morwell

12. When I was at the office in Morwell, I had sore red eyes, sore throat, constant headache and tiredness and felt tight across my chest. I am not an asthmatic and do not usually have these symptoms. The smoke was very bad and made it uncomfortable for me to work in Morwell.
13. Southern Cross Care had both clients and staff who lived near the Hazelwood mine. Southern Cross Care provided all staff and clients with face masks.
14. The Southern Cross Care office in Morwell was affected by smoke the whole time. I came into the office early most mornings to wipe down the dust. In particular, the bathrooms would get very dusty and required cleaning every day because they have old style louver windows that were unable to be completely closed.

Health

15. I kept listening to the authorities to hear what they were saying about the conditions and they kept saying that it was safe. However, when I looked outside I saw the ash and dust, and could smell the smoke. I did not think that we should have to work in the poor conditions.

16. I viewed the EPA website every day to check the air quality.
17. I attended the town meeting on 18 February 2014 at Kernot Hall. The advice given by the EPA, Ambulance, Police, Latrobe City Council, CFA and the Department of Health was that everything was safe, however it did not look like it was safe outside. I didn't believe the advice that it was safe to be in Morwell, and it appeared that neither did the majority of community members there. The meeting became very heated.
18. One of my roles is to look after the health and safety of my staff in the office, and those working out in the community. I received no advice from WorkSafe about what to do. I had to make my own decisions (in consultation with head office) about how to manage staff and clients depending on how the staff were feeling. I tried to ensure that field staff did not spend too much time working for clients who lived in South Morwell. I sent staff who lived in Morwell to see clients in other towns, so that they could have a break out of the smoke, and sent staff from other towns in to provide services in Morwell.
19. On 24 February 2014, I went with members of my staff to the health assessment centre at the Ambulance Victoria Gippsland Regional office at 2 Saskia Way in Morwell to get checked. The nurse checked my carbon monoxide levels and blood pressure. The results were all okay. I did not believe it was a comprehensive assessment because they did not listen to my chest, or take into consideration the other symptoms I was experiencing.

Relocation of the office

20. On Friday 21 February 2014, I checked the EPA website. I remember that it showed the air quality levels in Morwell at over 1800. I decided to send the staff home because the conditions were so poor. We returned to work in the office the following Monday.
21. On 28 February 2014, in consultation with our Head office executive a decision was made to relocate the office. The decision was made at around the same time that the Department of Health issued the relocation notice to vulnerable groups. By that time we had been working in the horrible conditions for over three weeks. Southern Cross Care did not receive any advice to relocate, however it was felt that the staff could not work in the smoky conditions for any longer.
22. Southern Cross Care relocated the office for approximately four weeks from 3 March to 31 March 2014. It was difficult to find an alternative office as

many organisations were also trying to relocate at the same time. We eventually moved into the Conference Room of Monash University Department of Rural Health at the old Moe hospital. The conditions were not ideal and we were very cramped, however it was clean and the air was clear. We had limited IT and communications connectivity which affected our daily business requirements.

23. At this time we had a number of clients who were advised to relocate as they were considered to be part of a vulnerable group. We assisted the clients who chose to relocate to find alternative accommodation. This took up a lot of staff time. We arranged for one client to fly to Queensland to stay with her family. This cost was taken out of the funding for her package. Others went to stay with friends/family out of the area, some entered Aged Care residential facility respite.
24. However, many of our clients did not want to move or had nowhere else to go. For those clients we kept in contact with them on a daily basis to ensure that they were okay, and to offer alternative accommodation. This was an increase in our service levels for the clients who remained in Morwell so we could ensure that they were okay. To the extent that we could, we contacted the clients by telephone to limit the exposure of our staff to the smoke.
25. We advised our staff working in the homes to try and clean up the ash for the clients in rooms being used the best they could and to take all precautions, including using wet mops and cloths, gloves, protective aprons, overshoes, and face mask when they cleaned up the ash.
26. It was a difficult time because for three weeks we were told it was safe to be in Morwell and then suddenly we were told that vulnerable people should relocate. It was hard to understand why only the vulnerable people were being recommended to relocate when we were all being affected by the smoke in Morwell.

Other consequences of the fire

27. Around the middle of March, I went into the Morwell office on a Monday morning to collect the mail. While I was there I noticed a big puddle of water in the kitchen. In the next room there was water everywhere.
28. There had been a major storm over the weekend. According to the plumber the gutters had filled with ash and coal dust, and become blocked and had overflowed, and the office had flooded as a result. The storm caused water

damage to the office including the IT equipment in the communications room. I estimate the damage caused by the flood to be in excess of \$30,000 which I expect will be covered by insurance.

29. Overall, my biggest concern throughout the fire was the lack of what I perceived to be accurate information. I felt that there was not enough information and the information that was provided often contained mixed messages that made decision making very difficult.
30. Our Head Office provided good support throughout the situation, however they were also dealing with a lack of information.
31. We incurred additional relocation costs involved in moving our office.
32. Individual clients have a contingency in their funding package and this was sufficient to cover their relocation costs.
33. We also lost work (therefore income) because some clients relocated out of the area. It is hard to measure the exact loss as our work is very fluid. Some of the part time staff were affected by the relocation of clients during the fire, because they worked less hours which resulted in less income for them. We tried to replace the work where possible.
34. We also had other losses that are hard to measure. For example, the additional roles taken on by staff in regard to the cleaning and relocation process. We also had to call on IT, Executive Management, Procurement, Property Services and OHS support from our head office in Melbourne.
35. My main concern is the health of my staff and clients. In particular I worry about the long term effects. The short term effects were apparent. There were asthmatics in our office who were visibly affected by the smoke. But the longer term effects are unclear. There is a heightened anxiety in the area about possible long term health problems.

Improvements for the future

36. There should have been earlier monitoring and earlier advice about what to do. The relocation advice was concerning and confusing as the initial advice over the first three weeks of the fire was that it was safe to remain in Morwell. The change in that advice after three weeks, to advise vulnerable people to relocate, was unsettling.
37. I felt that the Victorian Government ignored the people of Morwell and that the residents were not being treated well. I noticed a lot of anger in the community that was directed at the authorities.

38. Over the duration of the fire, I felt that the authorities continued to fail to act and respond to our concerns.
39. It was difficult for our organisation to know what to advise our clients. Whilst initially we were told that it was safe to remain in Morwell, we were uncomfortable about that advice as it didn't seem right. We could not act in any substantial way, like relocating clients and staff, because initially the Victorian Government said that everything was fine, and as a Government funded (albeit private) organisation I believe we are bound to heed their advice.

Submission

40. Attached to my statement and entitled "AW-1" is my submission that I provided to the Board of Inquiry on behalf of Southern Cross Care Victoria, Gippsland Office.

ANNETTE WHEATLAND