

Peer Workforce Development Guidelines

Outcomes of workshop at the 2019 TheMHS Conference

29 August 2019, Brisbane

Workshop overview

The 2019 The Mental Health Services (TheMHS) Learning Network Conference took place in Brisbane from 28 to 30 August. On the second day of the conference, the National Mental Health Commission (NMHC) facilitated a workshop on the development of National Peer Workforce Development Guidelines.

The workshop was led by Daya Henkel, Senior Policy Officer in the Mental Health Reform team at the NMHC, alongside Margaret Doherty and Tim Heffernan, the Deputy Co-Chairs of the Peer Workforce Development Guidelines Steering Committee.

Approximately 60 people participated in the workshop. Participants included peer workers, other members of the mental health workforce, service providers and planners, and policy-makers.

Vision for the peer workforce

At the beginning of the workshop, participants were asked to outline their vision for the peer workforce in Australia.

Common themes in the vision statements provided by participants included the following:

- The peer workforce is recognised, supported and valued
- Peer workers are employed across all mental health services and embedded throughout the mental health system; representation of lived experience perspectives across all levels
- Peer work is seen as a profession, equal to other professions in the mental health workforce
- Additional support structures are in place to sustain and develop the peer workforce (e.g. professional supervision and mentoring, peer networks)
- Sufficient resourcing is available for peer work roles, and peer workers receive adequate and fair remuneration
- Training is available to support the development of a skilled peer workforce.

“Vibrant peer workforce in every mental health service”

“[Peer work is...] a rainforest in desert places”

Current situation

Workshop participants were then asked to brainstorm what *is* and *isn't* working well in supporting and developing the peer workforce in Australia.

Some of the positive areas highlighted by participants included:

- the availability of specific qualifications for peer workers, particularly the Certificate IV in Mental Health Peer Work
- the recent increase in peer worker roles and the growing momentum for greater support and expansion of the workforce, including government support (national and jurisdictional) for peer workforce development
- the emergence of peer-led organisations and support structures, such as networks, communities of practice and peer supervision.

“[There is a] cultural shift toward embracing the roles”

“Peer work plays a role in bridging the gap and improving relationships between mental health services and community agencies”

“Recognition for specific skill sets for different peer workers”

Some of the challenges identified by participants included:

- limited and unstable resourcing for peer work roles, including a large casual workforce
- insufficient remuneration for peer workers (with some noting that remuneration levels are significantly below those of other mental health professions)
- lack of targets for growth of the peer workforce in policy
- lack of clarity and consistency in role descriptions, definitions and expectations for peer workers, including inconsistent use of language and terminology
- lack of understanding and recognition of peer work, and negative attitudes towards the peer workforce
- inadequate support structures for the peer workforce, particularly peer supervision
- limited career pathways, with several participants noting the lack of senior and leadership roles for peer workers
- limited opportunities for professional development and training, particularly in regional and rural areas.

“Limited availability of peer supervisors - limits opportunity for training of new peer workers”

“Setup, recognition and support still not there”

“[There is a] reticence for organisations to change position descriptions to peer roles”

“Peer role not clearly defined ... difference between ... having lived experience and being designated peer worker (both valuable but different)”

“Not enough recognition for minority groups (LGBTIQA+ and CALD)”

Ideas for improvement

“Recognition of specialist knowledge of lived experience”

“Peer workforce targets (%) at policy and funding levels”

Workshop participants shared a range of ideas to improve support for, and development of, the peer workforce. These ideas included:

- enhancing access to professional development and training opportunities
- improving recognition, valuing and respect for the peer workforce
- ensuring that the peer workforce is adequately resourced and remunerated
- supporting the development of a more diverse peer workforce to better meet the needs of the community (e.g. dedicated youth peer work roles, Aboriginal peer work roles)
- developing additional practical resources (e.g. training, guidance materials, policies and procedures) and support structures (e.g. forums, networks and supervision and mentoring) to assist both peer workers themselves and organisations employing peer workers.

“Funding for peer workers to undertake and complete Cert IV qualification”

“System of accreditation and ongoing CPD requirements”

“Diversity of peer work to break down intersectional barriers and create safe spaces for members in the community”



Next steps

The TheMHS workshop was the first major face-to-face consultation on the Peer Workforce Development Guidelines after the Peer Workforce Leaders Roundtable. Additional engagement activities will take place over the coming months.

Information gathered during engagement activities (including the TheMHS workshop) will be used to inform the development of a draft version of the Guidelines. The NMHC hopes to release the draft for public consultation in the second half of 2020, with a view to finalising the Guidelines in 2021.