

WITNESS STATEMENT OF VICKI HAMILTON

I, Vicki Hamilton, Newborough, in that State of Victoria, state as follows:

Personal background

1. I currently reside in Newborough, which is 15 km from Morwell.
2. I am the Chief Executive Officer and Secretary of the Asbestos Council of Victoria (ACV) and the Gippsland Asbestos Related Diseases Support Inc. (GARDS).
3. The ACV/GARDS was established in 1991 and incorporated in 2001. In 2002 the organisation was recognised as a deductible gift recipient for charitable donations.
4. ACV/GARDS is a non-profit, non-government voluntary organisation dedicated to support the victims of asbestos and their families.
5. The Latrobe Valley/Gippsland has seven times the average of mesothelioma diagnoses compared to the rest of Victoria.
6. ACV/GARDS provides support and information to sufferers, their families and carers. We also advocate on behalf of and support asbestos sufferers, their families and the wider community. ACV/GARDS is called upon to conduct speaking engagements and tutorials to first year medical students and nursing students. ACV/GARDS provides support to families by loaning free of charge medical equipment. We also have monthly support group meetings, excursions, 3 or 4 planned events a year and it maintains an office 5 days a week where asbestos sufferers, their families and the community can access information and support.
7. ACV/GARDS has approximately 200 members all at different stages of the disease and some who are interested in and active in all the issues around asbestos. ACV/GARDS provides an information and support phone line 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

My experience with the Hazelwood Mine Fire

8. On 9 February 2014 I was at Gippsland Homexpo Leisurefest Roadshow at Kernot Hall in Morwell.
9. During the afternoon I was advised by one of the other patrons that there was a fire nearby.

10. I did not receive a text message from the CFA to warn me of the fire, however another patron who lives in Sydney did receive a message about the local fires.
11. Luckily I was able to make my way home via the back roads. The police were just getting to the back roads to restrict access to them because of the fires in the area as we made our way through.
12. Whilst the fire was burning I could smell and see the smoke across the valley.

Impact of the Mine fire on ACV/GARDS and its Members

13. During the mine fire, the key issue raised by ACV/GARDS members was the lack of communication particularly in regard to the health effects of the fire and smoke. Our members were concerned about the toxicity of the smoke, the short and long term effects of the smoke, the lack of initial air monitoring and the considerable stress and potential mental health issues arising from the fire. Our members were not able to find the answers to their questions.
14. During the fire ACV/GARDS received a number of phone calls from members seeking advice. ACV/GARDS has provided continued support to its members throughout the disaster. However, this support was often limited by lack of information available to me and the confusing messages from Government. Examples of confusing messages included:
 - (a) the Chief Health Officer said that they were treating the fire just like any other bushfire. The community knew that the mine fire was not a bushfire and it was a very different fire with respect to how it was to be treated and what was contained in that fire. The community had no confidence in the authorities because of this message.
 - (b) the Chief Health Officer said that there would be no long term health effects from the fire. I was confused as to how would she know this as there had been no references made to how she could confidently make that assessment; and
 - (c) Finally, the announcement of the relocation assistance for those who wished to escape the smoke was provided on a Friday afternoon. That meant that no one could apply for the assistance until the following Monday, leaving those who were feeling most vulnerable to feel anxious all weekend.

15. A lot of our members in Morwell were experiencing an increase in their symptoms and relocated out of the area. In some instances members required additional medical equipment to cope with their increase in symptoms. An example of this was ordering extra oxygen bottles for members who had an increased need for oxygen because they could not relocate out of Morwell for one reason or another. Some members needed to use their oxygen concentrators 24 hours a day to help them breathe. As a consequence, our members were using more electricity than usual to run the oxygen and air-conditioning to filter the air. It was an expensive exercise for ACV/GARDS and our members.
16. I am not aware of any members going to the doctor because they all knew what was wrong and did not think the doctor could assist.
17. Our members also had a number of concerns about the assistance packages. Some were made to feel guilty about the assistance they received. Others had to travel back into Morwell (after being relocated) to receive financial assistance. There were also many inconsistencies with the allocation of payments, even between families. One of our members, Mr Ray Whittaker, is an example of this.
18. Our members are also very concerned about the clean-up of their houses in Morwell. The clean-up is not nearly extensive enough. It does not extend to roofs, roof cavities, heating and cooling systems, light fitting and other areas. It should not be expected that the residents have to clean this up themselves. Some of our members have spent quite a bit of money on cleaning equipment, detergents and water usage in their own clean-up efforts. Many of our members are physically incapable of cleaning their houses.
19. The bucket provided to residents was inadequate. Further, the Council failed to provide our members with information on how to use the limited equipment provided. For example, face masks were provided without any direction as to the purpose for which the mask should be used.
20. In addition, incorrect and unsafe information was being given to our members about cleaning up. For example, the Council was going to provide residents with high pressure hoses to clean their houses, despite the dangers of the use of high pressure hoses on and around asbestos. I believe that this practice is also against the EPA law. The Council had previous experience with the problems created by the use of high pressure hoses on asbestos so I was surprised, to say the least, that the Council was

encouraging the use of high pressure hoses for clean up with such a large number of houses that contain asbestos in the Morwell area. The pressure hoses were not provided due to these issues but only after I, and others, made a fuss through the local media. They were also advocating for people to clean their solar panels on their roofs. Climbing on a roof to clean solar panels is a very dangerous thing to do - especially for the elderly.

Comments/Improvements for the future

21. The management of the Hazelwood Mine Fire was a disaster. The only bright sparks were the fire fighters, SES, Red Cross and the ABC.
22. There should be an extensive investigation about whether it is safe for residents to live so close to the mine. If it is not safe then they should be given adequate compensation and relocated. Also, there should be a moratorium of all housing subdivision on the outskirts of Morwell until such time as there is a complete risk assessment carried out on safe distance for building and perceived personal risk.
23. It is evident from this fire that the lessons learnt from previous mine fires are not being followed. A number of inquiries have been undertaken in the past, however these seem to be ignored by the government and private companies. There also needs to be better communication between the mine and the emergency providers.

Annexures

24. Attached to my statement and entitled "VH-1" is my submission submitted to the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry on behalf of the Asbestos Council of Victoria/GARDS.

VICKI HAMILTON