



Consumer consultants

Description

Consumer consultants are people who have experienced homelessness and/or required services from housing or homelessness organisations, and who are now employed in a housing / homelessness service to put forward a consumer perspective. The ultimate aim is for the consumer consultant to create opportunities for all consumers to participate.

How it works

Consumer consultants are linked to a wide group of consumers receiving services, to gain their input into organisational structures where consumer views are regularly considered, resulting in changes being made.

To be most effective consumer consultants are firmly linked to managers with the authority to make decisions about changes to service delivery. The manager takes a strong positive position in setting the tone and expectation around valuing consumer participation, and generally has a strong hands-on role in consumer participation, planning the approach and closely monitoring implementation.

Consumer consultants are expected to:

- Be involved in the development of Consumer Participation Plans;
- Be active members of committees that provide input into planning, development and evaluation of service delivery;
- Establish consumer networks, or coordinate and facilitate existing networks;
- Run orientation and training programs around consumer participation for both consumers and staff.

These positions have been found to be most effective where two or more consultants work together.

Key policies, processes and structures to support and monitor consumer consultants include:

- A well-developed duty statement including key selection criteria, boundaries of the role and confidentiality protocols;
- Clear resourcing decisions in relation to consultants' work space
- Availability of mentoring, training and supervision for consumer consultants (and other staff)
- Clear consultative processes for gaining consumer input and reporting it to appropriate forums

- Payment of consumers for meeting attendance;
- Clear protocols and procedures for acting on information, the extent of decision-making authority and reporting back to consumers
- Monitoring mechanisms in relation to implementation of change as a result of feedback.

This strategy requires a range of regular forums for consumers to meet and discuss their experience of services, gain an understanding of their rights and talk about ways to improve services to better meet their needs.

Degree of participation

Consultation.

Timeframe

Long term.

Resource level required

High.

Like other members of staff, consumer consultants must receive award wages and conditions.

Consumer consultants need support, nurturing and replenishing mechanisms. They need ready access to de-briefing, peer support and rewards.

It is important that managers actively support implementation of strategies to encourage consumer employment. This support consists of: education and training of non-consumer staff; increased individual supervision for consumer staff, and special attention to the need to offer 'reasonable accommodation' or to otherwise modify work responsibilities to meet the needs of consumer staff, as is done when employing someone with a disability (Fisk et al; under review).

Strengths

By being visible and articulate, consumer consultants may change community attitudes and reduce the stigma associated with homelessness (SQM 1999). Consumer consultants can increase the sensitivity of non-consumer staff (staff who have not been consumers of homeless services) to their clients and educate co-workers; (Van Tosh in Glasser 1998).

Consumer consultants can provide an enormous impetus for the development of a wide range of consumer participation strategies. Consumer consultants have first-hand knowledge of homelessness and for

this reason are more likely to be trusted by consumers. They are well-placed to advise on what strategies will work to engage consumers in participatory activities.

Consumer consultants increase the avenues for consumers to be an integral part of job redesign and training delivered to staff.

Consumer consultants can provide a strong voice advocating consumer perspectives on an ongoing basis within an organisation. By building participation opportunities, consultants can shift the organisation from a 'consultancy' model to partnerships to consumer independence model, where consumers make all decisions regarding consumer participation activities.

Weaknesses

An over-reliance on consumer consultants as the key strategy to increase consumer participation can be counter-productive. To ensure consultants present views representative of all consumers their employment needs to be embedded in an effective infrastructure to engage as many consumers as possible.

Criticisms of the consumer consultant strategy are nearly all focused on the role definition and its implementation rather than the consultants' practices.

Employment of consumers as staff carries certain risks and the agency must be prepared for the challenges faced by consumer staff (Fisk et al in press, in Glasser 1998). (See Information Sheet #22: Consumers as staff).

There is a risk that consumer consultants may be expected to advocate on behalf of individual clients rather than for systemic change.

Example



The Psychiatry Unit of the Alfred Hospital in Melbourne employs Consumer Consultants to present to the organisation the point of view of the people who use the service. Fliers advise consumers of Consumer Participation at the Alfred and invite them to join the process.

Consumers can contact consultants when they are inpatients or outpatients, in person or by phone. Consumers can attend regular meetings with consultants and can tell these employees their concerns and ideas for improving the service. Staff, including the consumer consultant also get together to talk about the service and consider consumers' views. Then a group of people who use the service and staff who operate it, get together to discuss changes that are occurring and recommendations for further change.

Tips

- ☞ Consumer consultants must be employed as part of a consultative strategy that engages consumers and staff alike.
- ☞ It is strongly recommended that more than one consumer consultant should be employed.

For more information...

- Service Quality Australia (SQM) (1999). *Evaluation of Consumer Participation in Victoria's Public Mental Health Services*. Viewed December 2007 at <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/publications/downloads/conspar.pdf>
- Wadsworth & Epstein (1996). *Orientation and Job Manual – Staff Consumer Consultants in Mental Health Services (1995-1996)*. This manual provides extensive detail in relation to the employment of consumer consultants. It is based on the experience of the 'Understanding and Involvement Project'.
- Middleton P, Stanton P & Renour N (2004). Consumer consultants in mental health services: addressing the challenges. *Journal of Mental Health*. Volume 13, Number 5, October 2004, pp.507-518(12). Viewed October 2007 at <http://www.intentaconnect.com/content/routledg/cjmh/2004/00000013/00000005/art00007>