



## LACK OF FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO THE COMMUNITY SERVICE

### SECTOR FOR STAFF TRAINING/PROFESSIONAL

### DEVELOPMENT

By

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#### *Preamble*

The very nature of Community Services is not as clear cut as it would appear to most Australians. The sector is very broad in its approach and scope. It is not the same as it was 150 years ago and it has been greatly influenced by the changes in society, culture, economics and government policy.

According to the latest Australian Bureau of Statistics data:

At June 2000, there were 9,287 employing businesses and organisations which provided community services, a 15% increase since June 1996. 341,447 employees worked for community service organisations - a 7% increase in the four years since June 1996. 81% of employees worked directly on community service provision. There were 299,413 volunteers working at some time during June 2000 on community services activities, a 25% increase since June 1996 (***Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001***).

There is no doubt that the numbers of people being employed in the Community Services Sector has continued to grow at a rapid throughout the years since that report was published. In 2006 there were approximately 268,400 people employed (220,800 Full Time Equivalent) in community services industries in Australia, representing 2.6% of all employed persons across all industries. This translates to 1,403 FTE community service workers per 100,000 population in Australia. The number of persons employed in community services industries increased by 16% between 2001 and 2006. This compares with a 12% increase across all industries (***Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) Australia's Welfare 2007, p 331/3***).

People who are wanting to access a Community Service organisation do so for many different reasons, including financial assistance, crisis care, housing – short term and long term, domestic violence, family support, to name only a few. Organisations who deal with these issues, find that there is a need to have skilled and qualified staff to manage what can be very sensitive matters while at the same time ensuring that all Australians feel and experience social inclusion and not exclusion, as has been experienced in the past because of their presenting concerns or issues.

As a result, seeking to have the most appropriate and qualified person to manage a service or a program within an organisation has become a high priority and one of the most challenging outcomes facing the Community Services Sector over the last decade. Not only is it challenging to select the most appropriate and qualified person, it has become an ongoing challenge in providing training (both general and professional development) that will result in the retention and development the workforce thus providing a service of the highest standard to the community of focus and meet government expectations.

The level of education needed has become a key component of any job description and from anecdotal evidence provided by a number of managers and workers, there is a clear indication that although a person may have qualifications, they may not meet all the requirements of the position. Many staff are employed with the understanding that they will undertake the required courses of study to make them skilled. However, organisations, due to budget restrictions, are limited in what they are able to fund when looking at up skilling (that is professional development) their staff.

Many have to rely heavily on government run courses, or other organisations, which are able to offer courses, at reasonably cheap prices, when offering training to staff. Many workers in the sector are having to fund their own education due to little or no funding from the service being available for them to access, while at the same time they are employed to carry out programs where they have no previous experience in, but have been employed because of their life skills and because there were no other suitable applicants for the position.

Governments have in the past provided funding for specific projects, such as the development of NGO (Non Government Organisation) standards in Queensland and in Victoria a grant of \$160 000 translated into \$550 000 worth of training and development delivered to community organisations. Over 700 organisations received free training, and 100 organisations were matched with skilled volunteers (***VCOSS State Budget Submission 2009-10 Pg 36***).

Training and up skilling (professional development) is encouraged by the sector and is also an expectation under government funding guidelines, but the government in its funding agreement offers very little in the way of financial support to organisations who are looking at staff to up skill or gain further qualifications. There is an expectation that staff look for opportunities of improving their skills through either attending training courses, enrolling in a TAFE, University or other private providers of tertiary education. This is a financial and time consuming cost to staff, while at the same time maintaining their productivity in the workplace. A number of concerns have been raised by the sector about training qualifications and ongoing professional development. These include: a lack of recognition by employers of some qualifications; failure to acknowledge prior learning; training does not match skills required to complete the job and; the perception that the wider community does not recognise professional capacity or qualifications. While the *Showcasing the Community Sector* project does not focus on training standards, understanding industry and government attitudes around training and qualifications is important given the potential for conflicting messages to arise from the need to boost professional recognition on the one hand, while on the other targeting job candidates without formal qualifications but relevant life experience (***Recruitment and Retention in the Community Sector: A snapshot of current concerns, future trends and workforce strategies*** the Victorian Council of Social Service 2007. **Pg 7**). In the main this affects small to medium size community service organisation who's staffing level does not exceed 10 to 20 workers.

At the same time, TAFEs, Universities and other private providers of tertiary education compete for the small pool of training dollars that the government makes available to community organisations. They often have to tailor a course to suit a service, rather than a standard generic course, which is of a financial cost to them and time consuming to implement. This cost is then passed on to the service, who in turn struggle to financially afford the training and withdraw from proceeding with the training. The capacity building of an organisation is greatly diminished when this happens.

### *Proposal*

One of the major issues that need to be addressed is the amount of financial assistance that government provide to the Community Services Sector for the training and up skilling of staff, separate to the funding that it provides for the management of a service. The funding of a training package should reflect on the level of qualifications required to manage a program and services should then be recruiting accordingly. Services should be able to contact an education provider to seek support for training, while at the same time an education provider should, in consultation with the service, provide a training program that is relevant, but not necessarily tailored, to the program and provision of service.

As a private provider of tertiary education who is actively working to support the Community Service Sector we recognise the need for organisations to have appropriately qualified and trained staff to manage programs within a Community Service organisation. We recognise the growth of the organisation through capacity building is through the ongoing development and training of its staff. This capacity building can only be achieved through the investment of finance for small to medium size organisation that struggle to fund suitable training programs for their staff and increase the capacity of the service to their community of focus.

The recommendation I propose to the Productivity Commission is to include in its review the level of financial support, or lack of it, that government provide to the Community Service Sector for the provision of training and professional development of all staff within the sector, for small or medium services provision in the field.