

Support worker forums 2018: Christchurch

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 40 people attended the forum held in Christchurch on 17th July. Over 90 per cent were from NGOs. There was a diversity of roles including community support workers, peer support workers, and youth workers.

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 in the national feedback

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

Health and wellbeing

The discussions in Christchurch largely focused on how organisations can support health and wellbeing among support workers. Attendees highlighted the importance of having clearly defined breaks, health and safety processes, and supportive leadership. Training and supervision were also identified as important factors for promoting health and wellbeing.

Training and development

Attendees discussed the Health and Wellbeing Level 4 qualification, other support work qualifications (Addictions Level 7 and Bachelor of Health and Wellbeing), and models for adding-on

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](#)

specific skill training. Life skills, different care settings, and the distinction between generalist and specialist roles were also discussed.

Education and career pathways

Attendees identified the top three priorities or issues for this area. The most important issue was accessibility to training, which needs to be flexible, affordable and geographically accessible. Secondly, training needs to be service appropriate. Examples of service appropriate training include the Alcohol, Smoking and Substance Involvement Screening Test (ASSIST), Individual Placement and Support (IPS), cultural approaches, communication and de-escalation. Thirdly, having clear role boundaries, ethics and the development of a governing body were also identified as priorities.

Professionalism

The discussions focused on being recognised and valued as support workers, as well as increasing credibility and unity through the development of a professional body. Greater access and funding for training and supervision were highlighted as factors that support professionalism among support workers.

Retention and recruitment

Feedback focused on how the workforce is perceived by the public, and attracting more Māori, Pasifika and Asian peoples to join the workforce. This will involve promoting awareness of the sector and services, addressing stigma in the community, and recruitment strategies that map out a clear career pathway.

Role clarification

Attendees identified the top three priorities or issues for this area. The most important issue was the context or setting of the work; “different skills in different settings”. Secondly, attendees indicated a need for better understanding of the qualifications and experience required to move into senior roles. Thirdly, being recognised and valued as professionals is important for the role clarification of support workers.

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.

