

Support worker forums 2018: Auckland

Te Pou o te Whakaaro Nui and Platform Trust held three support worker forums in July 2018. Support workers are the largest occupational group in the adult mental health and addiction workforce.¹ Support work roles have evolved to be very diverse in nature, and the size of this workforce has been forecasted to grow substantially. The purpose of the forums was to discuss the key questions in *Fast Track: challenges and opportunities for the community support workforce*, and to identify strategies for further growth and development of the support workforce.²

A total of 57 people attended the forum held in Auckland on 19th July. Most were from NGOs (around 70 per cent), 21 per cent from DHBs, and four people from educational institutes. There was a diversity of roles including community support workers, consultants, peer support workers, and peer support specialists.

The forums involved panel speakers who shared local stories of innovative practice, and open space group discussions about the key issues identified in Fast Track. In each of the group discussions, the key discussion points were recorded onto A3 sheets of paper. Groups were asked to identify the top three issues for each area, and individual attendees also rated their top three priority areas. Themes were analysed based on the written notes recorded during group discussions, and facilitators' feedback from the discussions is also included in this report.

Themes from the Auckland forum

In the Auckland forum, training and development was most commonly rated as a top priority, followed by health and wellbeing, and role clarification. The following sub-sections are presented in the prioritised order.

Training and development

In Auckland, the discussion focused around the specific skills that would be useful for support workers. This includes alcohol and drug training, and cultural training. Attendees were concerned by the potential discrepancies between the Health and Wellbeing Level 4 qualification and what is required in the role. Feedback indicated organisations can support the workforce by providing ongoing training, supervision and clear pathways to other roles or professions.

¹ Reference: Te Pou o te Whakaaro Nui. (2015). *Adult mental health and addiction workforce: 2014 survey of Vote Health funded services*. Auckland: Te Pou o te Whakaaro Nui.

² The key questions in the Fast Track discussion paper included: recruitment and retention; training and development; professionalism; education and career pathways; role clarification; and health and wellbeing. Health and wellbeing is not part of Fast Track but was added for the forums at the request of the advisory group. The Fast Track discussion paper is available on the [Te Pou website](#)

Health and wellbeing

Feedback largely focused on how organisations can support health and wellbeing among support workers. This includes greater flexibility in the role, good leadership, and meaningful team building. Attendees also acknowledged their own responsibility in maintaining health and wellbeing: “our work is not separate from other aspects of life - one can enrich the other”. Training and supervision (particularly external supervision) were also highlighted as important factors for health and wellbeing.

Role clarification

The discussion in Auckland largely focused on the scope of practice for support workers. Working with people involved a variety of responsibilities, including building rapport and networks, setting goals, advocacy, driving, and interfacing with other social or health services. Attendees highlighted a need to be valued by clinicians as a team member and improve the handover of information.

Education and career pathways

Attendees identified the top three priorities or issues for this area. The most important issue was the recognition of industry-based qualifications. Secondly, attendees indicated education for support worker should have a New Zealand focused approach. Thirdly, there is a need for more promotion and career opportunities to move in leadership roles or other professions.

Professionalism

The main issue identified was the need to be recognised and value for the work that support workers do: “we are the door openers and the bridge between clinical and the person”; “support workers are the ones that build the rapport with people”. Support work often crosses-over with clinical assessments and interventions, and this also needs to be acknowledged. The role of training, modules, and qualifications in relation to professionalism were also discussed.

Retention and recruitment

Attendees identified the top three priorities or issues for this area. The most important issue was the need for coordinator roles that “coordinates and oversees where students and graduates will serve their placement”. Secondly, induction and orientation processes are important for retention and recruitment, but attendees noted that these processes vary across services. Thirdly, attendees indicated a need for DHBs and NGOs to work closer together to remove the silos.

Conclusion

The forums provided an opportunity for support workers to discuss the priorities and issues that are important for developing the workforce. The feedback gathered from all three forums will be used to guide further discussions in the upcoming national support work summit in December 2018.