INQUIRY INTO SERVICE COORDINATION IN COMMUNITIES WITH HIGH SOCIAL NEEDS

Organisation: Western Sydney Community Forum

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The Hon. Bronnie Taylor MP
Chair of the Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues

NSW Parliament Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

24th August, 2015

Submission to the inquiry into service coordination in communities with high social needs

Dear Ms Taylor,

Please find attached Western Sydney Community Forum's submission to the Inquiry into Service Coordination in Communities with High Social Needs.

As the regional peak organisation for Western Sydney, we welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry. We look forward to hearing the results and the impact they will have on communities in Western Sydney.

Should you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me on   .

Yours sincerely,

Billie Sankovic
Chief Executive Officer

Submission to the NSW Legislation Council, Standing Committee on Social Needs

Response to the Inquiry into Service Coordination in Communities with High Social Needs

Introduction

Western Sydney Community Forum (WSCF) is the regional peak organisation for the Greater Western Sydney region. WSCF has a long history of working with our members and partners to build strong communities and a strong service system in the region. We have led and represented social policy and service delivery across Greater Western Sydney for decades and continue to advocate for and champion solutions for regional priorities and challenges.

This submission aims to respond to the *Inquiry into service coordination in communities with high needs* through a solutions based framework by demonstrating best practice examples in areas of high social needs in Greater Western Sydney and capturing key insights from local organisations. Key themes from these consultations are explored along with several recommendations for both micro and macro level solutions.

For the purposes of this submission, two sample areas with high social needs in Greater Western Sydney were selected through the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas 2011 (SEIFA), being Blacktown and Campbelltown. A range of services from these areas were interviewed to ensure that local agencies were consulted and their views represented. These services include but are not limited to Blacktown Area Community Centres, Community Resource Network, Marist Youth Care, Sector Connect, Women's Activities and Self Help House and Youth Solutions. WSCF acknowledges and thanks these agencies for their valuable contribution.

Best practice models for the coordination of services

The following two models of service coordination have shown to be effective in addressing the needs of communities with high social needs in Blacktown and Campbelltown.

Macarthur Real Estate Engagement Project (MREEP)

Through its Homelessness Sector Facilitation Project, WSCF consulted with over 90% of the Specialist Homeless Services and Community Housing service providers in the South Western Sydney region. Through the consultations the major themes which arose was client's difficulty in accessing private rental and the long waiting period for social housing.

As the coordinating organisation, WSCF brought together stakeholders from Specialist Homeless Services, government agencies and Macarthur based real estate agents to discuss potential solutions.

A referral pathway for Real Estate Agents was developed, which allowed tenants to be contacted and supported by the appropriate referral partners. For tenants this meant that they received appropriate and relevant housing support, while real estate agents would not lose the money generated from the loss of rent and all the costly logistical issues involved with evictions.

Over two years of operation, 102 referrals were made resulting in 57 tenancies being saved. The project held a 77% success rate for contactable tenants. Economically, the evaluation showed that $56,000 was saved in the loss of rent as a result of the evictions and up to $1.1 million saved in potential future loss of earnings. Community relationships also began to solidify as real estate agents have been increasingly motivated to contact community services with notifications of vacant properties.

COM4Unity (Connecting Our Minds for Unity)

The COM4Unity project was developed to address the increasing issue of violence and antisocial behaviour of large groups of young people in the WestPoint Shopping Centre and the train station in Blacktown. The project, a collaborative effort between local community services, businesses, NSW Police and Blacktown City Council, engaged with young people and encouraged them to become positive community participants.

Through consultation with local and regional stakeholders, a seven step strategy was created which centred around: "engagement, consultation, participation, mentoring, support, education and training, employment/social inclusion and evaluation" (Wright 2010). The strategy utilised engagement and consultation with young people, which saw local cultural leaders and police actively connect with young people in WestPoint shopping centre and Blacktown train station allowing young people to voice their opinions and needs.

Similarly education, training and employment/social inclusion strategies saw coordinated services between Marist Youth Care providing employment workshops as well as retail operations accreditation courses (TAFE Retail Certificate III) for those young people who had expressed needs for workplace skill development. Furthermore, WestPoint offered space and employment or work experience opportunities for these young people to promote a sense of community ownership and participation.

Service coordination in communities with high social needs

Consultations with local service providers shows that despite a commitment by agencies to provide seamless pathways and services for high needs clients, service coordination can be complex.

Identifying client needs

All local services consulted identified their clients' needs through direct client inquiry using assessments, screenings and evaluations. Several organisations commented that the quality and comprehensiveness of information shared between services had a large impact on the success of any referral which took place.

Services identified their overall client group needs through statistical analysis, local social plans, consultations with focus groups and local advisory groups. Attendance at interagency meetings was identified as an important mechanism for providing a broader perspective on client needs and building inter-agency referral pathways and relationships.

Providing a coordinated response

Organisations reported that referral pathways between organisations, both formal and informal, are the primary method in which a direct coordinated response is provided. These relationships shape an organisation's contact with a client and their involvement in addressing client needs. Unfortunately, as policies of organisations working with the same client can often differ, this may make coordinating support unnecessarily complex.

Collaborative approaches are utilised by organisations to address local social issues. These approaches utilise relationships developed during interagencies, networks and formal partnerships to deliver outcomes for the community. Several organisations stated that the effectiveness of these collaborative projects was heavily reliant on developing achievable outcomes with a focus on actions and solutions.

Barriers to effective coordination

One of the key barriers to service coordination was the difficulty that organisations faced in sustaining relationships which were developed as a result of short term funding. Likewise, organisations reported that while the broadness of funding outcomes allowed for flexibility in delivering services according to client need, expectations that were too broad or vague had the potential to cause confusion for services working together on the same issue.

Poor communication was frequently mentioned as being a barrier to effective coordination. Services specifically identified challenges in communicating across "silos" or funding areas, where different outcomes, language, expectations and boundaries were all potential issues.

Finally, service coverage and saturation was reported as a potential barrier in high needs communities. Organisations reported a concentration of certain services in the same area, resulting in a duplication of services. This was in contrast to other service areas, such as intensive adolescent mental health services, where support was often inaccessible due to geographic locations, long waiting lists and eligibility forcing clients into other less appropriate support.

Recommendations to enhance service coordination

The major goal of these recommendations is not to place sole responsibility on a single entity, but create shared opportunity and responsibility across sectors and industries to create positive change in communities with high needs. The following recommendations have been formulated with input from local service providers.

1. Service Identification and analysis

In areas of high social need, identifying all support services available to clients is vital to ensure that effective levels of service coordination can occur. Analysis is also required to compare levels of service delivery with social needs to effectively identify service gaps. Regional peak organisations play a key role in liaising with local services to not only address coverage issues but build stronger relationships between all services and organisations involved.

2. Long-term investment to build stronger relationships

As demonstrated in the two best practice examples, strong relationships between local services, businesses and stakeholders are vital to creating community centred approaches in communities with high social needs. Building stronger relationships between agencies and sectors requires long-term investment in time and resources. This investment will be invaluable in assisting to overcome several of the barriers articulated earlier, resulting in efficient referrals and better service responses to complex issues.

3. Continue to explore Collective Impact models

As shown in the two best practice examples, the collective impact approach brings together and aligns the efforts of diverse stakeholders around a common agenda for common benefit. In communities with high needs, a coordinating body or backbone organisation needs to effectively facilitate the building of stronger relationships as well as analyse service coverage. The success of this role is contingent on existing connections within the community which can be leveraged to facilitate strong cooperation between services and stakeholders.

4. Continue to fund locally based solutions

Funding locally based solutions in line with identified community need is vital to improving service delivery in areas with high social needs. Locally based service providers have a good understanding of their local communities, clients and service systems. More often than not, these providers can utilise and coordinate existing resources innovatively to address community needs and work towards successful outcomes for their clients.

5. Explore standardised referral and assessment practice

Exploring standardised referral and assessment practice across the service system has the potential to streamline the assessment process so that services are able to collect and share information more effectively. This ensures that other services are then not required to commit more time during intake, resulting in more effective assessments and service delivery. It also provides a streamlined service for clients and communities without the need for duplicated assessments.