



“Occupational health, safety and welfare (OHSW) means coming home from work in the same condition in which I went, not coming home hurt, ill or distressed from my work life.”

- ASU member

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Recommendations For Building A Safe And Healthy Community Sector Into The Future

Produced by



Australian Services Union
(SA and NT Branch)



The community services sector is one of the fastest growing in South Australia.

As is the case globally, in SA the sector faces increased responsibilities and regulation with less funding, competition for scarce resources and a predominantly female workforce strongly motivated by values and commitment to their work but impacted by heavy workloads, long hours and low pay.

Community services workers work with some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of our community at all stages of the life cycle. They work at the coal face of need undertaking a range of roles in disability support organisations, neighbourhood houses, large church based organisations, environment centres, peak bodies, employment programmes, emergency accommodation, Aboriginal organisations, community legal centres, to name a few.

Given the client group of the sector, which commonly includes vulnerable adults, families and children at risk, it is imperative that community service agencies have skilled staff, effectively trained and engaged in good health and safety practices and structures. These structures and practices must focus on the occupational health, safety and welfare (OHSW) issues specific to this sector and OHSW must be seen as a key issue for workers and employers alike, despite the many competing demands workers and employers in this sector face.

The South Australian Government's Health and Safety Workplace Partnership Programme 2007 is an important component of the South Australian Government's efforts to make South Australian workplaces safer. The ASU won funding through this programme to undertake its Safe Workplaces, Healthy Community - Building Community Sector Health and Safety Project. Under the auspices of this Project the ASU has conducted a survey of workers in the sector which identified OHSW issues specific to the community sector, provided insight into why these issues arise and a clearer understanding of the level of OHSW structures in the sector and their effectiveness. This survey was supplemented by numerous visits to organisations, discussions with various employers and focus groups for community sector workers conducted in October 2008.

The following sets out recommendations for working together across the sector and in partnership with Government and all sector stakeholders to achieve the best possible OHSW awareness, structures and practices in the sector which will ensure we build safe workplaces and a healthy community sector equipped to continue to provide high quality services into the future.

Sincere thanks to ASU members for their ongoing commitment to strengthening the sector for the benefit of the clients with whom they work and the amazing work that they undertake every day, all survey participants for sharing their experiences, ASU staff for their outstanding work on so many aspects of our Project, various employers whose willingness to work together to strengthen the sector and their generosity with their time and provision of information has greatly assisted our work and Kym McIntosh (Southern Junction Community Services) and Karen Grogan (South Australian Council of Social Service) whose help with the preparation of this report was invaluable.

Katrine Hildyard

Branch Assistant Secretary

April 2009

Our Recommendations

Our ultimate goal is safe and healthy community sector workplaces able to provide high quality services into the future.

Based on our survey results, meetings with workers and employers, focus group findings and understanding of the sector, we recommend the sector work with all key stakeholders and government towards the following recommendations which we believe will ensure we achieve our ultimate goal.

These recommendations are broad and through the work of our Project and ongoing collaboration across the sector, we will develop and implement further strategies to achieve them.

Strengthening the Sector

Funding and staffing models to be reviewed

A number of issues broadly affecting the future sustainability of the sector and its ability to continue to provide high quality services emerged throughout our survey. The recommendations below strongly align with the Strong Community Healthy State campaign principles and the recommendations in the ASU's 2007 report - Building Social Inclusion - Priorities for the Non Government Community Sector Workforce - both of which focus on strengthening the sector for the future.

- Review of funding models to ensure adequate resources from funding bodies for appropriate staffing arrangements
- Review of funding models to ensure appropriate focus on OHSW issues, structures, practices and processes by the community sector

- OHSW practices and processes to be part of 'quality' criteria when considering organisations for provision of services rather than simply 'lowest cost' criteria
- Funding for and implementation of new staffing arrangements to improve staff client ratios, ensure safe staffing levels and adequate time for handover, brief/debrief and to reduce the number of casual and agency staff
- Development of mechanisms that facilitate sharing of OHSW resources and best practice across the sector.

Training

Community sector specific training and resources to be developed and delivered

The need to develop material, training, delivery of training and resources which are specific to the community sector in terms of the issues it contemplates as OHSW issues and how it is distributed, delivered and implemented is essential.

- Review of all OHSW accredited training programmes to ensure content reflects issues experienced in the community sector and experiences within each sub-sector
- Development of accredited community sector specific OHSW training
- Delivery of training in more flexible manner
- Increase in training subsidies for non government community service organisations
- Development of mechanisms to improve compliance with requirement for HSRs, responsible officers and committees to be trained by accredited organisations in a timely fashion
- Development and delivery of training for organisational leaders in best OHSW practice, their responsibilities under the legislation including their responsibilities and authority for ensuring the health and safety of employees under their supervision.

- Development and delivery of ongoing basic OHSW training delivered in a flexible and time efficient manner for all workers and employers in the sector on what OHSW encompasses and OHSW rights and responsibilities.

Workplace / Sector Culture

OHSW to be prioritized and more closely linked to high quality service provision

Given that community sector workers increasingly deal with vulnerable clients with increasingly complex needs, OHSW is often not seen and/or acted upon as a priority. Even where excellent policies and procedures have been developed, short cuts are often taken in an environment of high stress, high workloads, high client to staff ratios and staff's desire to meet the needs of clients first and foremost. OHSW must be seen as a priority and as intrinsically linked to the ongoing provision of sustainable and high quality services.

- As per 'Training' recommendation - Development and delivery of ongoing basic OHSW training delivered in a flexible and time efficient manner for all workers and employers in the sector on what OHSW encompasses and OHSW rights and responsibilities
- Development of (with reference to existing best practice models) a generic OHSW induction package for new staff in the sector which is adaptable for organisational context
- Review of all community sector qualifications to ensure OHSW information relevant to the sector is included and implemented as a core competency standard
- As per Strengthening the Sector recommendations, appropriate OHSW induction programmes, practices, processes and structures to be part of 'quality' criteria when considering organisations for provision of services rather than simply 'lowest cost' criteria

Workplace / Sector Culture

Continued..

- Sector wide forum to discuss and develop further ways to shift focus of sector on OHSW
- Prioritisation of OHSW at staff forums at an organisational level
- Development of model OHSW policies and procedures.

Communication

Communication on and understanding of OHSW in a community sector context to be improved

Consultation between all employers, employees, their representatives and their Union on all aspects of health and safety in the workplace are integral to OHSW and supported in the legislation.

- Development of written materials to improve broad understanding by community sector workers of what OHSW incorporates with a particular focus on what sorts of issues can create risk in a community sector context
- Development of written materials on OHSW rights and responsibilities
- Development of a handbook for HSRs to guide dealings with issues, practices, procedures and structures
- Development of portal for community sector specific OHSW resources, training and best practice models
- Publicising of community sector specific best practice models, resources and training
- Publicising of available subsidies/flexibility of education
- Development of a community sector Health and Safety Representative (HSR)/ OHSW practitioner network.

Structures

OHSW structures to be strengthened

HSRs, responsible officers and OHSW committees are pivotal to safe and healthy workplaces.

- As per Communication recommendations - Development of written materials on OHSW rights and responsibilities and development of handbook for HSRs to guide dealings with issues, practices, procedures and structures which include basic advice on election procedures for HSRs and committees
- Inclusion in the broad community sector wide training of information for all employees about their right to elect a HSR from their peers
- Ongoing targeted approach to increasing the number of HSRs in the community sector
- Ongoing targeted approach to increasing the number of OHSW Committees in the community sector.

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