

Employment program overlooks critical elements

The Brotherhood of St Laurence, Melbourne City Mission and Hanover Welfare Services, in their recent report, have presented the interim findings of an evaluation of the Personal Support Programme (PSP). The PSP provides intensive case management over a two-year period to job seekers facing multiple personal barriers and aims to achieve increased economic and social participation.

While many elements of the PSP model were found to be in line with good practice approaches identified in research in the European Union and the United States, the following elements are identified as critical are absent from the PSP model.

- adequate resources
- ongoing staff training specific to this client group
- integrated employment or community participation activities for those clients who have the capacity to undertake them
- ongoing barrier-specific post-employment personal support.

Despite high levels of disadvantage and significant barriers experienced by PSP participants, over 70% of clients reported a desire to participate in either employment or further education and training. This indicates that support and investment in capacities rather than the increasingly punitive approach evident in much of Australia's welfare to work policy will be most successful in increasing participation amongst disadvantaged groups.

However, intensive support to enter and stay in the workforce appears to be crucial: 84% of clients state that they would like to stay on PSP after gaining work or starting some other activity. The current model seems to overlook the potential of work to assist in overcoming personal barriers, as well as the different abilities and goals across the client group.

In terms of program delivery, the most significant concern is the inadequate program funding to assist a client group facing such significant disadvantage (recently announced small funding increases may improve this situation but are insufficient).

Other issues that were found to impact on the delivery of the program included referral of clients with mental health support needs exceeding the scope of PSP, and long waiting times between referral and commencement.

The full report can be found at http://www.bsl.org.au/pdfs/PSP_interim_report.pdf