

Support worker forums 2018: Wellington

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 45 people attended the forum held in Wellington on 18th July. Most were from NGOs (around 70 per cent), 24 per cent from DHBs, and two people from educational institutes. There was a diversity of roles including community support workers, peer support workers, navigators, and service coordinators.

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 Wellington forum

In the Wellington forum, health and wellbeing was most commonly rated as a top priority, followed by training and development, and education and career pathways. Wellington attendees were also asked "What are the tasks or functions of a support worker?". The responses focused on the personal values and attributes of support workers (eg respect and compassion), the role of building relationships and social networks, clinical skills (eg care planning, making referrals and de-escalation), and tasks related to daily life and independence.

The following sub-sections are presented in the prioritised order.

Health and wellbeing

The Wellington discussion focused on how organisations can support health and wellbeing among support workers. Attendees highlighted a need to ensure support workers feel safe in their roles. This will involve ongoing risk assessment processes "that take in consideration the effect on the

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](#)

support worker”. The importance of training and supervision were also emphasised; support workers want “enough training to do the job and feel safe”.

Training and development

Attendees discussed the need to increase the accessibility and quality of support worker training. Suggestions included streamlining access to apprenticeships, providing training funds, and developing a professional body. Organisations can provide support by ensuring support workers have opportunities for ongoing supervision and upskilling, as well as acknowledging lived experience.

Education and career pathways

The feedback largely focused on support factors and barriers. As above, attendees highlighted the need to increase the accessibility and quality of support worker education and training. The cost of training and limited pay scales was identified as barriers for support workers. Support workers would like opportunities to teach others and have “support worker led days of learning”. Attendees also discussed the potential of staircasing or mapping out career pathways in relation to the Health and Wellbeing Level 4 qualification to help clarify career opportunities.

Professionalism

Attendees indicated the need to be recognised and valued for the work that support workers do, as currently there is “not enough recognition for the role” and there is a sense of being “under-appreciated”. Barriers to professionalism were also discussed, these include health and safety challenges, limited opportunities to upskill, and uncertainty about what costs are covered by organisations.

Role clarification

The discussion focused around the concept of “same role but different job title eg navigator”. Attendees acknowledged the distinction between peer support workers and other support worker, as well as the role of DHB orderlies. Role descriptions are influenced by training, care settings, boundaries, and payroll definitions.

Retention and recruitment

Feedback largely focused on how support workers are perceived by the public (“what do the public think?”), and how the workforce can attract new population groups, such as people on working holiday visas, new immigrants or refugees. Supervision was identified as an important factor for retention, and the recruitment of casual support workers were identified as a current challenge.

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.