



Consumer-controlled organisations

Description

In consumer-controlled programs or organisations, the overall strategic direction of the service, including responsibility for financial and policy decisions, is in the hands of the service recipients. The Board or management are ultimately accountable to consumers.

How it works

Consumer-controlled models tend to be underpinned by a philosophical approach in which the ability to give help is seen as a human attribute and not something acquired by education or professional degree.

In consumer-controlled models, consumers are usually members of the organisation and are able to elect the Board which has the legal authority for the management of the service. The consumers, through the Board, determine the service's goals, objectives and priorities. The responsibility for implementing these rests with management and staff.

Boards of consumer-controlled organisations may often include consumers. Consumer-controlled organisations may or may not employ consumers or ex-consumers as staff. Boards and staff may also include non-consumers with desirable skills and a commitment to consumer run organisations.

In addition to consumer involvement in election of the Board, consumer-controlled organisations would normally use a range of other consumer participation processes to ensure that organisational decision-makers stay in touch with consumer views on an ongoing basis.

Degree of participation

Consumer control.

Timeframe

Ongoing.

Resource level required

Medium.

Consumers need access to training and skills development to participate in consultation and election processes. These processes also require other resourcing. Reimbursement and resourcing are required for consumers participating in the Board or other forums.

Strengths

Consumer-controlled programs for homeless people offer consumers a sense of belonging and an opportunity for growth. They are empowering; offering staff and participants a wealth of information and experience. Consumer-run programs show participating consumers that they can live independently and with dignity; the empowerment aspect goes beyond the Board to the people served.

Within consumer-run organisations, the focus of service delivery is on choice, dignity and respect. The concept of choice is central to the success of consumer-run programs and is indispensable for any program that truly serves its clients. Flexibility is important to services for homeless people: it might mean allowing consumers the dignity to make mistakes. Instead of telling clients 'no' or 'we can't do that here', consumer-run programs try to find creative ways to fulfil those needs (Glasser 1998).

Because consumers have had personal experience in the service system—getting or trying to get services—when they put together their own service organisation, they try hard to tailor the system to the client's needs, rather than the client's needs to the system (Van Tosh 1990 in Glasser 1998).

Weaknesses

Consumer control means that the Board and management of the service must ensure that their community and consumers are involved in all major decisions of the service. Like community control, consumer control may become a forum for differences within the community. Conflict must be regarded as one of the processes of participation, to be worked through rather than avoided.

Consumer-controlled organisations face a number of risks. Firstly, the management and professional workers of the service may set their own agenda despite the views of the board and other consumers. It is vital that consumers are able to express their views to the Board on a regular ongoing basis and not just at election time.

Secondly, consumer run organisations face considerable barriers. A common difficulty is finding a location for consumer-run homelessness programs in the face of resistance and stigma from surrounding communities. When neighbours find out that former clients will be running the program, resistance may increase.

Thirdly, a high level of transience of consumers accessing homelessness services can be a potential

barrier in terms of organising elections for Board members. Lack of a steady, adequate income for consumers may also interfere with their ability to act as Board members or stay involved in the process.

Other challenges faced by consumer-run programs include difficulty in obtaining adequate and secure funding for the programs, and difficulty getting cooperation from traditional service agencies.

Many of these barriers are faced by all programs for homeless people, but they may be made more formidable due to scepticism about the ability of consumers to operate programs.


For more information...

- Information on DASSI: <http://www.dassi.com.au>
- Information on National Coalition for the Homeless extracted from a longer article by Nicole Glasser (1998) at: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/homeless/symposium/5-CONSUMR.htm>

Examples

 In Victoria, DASSI (Disability Attendant Support Services Inc) is a consumer-run organisation. All clients are members of DASSI and elect the Board of Management that sets the strategic direction for the organisation. The Board is also made up of consumers and non-consumers with specific skill-sets.

Consumers have input into the decision-making of the organisation through regional Client Advisory Groups that meet twice a year. A client then represents each region at a state-level Client Advisory Group that feeds into the Board of Management. Additionally, DASSI clients are directly involved in developing and reviewing their support plans and actively assist their individual client services coordinator to match attendant support staff to the client's specific needs.

 National Coalition for the Homeless (US) provides a national voice to address issues related to homelessness and poverty. The organisation mandates that 30 per cent of their policy-making board be consumers and also employs two formerly homeless people. The coalition trains consumers in general advocacy skills, including how to be an effective Board member.

