



Benefits of consumer participation

The aim of consumer participation is to include consumers in decision-making processes that affect their housing situations and needs. It is through consumer participation strategies that consumers can contribute to the planning, delivery and evaluation of housing and homelessness services that will result in ongoing improvements to individual organisations and to the service system as a whole. Ultimately, this will result in improved outcomes for consumers and the community.

"Involvement transforms the way people are perceived and the way services are delivered".

While research on the benefits of consumer participation has lagged behind other areas of research in the housing/homelessness field, there is a growing body of evidence that supports consumer participation,

most of it from the United States where consumers have been involved in programs that serve homeless people since the 1980s. For example, one researcher noted:¹

Everyone benefits with consumer involvement in homelessness services:

- *Providers have a chance to increase the quality of services;*
- *Consumers can step up to empowerment through employment and helping their peers; and*
- *Clients can learn the value of peer support.*



Benefits are most likely for all parties when:

1. The main interests agree on the appropriate degree of participation;
2. There is a common language to discuss issues and develop ideas; and
3. Appropriate methods are used to get as much agreement as possible on desired outcomes.

Benefits for organisations

There are many general benefits that may result from involving consumers in your organisation:²

- Consumers who feel they have a say are more likely to be positive about proposals. People are far more likely to be part of a long-term solution if they have some ownership of the early ideas.
- Consumer's ideas and feedback can draw attention to glitches, problems and solutions. Consumers can be a source of fresh ideas.
- Involved consumers are more likely to invest in and commit to supporting agencies' efforts. Understanding of department functions helps build stronger advocates in the consumer pool. Some

consumers may have the capacity to help in kind or provide other resources;

- Consumers may develop a better understanding of the connection between funding and services and be less likely to express resentment and suspicion of how resources are applied.
- Involvement on one project or program builds understanding, trust and confidence which may be important on other occasions.

According to consumers of Victorian homelessness services, the best reasons for organisations to include them is because they know what the problems are and often have ideas about how to solve them:

"It is important for an organisation to get the participation (views) of the people using the service because they are the experts."

Any organisation about to engage consumers in participation must expect and be willing to embrace change. Things will not stay the same.³



Benefits for consumers

The primary purpose of consumer participation is to achieve better and more sustainable outcomes for consumers. In the health field, consumer participation has been linked with improvement in the quality of health care and improved health outcomes.⁴ This occurs through a range of linked processes.

Improved service system

Increasing consumer participation tends to result in organisational and systemic improvements:

- Higher quality and more responsive services, tailored to clients and their needs;
- Services that are more 'user friendly' or 'consumer-friendly';
- A service system that is more sensitised to the consumer's right to be there, to be heard and to hear how decisions that affect them are made.⁵

Consumer participation associates abstract 'clients' with real people.

Empowerment

Most importantly for people using housing and homelessness services, consumers with 'voice' (the capacity to express their dissatisfaction)⁶ both within and outside an organisation have an alternative to withdrawing from or exiting that organisation. This is important to people who have to rely on publicly

funded services because they may have very limited chances to exit; there may be no other services available. In such circumstances 'voice' provides the only mechanism for seeking change in policies, practices or outputs of organisations.

Skills, confidence and psychological well being

Involvement and participation connects people. It provides support, learning, networking and friendships among peers, providers and with policy and decision makers.



The way that 'consumer participation' strategies are implemented, and consumer input is used, can either empower or disempower consumers.

Involvement changes status from consumer to participant. Consumers are listened to and invited to present their point of view. Consumers may gain skills and confidence in a wide range of areas, such as how to run group meetings effectively, how to share information and how to gain

allies for a cause or issue. Learnings from these experiences can transfer to consumer's broader lives and relationships. Job opportunities may become possible.

As a result of all these factors, consumer participation can improve psychological conditions, diminish substance abuse and contribute to housing stability:⁷

"Involvement boosts the esteem of isolated and unemployed persons who face discrimination and stigma on a daily basis. Personally, my involvement acknowledged my value and improved my outlook. It provided hope, which strengthened me."

(Tripp 2005)

Benefits for the wider community

Citizen participation has been found to help build 'stronger local democrac(ies)' through the development of human and social capital, which in turn, lays a platform for collaborative local action for the common good (Cuthill & Fein:64).⁸ These emerging forms of governance involve business and community in decision making. The active citizen is a vocal citizen: people who express their views and participate in democratic decision making.⁹

Consumer participation in publicly funded organisations provides opportunities for participation in democratic decision making. This can build the capacity of people receiving housing and homelessness services to engage as active citizens in other arenas. It is also a chance to strengthen citizens' voices in these new forms of governance.

Endnotes

1. Glasser (1998). *Giving voice to homeless people in policy, practice and research*. Viewed November 2007 at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/homeless/symposium/5-CONSUMR.htm>
2. Benefits viewed October 2007 at <http://www.partnerships.org.au/guide/AZpartic.html#Benefits>. See also Glasser (1998) in Tripp (2005), viewed November 2007 at http://pathprogram.samhsa.gov/text_only/tech_assist/transcripts/BenefitConsumerInvolvement_7_2005.asp
3. For information on organisational learning and change management go to <http://www.developmentgateway.com.au/jahia/Jahia/pid/3066>. Viewed December 2007. Or web search using 'organisational change'.
4. Participate in Health Fact Sheet 1. Viewed October 2007 at <http://www.participateinhealth.org.au>
5. Glasser (1998) in Tripp 2005. See above.
6. Baulderstone, J (2004). Ensuring all Voices are Heard. *Parity* Volume 7, Issue 9, October 2004. Council to Homeless Persons, Victoria.
7. Mowbray, C, Moxley, D, Jasper, C & Howell, L (Eds.). *Consumers as Providers in Psychiatric Rehabilitation*. pp.35-44. Columbia: International Association of Psychosocial Rehabilitation Services.
8. Cuthill, M & Fein, J (2005). Capacity building: Facilitating citizen participation in local governance. *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 64(4) 63-80: December 2005.
9. Baulderstone, J (2004). See above.

