

Communique - Community of Peers Project

A Project to undertake a feasibility study into the establishment of a member based organisation for the peer workforce in Australia



The Network Chair and Executive Officer Ms Janne McMahon OAM wishes to advise that the Network has been funded by the Commonwealth Government through the National Mental Health Commission to undertake this Project.

'The Network has formed a Consortium with the National Mental Health Consumer and Carer Forum and the National Mental Health Commission to respond to the significant gap in Australia for a peak entity which can function as a member-based organisation to bring the peer workforce together in this very exciting 18 month project' said Ms McMahon.

She said 'We are very keen to work with a group of peer workers who met at the IIMHL at the end of February, 2017 in regard to a similar approach and the Network is looking to collaborate and work closely with them'.

Peer work is a growing occupational group in the mental health workforce and has been reported to be growing at a faster rate than other disciplines in recent years. However, many peer workers are employed in isolation, and report feeling alienated and alone. Many function with little support, and certainly there appears to be little opportunity for mentoring from peer colleagues.

This increase in the employment of peer workers has been supported by the articulation of peer support workers as a legitimate workforce within the 4th National Mental Health Plan and in part, it may be attributed to the development of the Certificate IV in Mental Health Peer Work for people with lived experience to become trained under a Nationally Accredited Training Scheme.

Not unexpectedly however, as a relatively new occupational group, there is still a lack of shared understanding across the mental health sector more broadly of the definitions, values, skills, practices and challenges in peer work. As such, the unique perspectives, expertise and skills set of this workforce is under recognised and grossly underutilised.

All other mental health professionals have professional bodies or organisations that promote the skills and capabilities of the discipline and advocate strongly for their role within the broader mental health workforce, in addition to providing opportunities for ongoing support and professional development, and access to collegiate networks, mentoring and/or supervision. An example of a highly organised and effective member based organisation in Australia is the Australian Medical Association (AMA) which represents all member doctors, irrespective of their specialisation. The AMA provides collegiate support for members and offers opportunities for professional development.

The Network Deputy Chief Executive Mr Patrick Hardwick said that 'currently the peer workforce in Australia does not have this level of structured representation or support, although it is easy to see the benefit that such an opportunity could provide. A member based organisation for peer workers could similarly offer a clear recognition for workers in this role, support them in their work, and advocate for their collective interests as required' he said.

What is planned for this Project:

1) Australian and international review

A review will be undertaken to determine what constitutes current Australian and international best practice in relation to the peer workforce, including methods to best support the workforce.

2) Understanding the peer workforce

This component will enable us to better understand what is required to support and sustain the peer workforce to deliver best practice. We will seek to ascertain the current number of peer workers employed in Australia, the number undertaking recognised qualifications, and the projected growth in workforce availability over the next decade.

3) National Workshops

We propose to conduct a one day workshop in the capital city of all states and territories for peer workers, services, organisations and employers.

4) Developing a model

The Project will consider options for the development of a member-based organisation. In particular, options that focus on the potential functions of such an organisation, as well as legal and corporate considerations, and sustainable funding will be explored.

5) Collaborate and communicate with other organisations engaged in supporting peer workers.

A critical accompaniment to support the successful implementation of the peer workforce through all settings in Australia is to create an entity which can collaborate, communicate, cooperate and support various activities being undertaken. Close liaison with Mental Health Commissions and others organisations at the local jurisdictional level who are engaged in supporting the peer workforce and/or who are creating material specific to the peer workforce will be critical.

6) Booth at the TheMHS 2017 Conference

The Project will have a dedicated booth at the 2017 TheMHS Learning Network which will be held in Sydney, on the 29th August – 1st September, 2017 at the Hilton Hotel.

7) Educational material focussed on the employer

An additional component we will seek to progress as part of this project will be the development of educational resources focussed at the organisation or employer. Given the work undertaken by the NSW Mental Health Commission in this area, we will seek to do this in collaboration with them.

8) Supporting contributions

The Project will also explore options for organisations such as private psychiatric hospital corporate providers, departments of health, mental health commissions and philanthropic organisations to support this work, either in the short term for the duration of this project or for the entity once established (e.g. via a direct funding contribution or in-kind support).

Project management

Janne McMahon will undertake a Project management role on behalf of the Consortium and the Network.

We want to hear from you!

Register your details now at www.surveymonkey.com/r/peerproject

or contact one of the project team

Email: peers@pmhccn.com.au

Phone: 1800 982 128

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