

WITNESS STATEMENT OF KAREN ANDREW

I, Karen Andrew, of [REDACTED] [REDACTED], Morwell, Victoria, state as follows:

Personal background

1. I currently reside at [REDACTED], Morwell.
2. I live there with my son, Kaleb.
3. I am of both Australian South Sea islander and indigenous descent. My mother's family is one of the oldest indigenous families in the Mackay area. I am an elder for both my mother's and my father's families.
4. I moved to Morwell in September 2012 from Mackay, Queensland.
5. I currently work as a youth suicide prevention counsellor for Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation based at Nindedana Quarenook, the Central Gippsland Aboriginal Health Service in Morwell. Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation delivers a range of health and community development services to the indigenous and wider community population across east Gippsland. I work with youth in the Morwell, Moe, Churchill and Traralgon areas.
6. My contract expires on 30 June 2014 and will not be renewed as funding for the youth suicide prevention program has been cut.
7. I have provided a submission to the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry. Attached to my statement and entitled annexure "KA-1" is my submission to the Inquiry.

The Morwell indigenous community

8. The indigenous population in this area is very different to the indigenous population at home in Queensland. At home, many people complete year 12 and owns their own homes and cars. In Morwell, I have note with some families there are three generations of unemployment. The school retention rate is also very low. The people here don't seem to have any goals to achieve things. I also think that the average life expectancy is well below that of other indigenous communities. Many people have died before they reach 40 since I commenced work here..
9. There is a need for strong community leadership and leadership within indigenous families in the Gippsland area. The indigenous community here is greatly divided and there are generations of disadvantaged people from dispossession.
10. I've been fighting since I was a kid to make changes in my community. I also want to empower the indigenous community here in Morwell to make changes to their lives. I believe this can be done by engaging with the women in the community and

empowering them first, as it is the women who are coming forward wanting to make changes. They want their kids to have a different life to what they had.

11. I am the only indigenous person with social worker qualifications in the area apart from my Social & Emotional Coordinator Mark. As a result, I work with indigenous clients of all ages, not just the youth. If I can't help a particular client then I refer them on to the relevant organisation. For a lot of my clients, I provide them with information about how processes work, such as making appropriate phone calls to services engaging women in training courses like "The Safe Learners Program" assisting women in learning the road rules in a group setting or sometimes I act as an advocate for them, explaining documents in lay terms as a large number of the community here are unable to comprehend the content of forms. The indigenous community need more information provided to them on a face to face basis because they don't know what support options are available to them.
12. I have done a lot of networking with other organisations on behalf of the indigenous community. It does not appear that anyone has done that before. Since my arrival, I have been invited to join a number of organisations as their indigenous representative for Ramahyuck in my role.

My experience with the Hazelwood Mine Fire

13. On 9 February 2014, I first became aware of the bushfires in the area around Morwell during the morning when mum and I went to Kmart in Moe. My mum was visiting from Queensland. On our way to Moe, I saw fires being put out on the side of the road closer to Moe. Not having grown up this area, I couldn't get over how quickly the fire was racing.
14. After a couple of hours, we finished our shopping and started to return home. On the way home we encountered road blocks. There was no signage to say which way to go so I just followed the other cars. I had no idea where I was going and was fearful of being trapped in my car. Eventually we made it home to Morwell.
15. On 10 February I received a phone call from my manager who told me that an alert had been issued for people to stay inside and that I wasn't to come to work that day. I stayed at home that day, as did my son. We both returned to work the next day and continued going to work as normal after that.
16. My mum stayed at home whilst I went to work each day. My mum is in the early stages of dementia. She would often forget that I had told her to stay indoors and to keep the house closed up to keep the ash and smoke from coming into the house. If my son wasn't working, he would be at home with her but on the days we both worked; I would go home and check on her. I wanted to care for my mother here

- until my employment ceased unfortunately I had to fly her back unaccompanied to QLD.
17. One day I went home at lunch time to find that mum had hung the washing out in the smoke and she'd forgotten to shut the doors so the house was full of smoke.
 18. After a while my mum developed rashes all over her body and redness around her mouth and nose. I took her to the GP clinic on Tuesday 25 February 2014. No diagnosis was give as she only saw the practice nurse. I was concerned about the length of time mum was sleeping whilst home alone.
 19. I decided that it wasn't safe for my mum to be left at home so I organised for her to return to Queensland earlier than originally planned. She flew home at the end of February.
 20. The quality of the air in the house was so bad that I went to bed at night with a mask on.
 21. One day it was so bad that I couldn't even see across the road for the smoke. I walked over to the RSL on Elgin Street with my bandana around my face and they kindly let me inside. The RSL was full of elderly people who obviously had nowhere else to go. The RSL were very accommodating of everyone. The RSL had more space to walk around than my little house so I took mum over there.
 22. I don't have any family in the area so was unable to leave the area or seek any respite out of the area.
 23. I live next to the Greek Church hall where the Government was processing claims for assistance. I went and asked whether I was eligible. I was told I was ineligible because I didn't have a health care card and because I worked.

Health

24. I have asthma and, during the mine fire, I had a number of asthma attacks, including one at work where I was put on the ventilator. I also had an asthma attack one day when I was on my own at home. It was so severe that I couldn't talk, and so I was unable to use the phone to call for help. My asthma still hasn't cleared up and is noticeably worse now than it was before the mine fire started.
25. I also experienced runny eyes, itchy face and eyes and I got the shakes. I found it difficult to go to work as I was having trouble breathing and suffered from headaches. I also found when I was at home the headaches became unbearable. I slept for hours and found it difficult to shake the tiredness.
26. I went to the doctor a number of times. My blood pressure was elevated as I panicked every time I couldn't breathe and my blood sugar levels were also elevated.

The doctor told me that the smoke from the mine fire was affecting my asthma and she advised me to leave Morwell for 2 weeks.

27. I did not relocate because I needed to work to get paid and I could not afford to pay for alternative accommodation outside of Morwell. I do not have significant savings because I'm paying the mortgage on my house in Queensland and rent here in Morwell. As I mentioned earlier, I was told I was not eligible for any assistance.
28. I did make use of the free asthma puffers from the chemist in Morwell.

Clean up

29. I live in a rented house, which is quite old. Due to a prior dispute with my landlord over a water bill resulting from a large leak, I have had put a water flow restriction device on my water which limits the water flow to my house. Accordingly, I found cleaning my house very difficult and time consuming. Because of the reduced flow of water, it takes approximately 3 hours to complete a load of washing. I started to take my clothes to the Laundromat to wash them during the mine fire. Despite washing my clothes on a hot cycle, I still found them very itchy to wear. This was also an additional expense for me.
30. I borrowed a vacuum cleaner from the recovery centre to clean the house. However, there is still dust falling from the ceiling. It is particularly noticeable over the bath tub. As it is a rental house, I have spoken to the real estate agent about getting the landlord on a number of issues regarding the house.. I suspect that he does not have adequate insurance.

Impact of the Morwell Mine Fire on the Indigenous Community

31. I attended the meetings that were held at Kernot Hall on 14 and 18 February 2014. I passed on all the information that I got from these sessions to Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation and Nindedana Quarenook Gippsland Aboriginal Health Service.
32. On 19 February 2014 I was at the Latrobe Community Health centre and I saw an information flyer that had been produced by DHS Morwell and distributed to community organisations, informing people as to where they could obtain a mask, what groups of people were the most at risk and what to do. I took a copy of this flyer back to work with me. No one at either Ramahyuck or Nindedana Quarenook had seen this flyer. I made heaps of copies of this flyer and pinned them up at Nindedana Quarenook.
33. Following this, the Business Manager Frank Grubb contacted my CEO, Ali Khan and informed him about the information that I had obtained. Frank then asked me what

information was given at the meeting on personal safety, and asked me using my judgment whether I thought we should close the services of Nindedana Quarenook because of the smoke situation in Morwell as he was working in Sale that day. Ultimately we decided not to close the services of Nindedana Quarenook as we were providing an important line of communication to the community. Instead I organised for medical staff to contact all the community members in the 'at risk' categories, namely those with respiratory problems, the elderly and pregnant women, to inform them of the risks regarding the mine fire and encourage them to come into the clinic for a flu vaccination and medical check-up.

34. I think that the indigenous community were left out of the loop of communications about the health risks from the mine fire. Nindedana Quarenook did not receive any official communication informing the staff how to respond to the mine fire. As our community members didn't have all the relevant information, they did not know what to do or where to go.
35. Indigenous people need face-to-face contact. The internet is not a good way to get information to the indigenous community, as many people either can't read, are not computer savvy, don't have access to a computer and/or cannot afford to pay for the internet. For the same reasons, engaging with the indigenous community through traditional media channels like newspapers, television and radio is also not an effective form of communication.
36. I don't believe the majority of the indigenous community made use of the assistance that was available to them. To my knowledge, there was only one person who accessed and was entitled to respite assistance. He was the only person who I told to seek assistance because my other clients would not have qualified.
37. There is also a sense in the indigenous community that they were excluded from the response to the mine fire because no one asked them to help. A lot of people have said to me that they wanted to go and fight the fire or contribute in some way but they were never asked.
38. The thing that I found most alarming was that we, as an organisation, did not have an action plan for this kind of disaster. We were constantly asking what we should do next.
39. Since the mine fire, we have discussed setting up a task force within the indigenous community and nominating leaders from each family who, in times of crisis such as the mine fire, will assist in disseminating information to the indigenous community.

Ramahyuck Morwell is in the process of setting up a facebook site to disseminate information to the Koori community.

KAREN ANDREW