

## **CPSU (PSU Group) Submission**

**Industrial issues arising in the Northern Territory  
Department of Health and Families, Families and  
Children's Services.**

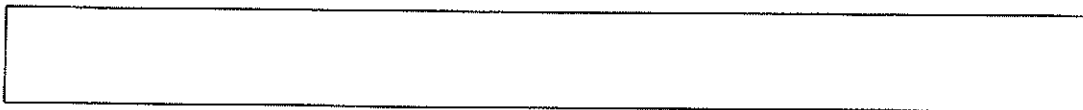
**Submission to the Inquiry into Child Protection 2010**

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## Summary of Recommendations

The CPSU recommends:

1. Northern Territory Family and Children services undertake exit interviews of all staff leaving and that these be audited by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment, and all positions undergo a Job Analysis Questionnaire for appropriate assessment.
2. A compulsory orientation to the Department of Health and Families and Northern Territory Family and Children services,
2. *Care and Protection of Children Act 2007* is undertaken with all case workers.
3. Where there is a higher than usual turnover, a prompt review of the circumstances in that region or office should be considered.
4. Comprehensive induction to working within a legislative framework should be provided.
5. That positions and ratios of staff across the Professional stream be reviewed.
6. That the role of the Administrative Officer be reviewed and include actual client contacts for assessment.
7. Consideration to over recruitment as a standard to avoid attrition to unacceptable levels be undertaken.
8. Northern Territory Family and Children services consider benchmarking and case weighting to assist in workload management
9. That protocols to affect change in responsibility staffing shortfall be designed to relocate responsibility to senior staff.
10. That protocols for escalation procedures be introduced to ensure senior staff are responsible and accountable for managing staffing shortfalls.
11. Establish the cause of attrition from the operational level to other areas of the Northern Territory Public Service.
12. Consideration be given to establishing a regular review process on all child protection matters and all case management decisions, that this review includes participants external to the Northern Territory Family and Children services unit or division.
13. Remote team services require review if the mandated responsibilities of the *Care and Protection of Children Act 2007* are to be complied with.
14. That ongoing rolling review in remote communities be instituted.
15. That independent legal representation and advice be open to all Northern Territory Family and Children services staff appearing in court and that this be funded by Northern Territory Family and Children services.



## INTRODUCTION

The PSU Group of the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) is an active and progressive union with approximately 55,000 members. The CPSU represents employees of the Australian Public Service (APS), the ACT Public Service, the Northern Territory Public Service, Telstra, the telecommunications sector, call centres, employment services and broadcasting.

The CPSU represents a significant number of members working in the child protection system in the Northern Territory.

It is important to acknowledge that this industry is well known for not being able to attract or retain experienced staff, and that the work itself is challenging. The high risks related to working with difficult clients and undertaking excessive and unrealistic work loads also impact on the retention of staff.

Members have for years consistently reported the same industrial issues across Northern Territory regions, to the CPSU.

The CPSU holds the view that these issues are not insurmountable and can with adequate resourcing and quality leadership be better managed.

This submission will outline the most common industrial concerns, some recent issues arising and the implications of these for staff and Northern Territory Public Service (NTPS) as employer, and provides recommendations for improvements.

## 1. STAFFING RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

The issues of recruitment and attrition in Northern Territory Family and Children services (NTFC) appear to be reflected in other states. However specific statistics are not readily available for comparison.

NTFC has for years been an entry point for many professional staff into the Northern Territory Public Service (NTPS). With the high levels of attrition and the expense of recruitment, a review of whether the salaries, allowances and conditions are commensurate with the demands of the work, should be initiated. This could be achieved by reviewing positions in the Job Analysis Questionnaire (JAQ) system or through review of the positions in NTFC. It is in the longer term interests of NTFC and may address attrition rates.

To achieve an improvement in retention of staff, it would be a useful exercise for the Department of Health and Families (DHF) to ensure that all NTFC staff leaving participate in an exit interview and that these be audited for findings. It is preferable that this exercise be undertaken external to the DHF. The Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment (OCPE) would be best placed to undertake this.

*The CPSU recommends:*

NTFC undertake exit interviews of all staff leaving and that these be audited by the OCPE and all positions undergo a JAQ for appropriate assessment.

NTFC is regularly running recruitment processes which are filled by relatively inexperienced staff. These staff are often employed from interstate and arrive with little or no knowledge of the NT, indigenous family issues, or of the industry sector. On commencement with NTFC, CPSU members report that they have no relevant orientation to their positions and are provided with no orientation to the region that they are appointed to. A compulsory orientation to the DHF, NTFC and the legislative requirements of the *Care and Protection of Children Act 2007* should be implemented for new starters to NTFC, with positions in regional or remote areas additional orientation should be provided.

*The CPSU recommends:*

A compulsory orientation to the DHF and NTFC, including the legislative requirements of the *Care and Protection of Children Act 2007* and regional induction is undertaken with all case workers.

The CPSU has been advised by its members of NTFC staff who have been recruited to Professional 1 positions have limited experience and within months are acting as a Team Leader. The capacity of these staff to lead a team in the provision of service to a high needs group, is often limited. The stressors of this are known by the CPSU to influence staff turnover.

In 2009 there was one region in the NT which had continued high turnover and difficulty in recruiting to vacant positions. The CPSU is not aware of any initiative to

identify why this region was not able to either retain or recruit staff. Without detailed analysis of what the reasons are, there is not likely to be a solution.

*The CPSU recommends:*

Where there is a higher than usual turnover a prompt review of the circumstances in that region or office should be considered.

CPSU members also report that they have been given a caseload with mandated responsibilities that they may not even be aware of. There have been reports of NTFC staff having to submit a report to court within a few days of arrival with no handover from previous case workers. Specific and extensive training in understanding and applying the relevant legislation should be compulsory for all case workers, team leaders, and managers prior to full engagement of case work or case management.

*The CPSU recommends:*

Comprehensive induction to working within a legislative framework should be provided.

The high stress environment of this industry is compounded by the demographics unique to the NT. Case workers in the NT are expected to work with some of the most disadvantaged children and families in the country. The level of skill required and the degree of difficulty of the work would suggest that there should be a review of the number of Professional 1 positions, that these positions should be closely supported and supervised, and that there be an established agreed ratio of Professional 1's to Professional 2's and 3's.

*The CPSU recommends:*

That positions and ratios of staff across the Professional stream be reviewed.

Administrative officers employed in NTFC are as counter staff often required to deal with unreasonable and aggressive clients and often are more experienced in the regional setting than many of the professional staff. As a consequence they take on responsibilities that are not formally detailed as part of their position requirements. They can provide the one constant to clients of the service and this relationship is not well recognised or utilised for maximum benefit.

*The CPSU recommends:*

That the role of the Administrative Officer be reviewed and include actual client contact and engagement for JAQ.

With the high turnover of staff there is a ongoing issue of increased workloads that are above what can be reasonably expected. With such a problem 'over recruitment' by the percentage of expected vacancies should be completed. It is likely that without this process in recruitment policies and procedures the problems will not be addressed.

*The CPSU recommends:*

Consideration to over recruitment as a standard to avoid attrition to unacceptable levels be undertaken.

Case load limits would provide for some protection of case workers and managers and add to the quality of work that is done. It would be in the interests of the clients, staff, and ultimately NTFC and DHF to consider initiating benchmarking and case weighting.

*The CPSU recommends:*

NTFC consider benchmarking and case weighting to assist in workload management

## **2. ESCALATION PROTOCOLS**

The excessive workloads and hours along with the high level of responsibilities carried by case workers, team leaders and managers are not, as a standard, matters that are managed by the most senior staff and executives of NTFC and DHF. This leaves the staff with high levels of work, high stress and with inappropriate responsibility for staffing shortfalls. This should be the responsibility of much senior staff. Currently there appear to be no formal protocols or procedures in place where NTFC executive staff are required be responsible for action on a staffing crisis.

*The CPSU recommends:*

That protocols to affect change in responsibility for staffing shortfalls be designed to relocate responsibility to senior executive staff.

Where there are mandated responsibilities such as those under the *Care and Protection of Children Act 2007*, it would be both accountable and responsible for an *escalation policy* to be adopted. This would enable staff to call upon the executive of the department for staffing assistance. An example of effective implementation of escalation protocols can be found in most hospitals, where in a staffing crisis, additional staff, are sought from the same department or other departments and agencies to meet a staffing shortfall.

*The CPSU recommends:*

That protocols for escalation procedures be introduced to ensure senior staff are responsible and accountable for managing staffing shortfalls.

### 3. REVIEWS

There is a great deal of expertise in NTFC. Those who perform well at in service delivery are attracted into senior positions in policy or management. This trend may be due to the more attractive salaries and manageable workloads, this cycle of drain from service delivery is not likely to change without some assessment of the causative factors.

*The CPSU recommends:*

Establish the cause of attrition from the operational level to other areas of the NTPS.

CPSU members have concerns when a decision by a Team Leader or Manager is seen to be high risk, there is currently no clear method for review (that does not appear provocative). Given the serious implications that a poor decision can have on a client and indeed a case worker, it is in the interests of clients and NTFC staff for a review mechanism for high risk decisions. The 2009 Inquest is a case in point, with caseworkers indicating to the CPSU that a review mechanism may have assisted in better outcomes on this case.

Some of the suggestions have been for regular committee meetings such as the Queensland Suspected Child Abuse Notifications committees. Other suggestions include cross NTFC unit reviews an additional suggestion is for the Children's Commission to provide this.

*The CPSU recommends:*

Consideration be given to establishing a regular review process on all child protection matters and all case management decisions, that this review includes participants external to the Northern Territory Family and Children services unit or division.

### 4. REMOTE SERVICE ISSUES

As a consequence to the Federal Intervention the remote area work of NTFC has increasing community expectations for better outcomes. With the existing staffing numbers and model (based in regional centres), there is little opportunity to develop case plans that have supports and better outcomes. The need for permanently based highly skilled officers in remote locations is evidenced. The current numbers are insufficient and this work is continuing to be managed only at the crisis level.

*The CPSU recommends:*

Remote Teams services require review if the mandated responsibilities of the *Care and Protection of Children Act 2007* are to be complied with.

Models for better outcomes that have been suggested include an 'active roving review' by senior staff, of remote locations. This type of review model would provide opportunities to identify communities, outstations and schools that have successful community practices, and these could be enhanced. The current remote program cannot possibly be expected to deliver the service that is mandated. Remote staff



have indicated that they have had to wait for several weeks in order to be able to action a matter of protective concern for a child. This extraordinary length of time is attributed to staffing, access to vehicles or charter costs. This situation not only continues risk for client but is unacceptable for professionals in most fields. This can not be acceptable on any level.

*The CPSU recommends:*

That ongoing rolling review in remote communities is instituted.

## 5. LEGAL

There have been recent instances where NTFC staff have been required to attend court as a witness in a highly publicised Coronial inquest. These staff either sought their own legal advice at their own cost, or they relied upon NTFC legal services for support and advice. There were very high levels of distress for many of these witnesses; this was compounded by the media reporting of the Coroner stating that criminal charges should be laid.

The CPSU has been made aware of a high level of concern amongst NTFC staff regarding the provision of witness testimony in this Coronial inquest, which was critical of NTFC. Their reliance upon NTFC legal services provided potential for a conflict of interest for legal services.

This inherent conflict would best be addressed by allowing staff to select their own legal advice at NTFC cost, with this in place NTFC staff would in the future, have more confidence in the independence of the legal advice provided to them and less anxiety around the legal support and advice received from NTFC.

*The CPSU recommends:*

That independent legal representation and advice be open to all NTFC staff appearing in court and that this be funded by NTFC

## CONCLUSION

NTFC staff commence in the NT with enthusiasm and high hopes for contributing to the improvement for families and for settling in the NT. It is a loss to the NTPS, NTFC and their clients that these staff, in a short time, find they are overwhelmed by work loads which are not able to be managed, and complexities that they are not equipped to work with.

The circumstances of the child protection sector have similar problems across the country. The NT has additional incentive to other states to retain staff, yet strategic initiatives to achieve this, do not appear to have not been attempted.

Retention rates of NTFC staff could be improved if there were strategic, considered and active steps taken. A benefit of this would be measurable not only in terms of retention but also in outcomes for the client base.