



DISCUSSION PAPER 3

PEER SUPPORT WORKERS AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR

1 Background

Peer work is the fastest growing occupational group in the mental health workforce.¹ Peer support workers have been employed within the public mental health system and community managed organisations for a number of years but the private sector lags well behind. The uptake of consumer and carer participation has been particularly slow in the private sector and this could possibly be attributed to few private hospitals with psychiatric beds being accredited against the *National Standards for Mental Health Services*.

A few private hospitals have some emerging consumer and carer advisory committees particularly since accreditation against the *National Safety and Quality Service Standards*, 'Standard 2 - Partnering with Consumers' became a requirement of the accreditation process on 1st January 2013.

The employment of peer support workers is increasing partly due to the articulation of peer support workers as a legitimate workforce within the 4th National Mental Health Plan. As with all new occupational groups and services there is a lack of shared understanding of the definitions, values, practices and challenges in peer work. To clarify we must first look at the definition of who a peer support worker is².

Peer Worker:³

Is an occupational title for a person in recovery from a mental disorder or mental health problem.

Peer Workers are employed to work solely within their focus area. The focus area in particular is:

- *People with personal experience of mental health recovery working with people living with mental health issues in order to enable those people to move towards recover.*

There are many tasks performed by Peer Workers, these may include such tasks as assisting people in articulating their goals for recovery, supporting families to enable this, helping people to monitor their progress, assisting them to manage personal wellbeing, modelling and articulating effective recovery strategies based on the worker's own learning and experiences, supporting the person to obtain appropriate

^{1,2,4} *Peer Work in Mental Health*, IIMHL January, 2013

³ *Definition - Peer Worker - Version 3*, 2012 Dodie Bennett, Janet Meagher

and/or effective services and helping them to understand different pathways to recovery.

Peer work, peer workers and peer workforce includes all workers in mainstream or alternative mental health services or initiatives who are employed to openly identify and use their lived experience of mental distress as part of their work. As this workforce develops there is a greater need to create new roles and define the boundaries between them.⁴

The peer workforce roles include but are not limited to:

- **Peer support workers** who provide support for personal and social recovery to people with mental health problems, including in acute mental health services, housing, supported employment, community support etc.
- **Peer advocates** who empower individuals or groups of people with mental health problems to advocate for their rights and needs on a range of issues in a variety of settings.
- **Peer educators** who provide education from a lived experience perspective for other peers, mental health workers or community members.
- **Peer advisors** who work in partnership with mental health service providers to give consumer perspectives at all levels of planning, implementation and evaluation, and provide feedback to service users.

Peer workers can provide many of the same functions as non-peer workers and other professionals however the essence of peer work is not so much the kind of work, rather the bringing to the role the experiences of what it is like to have a mental illness, treatment, hospitalisation and the recovery journey.

2 National Qualification

Public mental health and Community organisations delivering programs across a range of service types, including family and carer support and education, are increasingly looking to the peer workforce as an effective adjunct to their existing workforce.

A major initiative for a nationally recognised qualification has been the development of learning and assessment resources for the **Certificate IV in Mental Health Peer Work CHC42912** designed specifically to support the emerging peer workforce. This qualification is designed for Consumer peer workers and Carer peer workers who are seeking employment within the mental health sector in government, private or community managed services. This qualification is specific to workers with a lived experience of 'mental illness' as either a consumer or carer and who are looking to work in roles that support consumers or carers.

This qualification consists of 15 units of competency (6 core units and 9 elective units). This training provides an opportunity for peer workers to build upon their lived experience and any on-the-job experience they may have received which contributes to the acquiring of a nationally recognised qualification in mental health.

Work roles may include:

- Consumer consultant
- Consumer representative
- Peer support worker
- Peer mentor
- Youth peer worker
- Carer consultant
- Carer representative
- Aboriginal peer worker
- Family advocate

What others have said about this course

"reflecting on the experience I had at work in the past, I can appreciate the breadth of content in [this training] could have solved a lot of the heartache I had along the way. This is going to propel the [peer] workforce forward."

3 Debate and challenges for the private sector

The Network believes very strongly that there is a place for the peer support workforce within the private sector. As such private hospitals for example, face many opportunities but it is fair to say that in the main, these have not been embraced to broadening their workforce to include peer workers. This is mostly because of lack of understanding or preparedness to engage peer workers by management and corporate entities, together with employment issues and an openness to change.

Attitudes need to be questioned with discussion and objectivity. The development of peer support workers is consistent with a recovery focus. The Certificate IV in Mental Health now available through Registered Training Organisations, gives peer support workers an appropriate qualification and platform from which to be employed.

The Network calls for an open discussion within the private sector around the value of employing peer support workers.