



# Consumers as staff: paid and volunteer

## Description

Current and/or past consumers fill defined roles in service delivery or management within the organisation, and draw on their experiences and characteristics to enhance their ability (and that of the organisation) to provide services to people who are homeless.

## How it works

The starting point is to eliminate barriers to employment of consumers and former consumers. This may involve ensuring that HR policies include provisions precluding discrimination against consumers during recruitment processes. The organisation might also create one or more dedicated staff positions to be filled by consumers.

Organisations that are serious about employing consumers need to go beyond policy to proactively create opportunities for consumers to become involved. This may require the development of an employment pathway from consumer to volunteer, trainee and ultimately to paid staff (casual, part-time, permanent). This pathway must be supported with training and development opportunities available to all staff. The volunteer end of the pathway may play a role in identifying consumers who have the potential to go on to employment.

Effective employment practices (including clear job descriptions) can reduce any confusion for consumer staff about the boundaries between roles as consumer and staff, and maximise the impact of these positions.

## Volunteers

Consumers interested in ongoing involvement with an organisation can be invited to volunteer their time to contribute to consumer participation strategies as well as other activities. A worker with responsibility for consumer participation would meet with the volunteers and explain the aims of the strategy. The volunteers then identify the issues or consumer groups with which they believe they can best work. An approach is developed and outcome goals agreed.

Consumers can be responsible for running orientation and training programs around consumer participation for both consumers and staff.

## Degree of participation

Medium to high.

## Timeframe

Long term.

## Resource level required

High.

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).

Other requirements include: a detailed job description which describes position requirements (and if relevant the authority of consumer consultants); a work plan which identifies intended outcomes over time; a direct supervisory relationship with a senior staff member; and documentation of defined functional relationships with related consumer participation and quality improvement structures in the organisation, if relevant.

The role needs to be supported and supervised with regular direction, review and support from the line manager. This relationship should also attend to the specifics of the job description, work plans and the monitoring outcomes. Consumer staff are best supported and managed within standard personnel practices pertaining to all staff members.

## Strengths

The status of "staff member" is very influential in organisations. The inherent tensions between staff and consumer can be used creatively to explore and develop new ways of relating between them. Consumers as staff can increase the sensitivity of non-consumer staff to their clients and educate co-workers (Van Tosh in Glasser 1998).

Consumers can provide important links to potential consumers: they can help to locate hard-to-find individuals and devise creative strategies to engage homeless persons resistant to services. This is particularly the case when agencies are trying to engage homeless people who have serious mental illnesses and/or substance abuse problems, or multi-problem homeless families (Glasser 1998).

Consumers as staff have also shown a special ability to sensitively relate to and help solve the problems that clients face. They tend to be more tolerant of unusual behaviour; they do not maintain a rigid distance from the people they serve and tend to show more empathy for individuals' struggles.

Consumer staff can use characteristics developed while homeless to solve problems. These characteristics may include: knowledge of systems and being street smart; flexibility and patience; know-how to develop alternative approaches; understanding of basic needs/preferences; engagement/peer support; positive role modelling and the ability to fight stigmas by demonstration. They may be able to offer coping strategies and overcome obstacles with information and referral due to their own experience receiving services and facing these obstacles. (Van Tosh in Glasser 1998).

Peer to peer methods of consultation minimise power imbalances and increase the richness of information gathered while adding perceptive insights to the analysis of findings and the ability to advocate on behalf of consumers.

Engaging consumers as staff has significant benefits for individual consumers in terms of opportunities for meaningful activity and entry to the workforce.

## Weaknesses

There is a necessary role ambiguity in holding the position of staff member and simultaneously being a member of the consumer group. Consumer involvement as staff carries certain risks. The agency must be prepared for the challenges faced by consumer staff (Fisk et al in press, in Glasser 1998). One challenge is the need to overcome client-staff boundaries that can be a source of stress for the consumer staff, especially if they are a former client with the agency. Another is that it can be common for disclosed consumer staff to face some sort of discrimination—whether overt or subtle. Non-consumer staff have been known to treat consumer staff differently, with less respect, than other co-workers.

Other difficulties include having friends who are still clients; not feeling competent enough to do the job as a former client; and other clients wanting to develop a personal relationship with them.

## Example



Crisis is a national charity in UK for single homeless people. It is important for Crisis that the homeless people who use its services—its members—are empowered to break out of homelessness and reintegrate back into society. This is achieved by offering a wide range of activities so that there is something that every homeless person can engage in. Once people are engaged, Crisis works with members to help them progress into further learning and on towards employment.

The Skylight Café, operated by Crisis, offers its members (consumers) a unique training opportu-

nity where they learn about the catering business. As volunteers in the café they develop self-confidence, organisation and communication skills which are so important for people wanting to get back into the workforce. Crisis also has an employment pathway for consumers from volunteer positions into paid employment within the broader organisation.

## For more information...

- Information on Skylight Café viewed December 2007 at <http://www.crisis.org.uk/page.builder/skylightcafe.html>
- <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/publications/downloads/conspar.pdf>
- Glasser, N. (1998). *Giving voice to homeless people in policy, practice and research*. Viewed November 2007 at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/homeless/symposium/5-CONSUMR.htm>
- Tripp (2005) viewed November 2007 at: [http://pathprogram.samhsa.gov/text\\_only/tech\\_assist/transcripts/BenefitConsumerInvolvement\\_7\\_2005.asp](http://pathprogram.samhsa.gov/text_only/tech_assist/transcripts/BenefitConsumerInvolvement_7_2005.asp)
- See also Information Sheet #21: Consumer Consultants.