

## **NGO Sector Development Strategy - Mental Health**

The Mental Health Co-ordinating Council has commenced development of a strategy to enhance access to community based services for people with mental health problems and disorders in NSW. The project is funded by the Centre for Mental Health.

Three project officers, Sarah Buxton, Greg Ford and Heidi Freeman, have been employed to undertake this project. Sarah is from the UK. She is a social worker by training, and has worked in residential mental health rehabilitation and with refugees and asylum seekers in many settings. Greg has a background in social work, health policy and research. He has undertaken a range of projects examining emergency department demand, health care complaints, consumers' experiences of health care, and health financing. Heidi has a background in community development, research, policy, adult education, social planning and management.

In order to enhance access to community based services, and to encourage and support the increased provision of services, the project has identified three key focus areas: identity and promotion of the sector, enhancing partnerships, and workforce development. To ensure the project is focused and effective it will seek to identify areas in greatest need of support and development. The project will be looking for factors that currently have a negative impact on effective delivery of mental health services in the NGO sector, and how these could be changed. It will also be identifying factors that are working well with the aim of sharing these amongst service providers.

Over the next three months the project will be carrying out consultations across NSW. The first of these was held at the Mental Health Co-ordinating Council's Annual General Meeting on 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2004. The project officers each facilitated a workshop, the outcomes of which are described below.

### **Identity and setting priorities: Who are we now, where are we going, how will we get there?**

This group had an energetic discussion about their perception of the identity of the sector, and how they would like it to develop,

Some key points to emerge from the workshop include:

- The expertise of NGOs and their staff in providing a diverse range of recovery and rehabilitation services is undervalued by mental health planners and clinicians. This can be undermining for staff, consumers and management committees. Community based mental health organisations are generally highly valued by consumers who may play an active role in delivering, planning and evaluating services. Recognition of NGOs as complimentary service partners, by Area Health Services (AHSs), is crucial in enhancing understanding of the range of approaches which are effective for consumers.
- Participants expressed concern that the NGO mental health sector is constrained by the definition of its work as 'non-clinical'. Strategic health planning documents tend to reflect a division of roles, identifying clinical rehabilitation as the role of AHSs, and disability support as the role of NGOs. The sector needs to continue to develop its diverse role and competency, and to work towards recognition of this. As one participant noted, "support services don't exist in neat boxes".
- Collaboration is seen as a strength in this sector. Different forums exist in different localities, and members take every opportunity to meet with others working in this or related sectors. Isolation is reduced through participating in a network; resources, confidence and professionalism developed, and experiences shared.
- The sector needs a strong framework, strong leadership, and opportunities to meet and collaborate. Increasing the membership of MHCC would give the sector increased strength and authority and the resources to develop a clear political strategy. If networks do not currently exist, MHCC may be able to facilitate their creation.

- Services in rural areas are spread thinly and face many resourcing issues. Strong inclusive networks exist in some areas bringing together workers across the human services sector.

### **Collaboration and Partnerships**

A key aspect of the NGO Sector Development Project will be to support NGOs towards developing strong and effective partnerships with AHSs. One way the project will achieve this will be to demonstrate the complementary nature of services provided by Area Health Services and NGOs, and working with NGOs and AHSs to understand planning and funding issues. We anticipate these will be essential steps to developing a strong and effective partnership approach to service planning and delivery in mental health.

This workshop considered a range of barriers and enablers to collaborative partnerships between Area Health Services and NGOs.

Barriers highlighted by workshop participants included:

- Communication between AHSs and NGOs.
- Attitudinal barriers, including a lack of understanding of the unique role played by NGOs in the mental health system.
- Lack of understanding of qualifications and professionalism of staff working in NGOs. Workshop participants argued there is a strong notion that NGOs can do it 'cheaper' than AHSs. In turn, some people equate 'cheap' with poor quality.
- Cultural issues.
- Funding.

Enablers to effective partnerships highlighted by workshop participants included:

- AHSs and NGOs working to develop an appreciation of each other's work and the circumstances they work in.
- Consistency of approach by AHSs regarding planning and decision making about funding of rehabilitation and recovery services. This includes access to information about factors effecting decision making.
- Promoting the non-government sector as a professionally rewarding career choice for mental health workers.
- Consideration be given to changing 'NGO' title. Some workshop participants expressed a preference for 'community-based organisations'.
- Encouraging active participation by consumers and carers in AHSs and NGOs, for example, on consultative committees.
- Developing formal processes between AHSs and NGOs, such as memorandums of understanding and service agreements.

### **Workforce Development – Building Strength and Quality**

This component of the project will involve working with the systems and structures that shape the sector. It aims to ensure that service delivery is characterised by quality, innovation and evidence based practice. Work will be undertaken on the level of the individual, the organisation and the sector. The project will work with paid and volunteer workers. As well as focusing on specialist mental health NGOs, the project will also work to develop the capacity of other community service providers to deal with the mental health needs of their clients.

With regard to training, issues raised by workshop participants included:

- The need for entry level qualifications in mental health – such as Traineeships and TAFE Certificate IV in mental health.
- Developing appropriate competencies for accreditation and workplace training purposes.
- Setting up a transition process for consumers and carers who are moving into paid work roles within the sector.
- Addressing supervision of staff and volunteers.
- Training needs of staff, managers, management committees and volunteers.
- Liaison with Industry Training Advisory boards.

With regard to organisational development, issues raised by workshop participants included:

- The limited access to computers/internet in the NGO sector may restrict access to information sharing and the development of the NGO sector.
- The value of smaller organisations “piggy-backing” onto larger organisations, utilising resources that are relevant to both. For example, developing joint publicity.
- Sharing information such as generic policies and procedures.

With regard to sector development, issues raised by workshop participants included:

- Learning from the Queensland Alliance, where joint planning and needs assessments (between all those involved in service provision) are developed to identify gaps and plans for development.
- Developing networks, such as those existing within VICSERV, to promote procedural/structural development for senior and middle management and project staff.
- The need to promote cohesion within the sector, such as using the same outcome measurement tools to compare/share information.
- It was recognised that NGOs may be competing for the same funding. Collaborative relationships and information sharing can support service development in the face of competition.
- Participation in networks through phone and e-groups to enable more people to participate, particularly those working in remote locations.

### **Conclusion**

The project officers thank participants for sharing their expertise and knowledge, and for their thoughtful and creative contributions in each workshop. The next phase of the project is to carry out extensive consultations with NGOs and Area Health Services and to begin to address some of the priorities identified in the workshops.

The Project Officers welcome ideas and comments about the project. They can be contacted at the MHCC by phone on (02) 9555 8388 or by e-mail: [sarah@mhcc.org.au](mailto:sarah@mhcc.org.au), [greg@mhcc.org.au](mailto:greg@mhcc.org.au), [heidi@mhcc.org.au](mailto:heidi@mhcc.org.au)