Good morning ladies and gentlemen. My name is Donna Bulloch and I am President of Mining Communities United, a not-for-profit organisation formed in 2010 for the specific purpose of representing the people of Collinsville, Queensland. I am also a wife of a miner and a mother of two.

I appreciate the opportunity to give you some insight into what it is like to live and work in a town impacted by mining, what our group is about and some issues I feel need to be addressed for communities such as Collinsville.

Mining Communities United (or MCU), aims to work with the community through effective and inclusive communication to enhance the quality of life and well-being of the people of our town, settlement of which begun in the 1860s.

Large scale coal mining operations began here in 1912, with the Collinsville Coal Mine still operating to this day, along with Sonoma Coal Mine, Cows Coal Project and Jax Coal Bulk Sample Project a few kilometres south. Drake Coal Mine is due to begin this year, and the Byerwen Coal Mine is due to begin construction next year.

Collinsville is a town of approximately 2,000 residents, located 85km South-West of Bowen, with whom we share local government, along with Airlie Beach and Proserpine. Collinsville is uniquely situated compared to other mining towns, being close to the coastline, and providing a wealth of lifestyle choices such as fishing, swimming, boating and camping. Being so close to the Whitsundays, many weekend getaways involve getting out on the reef or indulging in the resort lifestyle available there.

Collinsville is not a dusty outpost in the middle of nowhere, and we have such facilities as a hospital, three primary schools, a high school, a swimming pool, a shopping centre and a library. We have a golf club, football fields and a pony club. Collinsville has a 400+ bed workers accommodation camp on the outskirts of town, and we recently met with planners whose client had plans to put another 300 bed camp in the middle of the town. The people of Collinsville encourage and welcome development; however as a group, MCU strive to ensure that the developments will improve the social and economic environment of Collinsville. While they have a legitimate place in remote areas with no other available facilities, in our experience workers accommodation camps placed in existing towns negatively affect local businesses and enhance the US vs THEM mentality which plagues mining towns by segregating the drive-in, drive-out (DIDO) and fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) workers from the rest of the population.

Rapid population increases can often lead to violence and anti-social behaviour in communities. When these sorts of problems occur, there are not enough police who can safely attend, which
also means that ambulance officers cannot enter the area to assist the injured. Historically there has always been tension between permanent workers and contractors; this tension continues to escalate with the increasing number of FIFO/DIDO workers.

Our communities are only funded to respond to the needs of permanent residents, which often means that they are incapable of responding to the basic needs of resident and non-resident workers.

Unfortunately there are challenges in measuring the population of regions that have FIFO and DIDO practices, and it is common for the actual number of people in resource sector towns to be grossly underestimated. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) is responsible for measuring and compiling this data through the census, which has estimated the population of Collinsville and its surrounding areas at 2,054 people. Through careful consideration, we estimate the actual number of people who could be sleeping and working in Collinsville at any one time to be closer to 4,000. We believe that both permanent residents, and those living in our communities six months of the year, should have adequate access to essential services.

If the trend of FIFO and DIDO work is to continue, then **there needs to be an urgent priority placed on accurate population data collection**, in order to allocate the funds, resources and services to areas which need them.

The census data shows that between 2006 and 2011 the male population grew by 3%, while the female population decreased by 3%. We estimate that there is actually more than double the number of men to women in Collinsville on a daily basis. This is easily visible in any of the establishments in town. I know that Professor Carrington has highlighted the problem of the data only reflecting the number of non-resident workers on shift, and not those employed in the area that are on their days off. Without accurate data, we can't accurately estimate what level of services our community needs to supply.

In a town where most families have at least one person, usually the husband, employed in the mines, most social occasions revolve around the shifts of the workers. On any given weekend, for a birthday party, football match or swimming carnival, many families will consist of just the kids and Mum, no Dad, because Dad is either working or sleeping off night shift. This is common for shift-working families all across Australia, but the issue is particularly concentrated in Collinsville as the majority of the workforce is employed in the nearby coal mines.

There is a great amount of pressure placed on the wives of shift-workers, as their social and work lives must take a backseat to their husband's, and the raising of the children and attendance of extra-curricular activities is predominantly on their shoulders. Workforce arrangements for big and small business need to accommodate for rosters and for school hours. Small businesses often suffer from the inability to attract staff. Traditionally these communities rely on the skilled partners of industry workers to service the needs of the community. Unfortunately with the increase in FIFO/DIDO, growth in mining development no longer means an increase to skilled workers in non-industry related roles.

While the pressures can be high on the wives of resident-workers, they can be even greater on the wives of husbands who are DIDO or FIFO. These pressures are well documented, and include depression when husband is away and anxiety while he is travelling on country roads. Most roads leading to mining towns were not constructed for the current volumes of trucks and cars, and are generally in poor repair. When we consider the amount of fatigued and frustrated workers driving on these roads, along with the road trains, over-size loads, and all manner of mining equipment and service vehicles, it is little wonder that they are over-represented in accident statistics. Believe me, as a former DIDO wife, all these thoughts and facts run through your head each and every time you know your husband is going to be travelling to or from the town he is working in.

A wife, especially one with small children, will often be counting the days until her husband is home, desperate for a break from the daily grind of domestic chores and child-raising for which

http://www.cjrc.qut.edu.au/
she is wholly responsible while he is away. When the husband comes home physically exhausted and keen for some leisure time of his own after a 170 hour fortnight and a full day of travel, then this can lead to friction and conflict. It can be difficult to adapt the family routine when Dad returns, leading to resentment, a sense of unmet expectations and tension between family members. Learning how to live together again, month after month, week after week, can place a strain on a relationship very quickly.

On the other hand, some families report that the family dynamics are greatly improved with a FIFO husband. It means more quality time when the husband returns from work, it means more flexibility for holidays and it means greater financial security by being employed in the mining sector. The higher wages are often the reason people are enticed into mining in the first place, and it can definitely provide a higher standard of living and work/life balance than many other careers. These are hard decisions to make as a mining family.

One of the unfortunate realities for the mining sector is the volatility and uncertainty often afforded to its workers. In December 2012, about 90 workers at Collinsville Coal Mine were sacked, leading to many local families moving away to find work. Other workers were forced to gain DIDO/FIFO work, leaving their families in Collinsville while they travel.

This can lead to the forced separation of a family who may have otherwise chosen to settle and raise a family in a town like Collinsville. One family I consulted spoke of the need to ‘squirrel away money’ due to the uncertainty facing the families employed by mining contractors. The lack of stability afforded to them was a cause of anxiety and stress, which led to this particular family leaving the mining sector entirely in search of a more stable lifestyle.

A lot of families are hesitant to invest in mining communities, if they feel they will be uprooted within two-to-five years to another location. It can be hard for a family to obtain a loan to purchase a home in a mining town due to lack of job security, and also the rapidly rising and falling property values, whilst the high rents of homes in these towns are also prohibitive. A small three bedroom home in Collinsville can rent for up to $650 per week.

While the negative impact of mining can be easily seen and felt in mining towns, there are a number of positive aspects of living and working in a mining town. Due to the rosters, most people who work at the mine get between 4 and 7 days off at a time. This is great for spending time together as a family, and the added bonus of living where you work means that the campsites, rivers and recreation areas are all within 20 minutes drive, and you don’t lose two of your days away from your family to travel.

There is an old saying: ‘it takes a whole village to raise a child’. That saying is still alive in Collinsville today. We all pitch in to help each other raise families in a town with no available childcare. We pick up each other’s kids from school. We are all involved with looking after the children of the town, every child feels like our own.

This attitude unifies us and to live in Collinsville feels like being embraced into a big, inclusive family.

Collinsville has a long mining history, and we like to teach our kids about it. The harsh realities of mining are documented through our local interactive experience, the Coalface Museum, where past locals tell the tales of struggle, strife, hardship and tragedy of the mining industry. It is important to us that children grow up respecting the sacrifices mineworkers have made in order for their parents to return home from work safely. Some children may live on a street named for one of their family lost in the 1954 Coal Mine Disaster. Local school children play key roles in Memorial Day, when we commemorate the lives of 26 miners from the area who lost their lives in the winning of coal.

Incidents like those at Pike River, Moura, and Mount Mulligan, among others, are a reality of mining. It’s still a dangerous industry. In Collinsville, when the fire siren goes off, the hair on the back of your neck stands up, you can be standing in the shopping centre with everyone standing
frozen. Immediately your mind goes to where and if your loved ones, mates and family are working that day or if they are travelling on our roads.

I have read a lot of ‘rich, greedy miner’ theories. It’s important for me to emphasise that many mining families have been out in those coalfields for generations, through the strikes, accidents, booms and busts, redundancies, pay cuts, sackings and tragedy. Regardless of the highs and lows of the mining industry, many will continue to be there for generations to come.

In Collinsville, there is a sense of cooperation, of responsibility and of family. There is a level of trust that I have not experienced elsewhere, and it has come about from being part a community that unites to triumph over the hardships and adversity that the impact of mining can have. Where it is a never ending battle to make mining companies see that a town like Collinsville is a community, not a commodity, and their business practises have long-lasting effects on people, families and towns.

Thank you once again to Professor Carrington for inviting me here today to provide an insight into life in a coal mining town as a wife, mother and community advocate, and thank you all for listening.

Correspondence: Donna Bulloch, Mining Communities United, Collinsville, 4804, Qld, Australia.
Email: donna@miningcommunities.com.au

1 The views and opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of any other organisation or individual.