

# TUG OF WAR

WITH FAMILY PRESSURES HAVING AN IMPACT ON RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF SERVICE PERSONNEL, SOME SUGGESTIONS HAVE EMERGED DURING HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE HEARINGS.

STORY: JAMES NICHOLSON

When the Prime Minister, John Howard, famously referred to the question of work-family balance as a barbecue stopper some years ago, he acknowledged it as “the biggest ongoing social debate of our time”.

What elevated the issue to “barbecue stopper” status, of course, was the dramatic shift that has taken place in the employment landscape in Australia, as in other Western countries, over the past several decades.

Times were when the men would go out to work while the women would stay at home to

attend to family responsibilities—and never the twain would meet.

But times changed quickly, and in the latter stages of the last century women were entering the workforce in dramatically increasing numbers. In the 25 years to 2004, the number of women in the Australian workforce doubled.

These are changes that have brought with them a particularly complex and taxing set of challenges for working parents.

As the House of Representatives Family Committee’s inquiry into balancing work and family has heard, they are challenges which are acutely felt in the armed services and police forces.

In a submission to the inquiry, the Western Australian Police highlighted an alarming decline in the number of women it was able to attract or retain.

According to WA Police Commissioner Dr Karl O’Callaghan,

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the issues of child care and work-family balance lie at the very heart of those recruitment difficulties.

“We do exit interviews with everybody that leaves the police and one of the main reasons cited by women for leaving the police is family responsibility,” Dr O’Callaghan told a committee hearing in Perth.

“The critical issue in attraction and retention is the ability for police officers to have a work-life balance, the availability of affordable options for child care and family care, and the availability of flexible work arrangements.”

The difficulty of attracting and recruiting female police staff in particular is exacerbated by Western Australia’s geography and the need for police personnel to accept postings in regional or remote areas which often lack an adequate range of services and facilities.

“Police officers are under obligation to transfer as the job requires,” the WA Police submission noted. “This can mean taking family to live in rural/remote towns that don’t have child care services.

“Affordable employer-funded child care support is needed to assist these families. Where the lack of child care services is an added burden for families, this can lead to pressure on police officers to abandon the job or not return after parental leave.”

Ironically, the downturn in recruitment and retention trends coincides with a rising demand for policing services in the West. Increasing tourism figures, a growing population fuelled by the resources boom, a heightened security focus and concern over crime rates are contributing to an urgent demand for greater police numbers across a state which, at 2.5 million square kilometres, is the world’s largest police jurisdiction.

The inquiry, chaired by Bronwyn Bishop (Member for Mackellar, NSW), was presented by the WA Police with a list of proposed changes



The WA Police highlighted an alarming decline in the number of women they are able to attract or retain. Photo: AAP

to government child care policies and systems that would enhance the prospects of attracting and retaining a sufficient workforce.

Among those proposals were a lower cost of child care and the option to salary-sacrifice child care services, greater availability of child care services, including child care that would support round-the-clock police rosters, and equity of government funded support for overnight and emergency child care coverage. The submission also raised the elimination of Fringe Benefits Tax as a possible means of making salary-sacrificed child care a viable option.

WA Police has gone on the front foot in an attempt to arrest the recruitment and retention decline. One of its most effective strategies has been to offer flexible working arrangements, in the form of part-time work, job-sharing arrangements, home-based work or flexitime. Twenty three per cent of WA Police’s female staff access such arrangements —the highest rate in any Australian police agency.

Other benefits designed to encourage retention include preferential

placements at the end of a posting to a remote area, a 44-hour week in remote locations and access to training during maternity leave.

The clincher, however, remains the provision of accessible and affordable child care or family support. According to Dr O’Callaghan, a good child care system would not only attract more women to the police, but would encourage more women to return after having children.

“If they take two or three years off and when their children are a little bit older they want to come back to work, if they could access child care at a reasonable cost I think they would come back,” Dr O’Callaghan said.

“One of the biggest challenges for us then, if we have women coming back and working 24/7, and they are working in rural and remote Australia, is how do we get them child care facilities or how do we get them some family support?”

It is a question every bit as pertinent to the Australian Defence Force which, because of the strategic significance of Australia’s north, has a considerable proportion of its personnel posted thousands of kilometres from home.



WA Police Commissioner Karl O'Callaghan says child care is a key issue. Photo: AAP

While a 10,000-strong Defence community in Darwin and various networks within the Defence organisation provide a degree of support in areas such as child care, the absence of dependable round-the-clock family support can represent a significant obstacle to recruitment and retention.

Brigadier Craig Orme, Commander of the 1st Brigade at Darwin's Robertson Barracks, told the inquiry at a hearing in Darwin that the biggest issue for Defence personnel and their spouses in the Northern Territory was that of dislocation from extended family in the south.

"After a period of time the spouses find that they would like to get the support of their extended families," Brigadier Orme said.

"It is at that point that they are put into a decision space where they ask, 'Can we continue or are the kids missing grandma and grandpa?' They have those sorts of issues. That is probably the single biggest issue, if there is one, that has a strategic impact on managing work-life."

Like the WA Police, the Australian Defence Force has explored various approaches to minimising the difficulties

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that servicemen and women face in maintaining a work-family balance. At the core of the Defence philosophy, the inquiry heard, was the principle that Defence shares a responsibility with the serving member to ensure the wellbeing and welfare of all its families.

As a means of addressing the dislocation issue, Defence entitles each married Defence member to two remote locality trips out of Darwin each year, one of which can be transferable to a family member.

There has been significant progress in the provision of child care services too. Darwin's first Defence child care centre was opened in 1997—by Mrs Bishop as it happens, in her capacity as the then Minister for Defence Industry, Science and Personnel. Nine years on, there are now five such centres in Darwin and by the end of this year the number of long-day care places will have risen by 150 per cent in 18 months.

Defence also operates an extended child care program and

sponsors out-of-school hours places and school holiday programs which offer the flexibility required by Defence personnel.

However well-intentioned such schemes may be in attempting to ensure a satisfactory work-family equation though, the imposition of Fringe Benefits Tax on entitlements ranging from child care to remote locality trips has the effect of diminishing the benefit that these entitlements were designed to deliver.

Defence has applied to the Australian Taxation Office for a private ruling on Fringe Benefits Tax in relation to its child care centres in Darwin, which are operated by ABC Learning. Nevertheless, the ramifications of Fringe Benefits Tax reach far beyond child care in the work-family debate.

At the inquiry's Darwin hearing, the Northern Territory Delegate of Defence Families Australia, Joanne Aboud, articulated the impact that the tax was having on Defence families.

"It is quite feasible for an average family of four, where the spouse has accessed [the Services Workforce Access Program for Partners] . . . and they have taken eight flights to, say, the east coast to visit family—to have an excess FBT of over \$20,000 gross," Mrs Aboud said.

"Even though there are great initiatives, there are Defence families who consciously have to make the choice that they do not access these things."

It is a point that would strike a chord with Brigadier Orme.

"The FBT has an effect on the entitlements we are trying to provide our soldiers, sailors and airmen to make it attractive to serve in the Territory," the Brigadier told the inquiry.

The Family Committee's report into balancing work and family is expected to be tabled in the House of Representatives in December. ■

*For more information on the work-family balance inquiry visit [www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/fhs](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/fhs) or email [fhs.reps@aph.gov.au](mailto:fhs.reps@aph.gov.au) or phone (02) 6277 4566.*