

WITNESS STATEMENT OF LISA WILSON

I, Lisa Wilson, of 1 Donald Street, Morwell, Victoria, state as follows:

Personal Background

1. I currently reside at 1 Donald Street, Morwell.
2. I live with my partner and we are expecting a baby in July.
3. I have lived in Morwell my entire life. I am the fourth generation of my family to live in Morwell.
4. I am currently employed as the Gippsland Homeless Network Co-ordinator at Quantum, which is located at 227 Princes Drive, Morwell. We support people experiencing family violence and homelessness in the Gippsland region.
5. I have provided a submission to the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry. Attached to my statement and entitled annexure "LW-1" is my submission to the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry.

My experience with the Hazelwood Mine Fire

6. On 9 February 2014, my partner and I flew back from a holiday in Brisbane. We had been receiving the CFA mobile phone warnings throughout the day to evacuate, as our phones were registered to Morwell. We were worried about our two cats that we had left at home. We couldn't return to Morwell that day because we were told that the roads were closed. We stayed with friends in Melbourne that night.
7. On 10 February 2014, we were told it was safe to return and so we returned to Morwell late in the afternoon.
8. On returning home I noticed that the smoke didn't look as bad or thick as it had during the Black Saturday Bushfires in February 2009, yet I knew that this fire was much closer.
9. Initially, there was limited media coverage of the fire because the media was focused on the Kyneton fires rather than the fires affecting Morwell. When that fire was downgraded, the media's attention turned to the Latrobe Valley. The ABC radio was the best source of information but even they weren't great initially.

Health

10. During the first week that the fire was burning, family and friends kept suggesting that I should leave Morwell as I was 18 weeks pregnant. I tried to find information on the existing air quality and the intensity of the smoke as I was concerned about my health and the effect on my growing baby.
11. We live in an old commission house and it's not particularly well sealed. There was a constant layer of soot in the house. We live near the mine so it's usual for us to need to clean coal dust from our house several times a week. During the mine fire, it was significantly worse and our house required a lot more cleaning. We had recently become engaged and had engagement cards hung up in our house. Even the cards were all covered in ash and smelt.
12. I was unable to hang my washing out each day because of the ash in the air. We used the dryer a lot more and noticed a marked increase in our electricity bill. Our phone and internet bill also tripled as we were constantly trying to source information about what we should be doing during the mine fire.
13. The worst visibility that we experienced was about 5-10 metres. For me, the worst part of the mine fire was the smell in Morwell - it was like burning plastic. Also, when it was windy, the air became really gritty. During the mine fire, you never felt clean.
14. By the second week I was experiencing some difficulty breathing and whistling in my breath. I initially contacted NURSE-ON-CALL who were unable to provide me with any helpful information other than to suggest that if I was feeling unwell I should go to my GP.
15. On 18 February 2014, my partner and I attended the second public meeting held at Kernot Hall, Morwell. I was overwhelmed by the number of audience members who were not locals and who I felt were monopolising the session and taking time away from the locals who needed information. I could not get near the experts. I felt like these non-locals were intruding. Locals, like me, have grown up with the coal mine and we know that there are risks associated with living so close to the mine, but these people weren't aware of these risks.
16. Around this time, I went to the CFA mobile information van in search of information. They advised me to go to the Health Assessment Centre which had been set up at Ambulance Victoria Gippsland Regional office at 2 Saskia Way, Morwell.

17. I attended the Health Assessment Centre three times during the first week that it opened. On the first two times, I was told that there was a 1-2 hour wait before I could be seen by anyone so I left. On the third time, I didn't have to wait and my carbon monoxide levels weren't elevated.
18. I also saw my local GP who recommended that I attend a medical centre every couple of days.
19. I alternated between attending my GP and the Health Assessment Centre. I attended at least once a week. Each time I had a negative carbon monoxide reading and good oxygen rates. The medical practitioners would also listen to my chest. They admitted that they had little information and what they could do was very basic.
20. Each time I went to the Health Assessment Centre, there was a significant waiting period. On one of these visits, I was advised by an ambulance officer on duty, that we should wear masks when we were outside as they weren't really sure what was in the air and what effect it could be having. This ambulance officer also discussed my haemoglobin levels and the uncertainty around the quality of oxygen that would be getting to the baby. He explained that there was no test for this, rather it was something we needed to think about as we had been exposed for some time and the potential impact was unknown. From this point on my partner and I wore masks every time we were outside.
21. During this time we also had some sonar scans of the baby done which was really reassuring.
22. I tried numerous times to contact the Department of Health to obtain some information on the impact of the smoke on myself but more importantly on my unborn baby but was unable to obtain any information. On one instance I specifically requested to speak to a health officer but was ultimately put through to the grants line at DHS where they very quick to inform me that I was not entitled to any grant, notwithstanding that I wasn't applying for one. I felt insulted and angry. I was eventually told that a health officer would call me back, but I never received that phone call.
23. I found the absence of the Department of Health within the community noticeable.
24. I am well educated and have travelled all over the world yet my experiences during this period made me feel like I was stupid. It was disheartening.

Relocation

25. I did not feel well informed enough to make a decision about leaving the area, nor did I know how long we should relocate for if we did decide to leave.
26. We had accommodation options in South-west Gippsland as my parents live in Phillip Island but the difficulty was my partner works in Sale and this would have meant a commute of over 2 hours for him every day. Additionally, we could not take our pets and I did not want to leave my cats behind.
27. In the third week, a friend in East Gippsland offered us their home. This coincided with the announcement by the Chief Health Officer, Rosemary Lester, recommending that people in high risk categories relocate.
28. I understood the high risk categories to include pregnant women. Despite being pregnant and falling within this category of high risk people, I was not eligible for any financial assistance. Whilst the relocation assistance would not have gone particularly far, it would have been of some assistance.
29. We stayed in East Gippsland for approximately 3 weeks. I was able to work at my employer's Bairnsdale office. Even so, my usual 5 minute commute in Morwell was increased to a 40 minute commute.
30. We noticed a change almost immediately on relocating. My partner and I were able to sleep better. We no longer woke up feeling as though our mouths were full of mucous. The change in the cats was also immediate, their coats changed colour and they were no longer so sedate.
31. I now query whether we should have relocated earlier. Evacuation resulting from a fire threat is an easy decision to make because the threat from fire is imminent and you have no choice, but in this instance we were told it was okay and we didn't want to leave our community and support network.
32. During our relocation period in East Gippsland, I experienced an incident where the baby stopped moving for approximately 12 hours. I attended at the East Gippsland Hospital and saw a midwife. She was fantastic when I explained I had relocated because of the mine fire and was very helpful. She did everything she could to assist us and eventually the baby started moving again.
33. We checked on our house the weekend prior to returning home, it was very grimy and dirty. A layer of dirt had settled on everything in the house and it was extremely hard to lift. Outside a layer of black scum covered everything, not just the flat surfaces but the walls of the house as well.

34. On learning that it was safe to return home, we thought we would have to wait for the following weekend as we knew the clean up would be very time consuming.
35. Unbeknown to me my family had instigated a huge clean up of the house so that we were able to come home early and not have to clean the house. All the surfaces and linen had been cleaned but the house still smelt a bit. They even cleaned the engagement cards and put them in a plastic bag for us. I found the assistance by my family so overwhelming and I was so grateful to be able to be back home.

Impact on Homeless Network Victoria

36. Throughout the mine fire, my employer was very understanding. They gave all staff the opportunity to work from other sites and they tried to make our office as comfortable as possible in the circumstances. We were lucky as our air conditioning system primarily relied on recycled air. They also set up ventilation room with purified air. We had a roster providing a skeleton of staff to look after reception and service delivery. It was better than many other work places.
37. Our staff had to keep coming to work because you just can't stop providing the kind of crisis service that we provide. Despite this, our services were severely impacted.
38. I don't have my own client case load, so my knowledge of how clients were impacted during the period is through what I was told by my staff who were providing direct service delivery. Our March 2014 meeting was dominated by discussions about what our clients were doing to combat the smoke and ash.
39. Our ability to assist women and children escaping family violence with temporary accommodation was impacted because all available accommodation was being used by emergency services staff brought in to fight the fire. As an agency we were left with limited options to assist these people.
40. We also run a high security women's refuge for non-locals in the area for women escaping family violence. These women did not qualify for re-location assistance because their identification did not show them as being residents of Morwell. Many of these women questioned whether they were better off returning home to dangerous environments because they found the

conditions at the refuge to be so uncertain and some of them did choose to leave.

41. I know that some of the vulnerable people in the area took advantage of the financial support offered, but many other vulnerable people who we work with didn't qualify for assistance. I thought this was unfair.
42. A lot of our clients went on day trips because of the free V-line travel and free zoo entry. These were really beneficial initiatives that people were able to take advantage of.
43. The Morwell Bowling club was really popular as their air conditioning worked really well and they seemed to be accommodating of everyone. There was a queue at their door every morning.

Improvements for the future

44. It was really disappointing for Government authorities to say they didn't know what to do because this had never happened before. This was untrue as there have been fires in the mine before.
45. It was also disappointing that the good work that many people and organisations were doing was not recognised. Additionally a lot of this great work was undermined by the media's portrayal of Morwell. As a community we are strong and proud yet we get knocked down all the time and this happened again during the mine fire.

LISA WILSON