

Merri Outreach Support Service

Consumer Participation Policy

Introduction:

At Merri Outreach Support Service (MOSS) we are committed to providing the best service to our key stakeholders (the consumers of our service) that we can and believe in the principal of continuous improvement. MOSS believes consumers need to be the driving force in policy change and improvements to the service system and service delivery models and consequently MOSS places a very strong emphasis on consumer participation.

MOSS has long had consumers on our committee. At the time of writing we have two consumers on the committee, one being the co-chairperson. Another long term member retired from the committee in late 2006 and is rejoining in 2007/08.

In early 2005 we decided to explore other mechanisms to increase consumer participation and input into service development. We were also looking to improve our evaluation processes.

How we currently ensure consumer participation at MOSS:

The three key mechanisms for ensuring consumer participation at MOSS are:

- The Case Management process
- Consumer groups
- Committee membership

Case Management process:

The fundamental mechanism for consumer participation is the case management and case planning process. Key to effective case management is consumer participation in their case plan. We have a very strong "strength based" focus and believe people have the capacity, knowledge and skills to resolve their issues.

MOSS believes in a partnership and consumer participation focused approach to case planning and that successful long term outcomes depend on the consumer being the "driver" of the case plan. MOSS believes in fostering independence not creating dependence

Consumer groups:

Outside the case management process there needs to be other mechanisms to ensure that the people who we are funded to provide a service to have direct input in to how we provide this service.

In April 2005 we implemented a Consumer Reference Group (CRG). The CRG had an open policy but comprised ten core members. They met monthly and have made a significant contribution to MOSS since its inception. There have been some key outcomes and the group has had a direct positive impact on the day to day running of the service and ongoing improvements in service delivery. The group is winding up in December 2007.

In July 2007 MOSS commenced running Consumer Focus Groups as another evaluation mechanism but also to ensure a range of consumers have the opportunity to participate in policy development, agency planning and program development.

Focus groups will continue to be held in key regional centers to ensure that all clients continue to have the opportunity to participate.

We will be running these regional focus groups every 12 months and smaller issue specific groups as required (eg women who have experienced family violence, young people). The Consumer Focus Groups are replacing the Consumer Reference Groups.

Please note: When consumers participate in consumer focus groups or similar activities (eg research) MOSS compensates them financially for their time. This is usually in the form of vouchers. This recognizes that their time is valuable as is the insight and knowledge we are hoping to learn from.

Committee membership:

As noted in the introduction consumers are encouraged to join the committee. In most instances the consumer will have ceased being supported by a program though this is not a prerequisite. When a consumer joins the committee they are supported by the existing committee members and their support needs are assessed on an individual basis. The agency also provides support, particularly in terms of time (eg for transport). Support needs vary but may include transport, supplying a computer, computer training, setting up email accounts and assistance going through written material if literacy is an issue.

It is important to note that when a consumer joins the committee they are regarded as a representative of the community, rather than a consumer "representative". There is no expectation they will advocate on behalf of consumers generally, though of course their experience of being a consumer of MOSS and the Homelessness Service System will provide important insight and perspective. MOSS recognizes that this insight is a valuable asset to the organisation.

Please refer to the Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest policies for more information related to consumer membership on the committee.

Conclusion:

MOSS is committed to Consumer Participation and beyond the initiatives noted above continues to explore other ways to make participation possible. This is in recognition of the fact that a "one size fits all" approach is not an effective way to approach consumer participation and that an agency needs a range of options consumers can choose from.