

## **INQUIRY INTO SERVICE COORDINATION IN COMMUNITIES WITH HIGH SOCIAL NEEDS**

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## CentaCare Wilcannia Forbes

### Inquiry into service coordination in communities with high social needs

#### Introduction:

In CentaCare's experience, service users are overwhelmed by the number and diversity of service providers and services. They are uncertain what services are available to them, if and how they can meet their needs and how they can be accessed.

Service users tend to engage with trusted and known providers who have a thorough knowledge of and presence within the community/ region.

#### 1. 'First To Know' Agencies

Historically, 'first to know' agencies such as health services and education providers were often the first agencies to engage with clients and hear about their issues or needs. Individuals and families used to turn to their GP or community health nurse for initial advice. These agencies continue to play a significant part in identifying needs; however they often lack knowledge of support agencies in their community and the types of services they offer. As a result referrals are not made or are inappropriate. The confusion exists as agencies may be funded to deliver a service for a short contracted period of time and then through a re tendering process the provider changes.

#### 2. Client confusion

Service users are confused by the number and diversity of service providers. From a client's perspective the service provider network is complicated, overwhelming and on occasions impossible to navigate; i.e. a parent dealing with a teenager showing early signs of mental illness does not know where to start looking for support unlike a parent whose child is presenting with a tooth ache who knows immediately that the dentist is the first place to visit for assistance. This issue is inflated by

- The short lifetime of programs due to short term funding;
- The tight parameters of programs (i.e. prescribed target group, geographical area);
- The changing names of programs and service providers

Service users are most likely to access a service if there is consistency, simplicity and a continuum of service delivery.

#### 3. Client engagement/ client choice

Individuals enjoy the right of choice. This applies to all aspects of life – what people eat, how people dress, where people shop, which doctor they visit, which school they send their children. The same principle applies to support services. Service users choose the provider based on their own preferences. These preferences may not be based on the expertise of the agency or the services it provides but more commonly are reflective of relationships. Service users are more likely to engage with a service they know and with people they trust. This often becomes even more relevant in small communities with high social needs.

#### 4. Local services/ local employment

Local services employing local staff are more likely to engage service users. In particular service users who have a commitment to employing locally are more readily accepted by community and are likely to engage with individuals and families. These types of agencies have a commitment to upskilling their staff; therefore they empower and enrich community by creating employment and training opportunities.

Short term funding impacts on this commitment making it difficult to support staff through their training to its completion and creating barriers to retaining qualified staff.

#### 5. Service collaboration

Service collaboration can be undermined by competitive tendering. True collaboration will only occur if agencies' outcomes/ targets align. Collaboration needs to be free of 'client ownership' and encourage agencies to withdraw from service delivery if it is in the best interest of the client.

#### 6. Specialised services versus general services

There is an argument for services to be more specialised. Service users would find it easier to navigate their way through the service provider network if service providers were easily categorised with one service being the 'go to service' for mental health, another for family relationships and another for disabilities.

Many agencies have gone down the path of diversification. While this has contributed to the confusion of service users, in many instances it has enabled services to provide a holistic service through a 'one stop shop' model. This model has the benefit of being able to address multiple and complex needs. The client only has to tell their story once and experiences an assuring consistency and continuum of support.

#### Conclusion:

In CentaCare's experience, families with multiple and complex needs turn to a service they know and trust, no matter what programs they are funded for and who their defined target groups are.

These families have an established relationship with the service and the people who work there. They understand that the service cannot respond to all of their needs but they trust that the service acts in their best interest and will assure that they will be connected to the service that best meets their needs.

Therefore the service provider needs to have a solid understanding of the local service provider network and referral pathways. The service provider also needs to be willing to walk with the client through supported referral processes that may support a client to another more relevant service provider.