



CP in everyday practice

Description

Consumer participation is not seen as a separate activity but is incorporated in all aspects of service delivery. Policies and procedures in relation to service delivery and administration support the role of everyday practice in increasing consumer participation.

How it works

"Every time a consumer has contact with a service, it is an opportunity for participation."
(Service provider)

Everyday service delivery practice can support consumer participation in a variety of ways including use of a strengths-based approach to case management and an asset-based approach to community development; consumer friendly administrative procedures and consumer charters. It includes a 'customer-focused' approach to service delivery and processes to respond to consumer initiatives.

Written and oral information is presented to consumers in an accessible and understandable way, explaining consumer participation opportunities as well as services available, choices and likely outcomes with clear pathways for asking and getting answers to questions about the service. Information is available in languages other than English, through translated written material and/or effective use of interpreters.

Communication with consumers is reviewed and reformed to encourage their participation; in particular information is made available to consumers before meetings/consultations and comments are acceptable after them.

Standard questions about consumer satisfaction with the service received may be included in all contacts. Any concern or compliment received in response to these questions is recorded and fed into the organisation's quality service and CP strategy.

Workers also record anecdotes and informal comments or feedback from consumers, and discuss them at team meetings. Related issues can be raised at higher levels and responses are consistently fed back to workers and consumers. For example, concerns and compliments and the organisation's responses to them can be publicised on



a news board in a public place such as the reception area or common room.

There are clear policies and processes to respond to inquiries or requests initiated by consumers.

Consumers have rights and guarantees that specify service conditions. The organisation has clear, well-publicised pathways for complaint and possible redress for consumers if service standards are not met. These are developed, written and regularly reviewed in consultation with consumers.

Degree of participation

Medium level consultation.

Timeframe

Medium to long term.

Resource level required

Medium.

Resources are required to review practice, procedures and policies and to introduce changes in consultation with consumers and staff. Training and establishment time are needed for administration systems. May require establishment of particular roles or assignment of responsibility (such as the responsibility for responding to feedback).

Strengths

Consumer-friendly administrative procedures do not require people using housing and homelessness services to tell their story again and again. This saves the organisation time and avoids a potential source of misinformation and frustration.

Responding to consumer initiatives is a valuable chance to build a partnership that may be a resource for future CP initiatives. It acknowledges and draws on the strengths and skills of consumers, and strengthens self-worth.

Consumer charters support participation and have the potential to ensure standards of service quality and accountability. Developed in consultation with consumers, they also contribute to future CP initiatives.

Incorporating consumer participation in everyday practice spreads responsibility for CP within the organisation and makes it a focus of all staff instead of isolating it.

Weaknesses

A consumer perspective on administrative procedures may have only a slight impact on systems that are usually designed to suit the needs of administrators. These procedures often reflect the compartmentalised nature of service organisations with departments and divisions having their own systems with their own information requirements.

Information provision is sometimes confused with consultation. There is a risk that communication may be ineffective because the method is not relevant to the target audience. Information and communication strategies have to be designed to provide information at an appropriate time and in an appropriate fashion.

Organisations may not be able to respond well to all consumer initiatives due to structural, time or resource limitations. Some consumer initiatives might require a lot of time in negotiation and extensive resources to implement. Failure to respond to consumer initiatives may result in loss of confidence in the organisation's ability or willingness to respond in future. There is a risk that organisations may go for a "quick fix" rather than one that will make a real difference.

Consumer charters may be "toothless" if they are not backed up with practice and resources. They tend to be individually focused and might draw resources away from services that target the wider community / consumer group.

Example



All publicly funded community-managed housing or homelessness assistance services must inform their consumers of the OOH

Consumer Charter and ensure rights and responsibilities are clearly understood. It is part of everyday practice for staff and consumers to work together within the rights and responsibilities outlined in the charter.

Tips

- ☞ Information to consumers is most likely to be effective in improving consumer participation if it is part of an ongoing, two way process of communication. Information provision should be seen as a continuum from informing to educating to empowering.
- ☞ The speed and approach with which services respond to requests and unsolicited feedback from consumers is an important indicator of the commitment of the organisation to consumer participation.

For more information...

- <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/publications/downloads/conspart.pdf>
- See Information Sheet #13 (Organisational development) for an example of changes to a complaints procedure.
- More information on asset-based community is available online (viewed December 2007) at: <http://www.sesp.northwestern.edu/abcd>