



CMHDARN RESEARCH SEEDING GRANTS 2018/2019

EVALUATION REPORT

NOVEMBER 2019



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2018/2019, member organisations from the Mental Health Coordinating Council (MHCC) and the Network of Alcohol and Other Drugs Agencies (NADA) were invited to apply for the Community Mental Health Drug and Alcohol Research Network (CMHDARN) Research Seeding Grant Program.

The CMHDARN Research Seeding Grant Program provided an opportunity for community-based mental health and/or alcohol and other drugs organisations (AOD) to access one-off grants aimed at building sector and cross sector capacity to undertake research, that is to become 'research ready'.

Three Seeding Grants were awarded during this reporting period. Grant recipients DAMEC and Kathleen York House presented their projects at the CMHDARN Symposium and received positive feedback from attendees. The third grant recipient, Positive Life, determined that they would progress their project through an LHD Ethics process and terminated their grant part-way through the contract with CMHDARN.

All projects reported benefits from participating in the CMHDARN Research Seeding Grant Program in 2018/2019. These benefits ranged from increased understanding of their communities, changes to staffing and data collection methods and increased connections to undertake further research. The projects also reported challenges in undertaking the program, including the time limitations of the program and the difficulties of undertaking ethical processes in short timeframes.

Overall, the Evaluation of the CMHDARN Research Seeding Grant Program found benefit to the organisations involved whilst acknowledging that some changes could make the program more useful and relevant going forward.

INTRODUCTION

The Community Mental Health Drug and Alcohol Research Network (CMHDARN) is a partnership project between the Mental Health Coordinating Council (MHCC), the Network of Alcohol and other Drugs Agencies (NADA) and the Mental Health Commission of NSW.

CMHDARN was established in 2010 with the aim of promoting and supporting involvement in practice-based research conducted by community-based mental health and alcohol and other drugs organisations. The objective of CMHDARN is to develop the skills and competencies of the two sectors in undertaking community-based research endeavours. This objective also focused on promoting peer led research wherever possible.

The overarching aim of CMHDARN is to:

- improve the quality of service delivery and correspondingly, the outcomes for consumers of community-managed services, and
- promote increased understanding and awareness of co-existing mental health and alcohol and other drugs issues.

CMHDARN aims to support organisations by providing opportunities for the exchange of ideas, to share resources, and to network and collaborate with other community organisations and research bodies, including universities and research institutes. This fosters a community of practice, a mechanism for continuous learning that can shape critical thinking and enable innovative practices and approaches to flourish.

BACKGROUND

In order to support organisations to build the research capacity of the community-based mental health and alcohol and other drugs sectors, the Network shares information and engages with members via its website, workshops, forums, symposiums, through reflective practice webinars and other activities.

It also offers ad-hoc opportunities to apply for grants, including Seeding Grants for CMHDARN to build research capacity which contributes to the body of research across the mental health and/or alcohol and other drugs sectors.

This Evaluation Report reviews a round of Seeding Grants which were offered to the sectors in the financial year 2018/2019.

CMHDARN RESEARCH SEEDING GRANTS – APPLICATIONS

Round 1 – 2018/2019.

In July 2018, Expressions of Interest (EOIs) were sought from members of the Mental Health Coordinating Council (MHCC) and the Network of Alcohol and Other Drugs Agencies (NADA), for one CMHDARN Research Seeding Grant for \$30,000 (excluding GST). Applications were reviewed by a panel of six organisational representatives. Positive Life (Lead Organisation) and ADAHPS were the successful recipient of the Seeding Grant, awarded in August 2018.

Round 2 – 2018/2019

In November 2018, two more Seeding Grants were released for EOIs, each totalling \$9,000 (excluding GST), for members of the Mental Health Coordinating Council (MHCC) and the Network of Alcohol and Other Drugs Agencies (NADA). Two organisations were assessed as successful in November 2018; Australian Drug Foundation Kathleen York House and the Drug and Alcohol Multicultural Education Centre.

The grants were intended to support organisations to develop a research methodology and to identify suitable academic and/or other project partners to collaboratively conduct research. The project proposals could include the development of research questions, exploration of existing and emerging best practice issues, tools and resources and the undertaking of preparatory work, including scoping and mapping studies and literature reviews to apply for larger research funding.

Round 3 – 2018/2019

In April 2019, two more seeding grants were released for applications, totalling \$9,000 each (excluding GST), for members of the Mental Health Coordinating Council (MHCC) and the Network of Alcohol and Other Drugs Agencies (NADA). Unfortunately, no applications were received. Potential reasons for this are discussed in more detail below.

CMHDARN RESEARCH SEEDING GRANTS – SUCCESSFUL RECIPIENTS - PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Positive Life

Positive Life NSW works to promote a positive image of people living with and affected by HIV with the aim of eliminating prejudice, isolation, stigma and discrimination. They provide information and targeted referrals, and advocate to change systems and practices that discriminate against people with HIV, friends, family and carers in NSW. The services include psychosocial, practical and peer support including the Housing Program, Work Ready Program and various social inclusion events.

CMHDARN Research Seeding Grant Project Title: *People Living with HIV (PLHIV), Independent Living and Resilience*

The purpose of the study was to identify PLHIV's lived experiences and competencies that enable navigation and stability in housing circumstances. The objective was to determine intersecting social, environmental and structural factors that impact AOD use, mental health issues and housing stability, with an aim of encouraging resilience strategies and preventing homelessness.

Positive Life undertook a mixed methodology approach, including a desktop literature review to examine the existing evidence on the intersections between HIV, housing circumstances, AOD use and mental health. The researchers then proposed to do an online survey to gather cross-sectional data about support needs in relation to independent living and homelessness and conduct qualitative interviews with individuals who had / have a lived experience of moderate to severe mental illness, AOD use, and have accessed housing services.

Due to the time constraints of the CMHDARN Research Seeding Grant Program and the necessity for approval from a Human Research Ethics Committee to undertake the online survey and qualitative interviews, Positive Life ceased their funding arrangement. However, the initial funding was used to conduct a literature review and begin the ethics application process, including the creation of a Questionnaire, a Participant Information Sheet and conduct an analysis for relevant themes for the qualitative interviews.

Kathleen York House

Kathleen York House is a long-term rehabilitation centre that supports women to overcome substance dependence and to reduce its harmful impacts on their lives, and the lives of their children, families and on the community.

CMHDARN Research Seeding Grant Project Title: *Understanding the needs of women seeking treatment for substance use disorders in NSW*

The research aimed to assess treatments needs for women in NSW with substance use disorders (SUD) by utilising data extracted from the “NADAbase” to determine the characteristics of women entering women-only SUD treatment services in NSW. The study also aimed to examine the levels of psychological distress of this cohort. The objectives of the study were to provide the NADA Women’s Network with the opportunity to reflect on the services provided to women with SUD and identify gaps in service provision across NSW by increasing the knowledge of the characteristics of people who accessed these services.

The study was able to examine the data from 3404 women entering treatment between April 2014 and December 2018, with most clinical episodes originating in residential services. Initial results indicate the following; the median age for entry to residential services was 33; the most commonly reported principal drug of concern was amphetamine, followed by alcohol and; the majority of clients with completed psychological distress measures showed high levels of distress.

The CMHDARN Research Seeding Grant has supported this research and enabled data analysis that would not otherwise have been conducted, giving the services involved in the study an in-depth and accurate look at the clients entering their services. The information gathered will be utilised to design services and programs that meet the needs of the clients that are accessing these services. Furthermore, the funding through CMHDARN has allowed for an opportunity to establish a research protocol around the NADAbase and to test the data quality, benefiting future research projects that will utilise this dataset.

The researchers are preparing articles for peer-review publications and which will also be distributed in CMHDARN Connect.

Drug and Alcohol Multicultural Education Centre

The Drug and Alcohol Multicultural Education Centre (DAMEC) provides culturally responsive AOD outpatient counselling and other activities to reduce the burden of AOD related harms including mental health issues among culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities in NSW.

CMHDARN Research Seeding Grant Project Title: *A consultation on the needs and experiences of people from Iran living in Greater Sydney, NSW who may face AOD and mental health related issues*

To date very little is known about the specific needs and experiences of AOD misuse and mental health related concerns for people from Iran residing in Greater Sydney. The research project funded through the CMHDARN Research Seeding Grant aimed to draw on the personal insights of consumers from Iran who are currently engaged in a variety of harm minimisation and wellbeing strategies through DAMEC, STARTTS services and/or Narcotics Anonymous (NA) Farsi speaking meetings. The consultation sought to identify consumers-led ideas relating to the needs and experiences of people from Iran living in NSW. This includes understanding if co-occurring issues of AOD

use and mental health are relevant and what strategies for service provision and other help seeking behaviours are needed. Consumers were also invited to reflect on what is required if further investigation/study is undertaken. The research project funded through the CMHDARN Research Seeding Grant achieved the following:

- Improved dialogue and engagement of DAMEC’s Iranian migrant male consumers through a participatory action and culturally responsive research approach
- Improved understanding of pre and post migration patterns of AOD use and related harms of Iranian migrant men living in Greater, Sydney who have accessed DAMEC services
- Improved understanding of the complex bio-psychosocial health needs of Iranian migrant men who have accessed DAMEC services including the prevalence of trauma symptomology, loss, marginalisation and social exclusion
- Improved understanding about service needs in health, social and human services sectors including AOD counselling and complex case management assistance for Iranian migrant men who may face co-occurring AOD and mental health issues
- The research reinforced Farsi speaking DAMEC staff’s concerns relating to particular AOD use and harms, settlement and acculturation issues, social exclusion and marginalisation/loneliness and intergroup challenges of self-generated help seeking behaviours amongst cohort of Iranian male consumers
- Farsi speaking DAMEC staff used findings to further enhance response and services to the former consumer group. This included hosting relevant services to provide information and Q&A sessions to DAMEC’s Farsi speaking consumers, in house-psychoeducation programs, supported referral pathways to Housing, GP’s and other services while continuing to meet an increased demand for AOD bilingual counselling for Iranian consumers.
- The research reinforced consumers’ reverence and value of DAMEC’s services with particular reference to the provision of culturally responsive AOD counselling and complex case management
- The research highlighted the need for an expansion of DAMEC services for Iranian migrant men based on complexity of needs, lack of alternative culturally responsive service provision, positive evaluation and uptake of DAMEC services through peer and word of mouth referrals by Iranian consumers/participants

DAMEC is currently preparing an article for publication in peer-reviewed journals after receiving approval from a Human Research Ethics Committee.

SEEDING GRANTS EVALUATION

AIM

The aim of this evaluation is to determine if the CMHDARN Research Seeding Grant Program met the intended objective of supporting organisations to become 'research ready'. This was to be achieved by awarding seeding grants to community-based organisations to enhance the development of a research methodology and to identify suitable academic and/or other project partners to collaborate on conducting the research/project.

FINDINGS

Summary of Seeding Grant Project Achievements

Key Benefits of the Seeding Grant Program

Each project funded by the CMHDARN Research Seeding Grant program reported numerous benefits, including increased understanding of the people who access the service and changes to their processes in terms of data collection and staffing levels.

Organisations that had specific research questions benefited most from the Seeding Grant Program. Those organisations with dedicated researchers within their service or established relationships with academic institutions tended to benefit more than those who did not.

Key Challenges in undertaking the Project

The key challenge identified by all recipients of this program was the time limit for the projects. It was reported by all that six months was not enough time, especially when most research projects funded through the CMHDARN Research Seeding Grant Program were required to go through formal ethical review before commencing the research project.

Surprisingly, the offering of a third round of Seeding Grants in 2018-2019 did not result in any applications. The CMHDARN Reference Group and CMHDARN Operations Committee discussed potential reasons for the lack of applications, including the timeframe issue (as above), the small amount of money available for each grant and the ability and capacity for organisations to complete research related to both mental health and alcohol and other drugs. Given that no applications were received, it was hard to ascertain why organisations did not respond. However, the 2019/2020 CMHDARN newly conceived "Innovation and Evaluation Grant" with an extended timeframe and more funding attached did attract applications, indicating that the issues identified by the Reference Group and Operations Committee had merit. CMHDARN will continue to work with the Mental Health Commission of NSW and NADA to structure any future seeding grants to best suit the needs of the services that will most benefit.

Impact on the Organisations

Improved knowledge and skills in research

The organisations who received a CMHDARN Research Seeding Grant reported increased knowledge and skills in research, particularly in relation to research utilising a participatory action framework. This included increased skills in negotiating complex network relationships and the complexities of working with marginalised populations within this framework. As the two completed projects were conducted by researchers with prior experience, neither reported significant amounts of change in this area, however, both reported learnings around the implementation of this model.

Improved confidence about research activity

All three projects in 2018/2019 indicated an improved confidence with regards to research activity. The flow on effect of the Seeding Grant projects created further opportunities for growth for all participants, in areas such as collaboration with research partner organisations, collaboration with other agencies undertaking similar work, increased understanding of the need for and use of research throughout the organisation and feeling confident to take research to a Human Research Ethics Committee.

Workers have an increased capacity to undertake research and apply evidence in their work (individual and organisation)

The workers directly involved in the research demonstrated and expressed increased capacity to undertake research. This was demonstrated by some of the projects continuing with and building upon the research started under the CMHDARN Research Seeding Grant Program. The evidence gathered during the research projects will be used to inform broader organisational change, including assessing staffing levels and types, database development and data collection processes for future research.

Better access to resources and information about research

One project reported an increase in access to resources and information with formal linkages made to a research institution. Another reported increased access to resources and research through their academic partnership which continues even though the Seeding Grant project has ceased.

Improved knowledge about MHAOD issues (individual and organisation)

In one project the research funded through the CMHDARN Research Seeding Grant Program resulted in a better understanding of prevalence rates of AOD use in a specific community. This improved knowledge led to a more developed understanding about services needs and enhanced responsiveness to the needs of the group who undertook the research.

Another project looked specifically at the characteristics of people entering services from a specific population group. This project will greatly increase the knowledge of mental health and AOD use in the communities examined and will be distributed broadly to several networks in NSW.

Practice and cultural change

All projects reported that research led to changes practice and culture within their organisation. Specifically, changes were made to meet the needs of the communities and people who access the service reflecting the increased knowledge services have acquired about the needs and characteristics of the communities they serve. Also, the services reported having become more receptive to research in general. One service conducted an audit of their data

collection systems as a result of participating in the research and subsequently implemented changes to data collection strategies.

Consumer Participation changes

The projects utilised a participatory action framework and thus consumer / client involvement was key to the design of their research. As a result, improved communication pathways from clients / consumers to the organisation were established.

Improved networks

Research Partnership

One grant recipient reported that research capacity had grown in their organisation as a direct consequence of the strengthening relationships with their research partners. Another reported that formal links to an academic institution were established as a result of the research supported by this program.

Other Partnerships

Seeding Grant recipients reported that no other partnerships were developed. This is not unexpected as all Seeding Grant recipients in 2018/2019 work in both the mental health and alcohol and other drugs sectors and thus did not need to create other partnerships to work across these sectors. Furthermore, the limited time for each grant did not allow for partnership development that did not directly relate to the research undertakings.

Ethical Considerations

All Seeding Grant applicants undertook ethical review from both a Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) and the CMHDARN Research Ethics Consultation Committee (RECC). The projects reported that the ethical processes were beneficial, but nonetheless having to go through both committees was cumbersome.

The communities within which most AOD and mental health services work would usually be classified as “vulnerable” according to the National Health and Medical Research Council and thus do not meet the definitions for low or minimal risk of harm from a human research ethics perspective.¹ Thus, it would be useful to consider how to streamline processes to ensure that CMHDARN Research Seeding Grant projects endorsed by an HREC that also need to go to the CMHDARN RECC, do so without placing unnecessary extra burden on the recipients.

Increased participation in research related activities

All projects undertaken in 2018/2019 through the CMHDARN Research Seeding Grant Program intend to publish their results in peer reviewed journals, therefore the results will be disseminated widely and will add to the richness of the literature available in mental health and alcohol and other drugs in a service delivery context. Further, the projects plan to distribute their results to their networks and through the networks of CMHDARN, MHCC and NADA.

It is difficult to measure whether research related activities will increase due to this dissemination as causality is not able to be determined. However, we are optimistic that the increased visibility of community managed and non-government organisations conducting research will result in increased participation by others.

¹ <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/national-statement-ethical-conduct-human-research-2007-updated-2018>

CONCLUSION

The CMHDARN Research Seeding Grant Program in 2018/2019 provided organisations with much needed funds to support practice-based research. Organisations reported many benefits from being involved in the program. There were some suggestions for changes to future grant rounds which have been implemented by CMHDARN.

The CMHDARN Research Seeding Grant Program in 2018/2019 met the intended objective of supporting organisations to become 'research ready' and set up organisations to continue research into the future.

CMHDARN wishes to express its thanks to all the participants who have contributed to these projects including the researchers, mentors and collaborators, but particularly the consumers and clients of services who have participated in the studies and provided feedback on services and programs.