

Executive Summary

Mental Health Carer Representation (MHCR) Program Project Report

Carers ACT commissioned Sebastian Rosenberg from ConNetica Consulting to:

1. Conduct a review of the MHCR program, in particular the processes of election of Carer representatives and management of the Program, and
2. Identify the systemic issues deemed to be of highest priority for Mental Health Carers over 2011.

The review has produced numerous recommendations in relation to the Program review. These include: suggestions for improving the way that Carer representatives are elected and supported in their role; processes for improving communication between Carers ACT, Carer representatives and the broader group of Mental Health Carers in the ACT; and how Carers ACT can more accurately and strongly represent Mental Health Carers through systemic advocacy.

How the views were sought

The views of a broad group of Mental Health Carers were sought through two on-line surveys, a group forum and individual interviews.

Firstly a survey asking people to nominate their top three federal and territory issues was emailed to 233 Mental Health Carers. (This does not represent the total number of Mental Health Carers accessing Carers ACT services). An invitation to attend a strategic planning forum to further discuss advocacy priorities was also included.

The strategic planning workshop facilitated by Sebastian was held on Thursday 9 December 2010, and was attended by 20 Carers. Some representatives from Mental Health ACT also attended. An extensive list of priorities for advocacy was determined from this forum. A second survey was then emailed, requesting people to select their highest priorities from this list. Thirty four Carers completed this survey.

Concurrently, a separate email survey was sent out. This survey was designed to garner views from Mental Health Carers already involved with the MHCR program (114 Carers) about the election processes, the support provided by Carers ACT, the existing strengths of the program, as well as opportunities for improvement. This survey was completed by 12 people.

Mental Health Carers were also invited to discuss any issues in a face-to-face interview with the Consultant. Several people availed themselves of this opportunity.

The review also included an examination of the processes and procedures with which Mental Health Carers engage with the MHCR program, and the concomitant processes

and procedures by which Mental Health Carer Representatives and Carers ACT engage with each other.

Key Priorities for Mental Health Carers

Four areas were identified as the top priorities for mental health Carers. They are:

1. Improved legal recognition of the rights of ACT Mental Health Carers
2. Supported housing for people with mental health issues being cared for by Mental Health Carers
3. Better management of mental health services, particularly with regards to information sharing with all involved, and
4. Accountability and quality improvement within mental health services.

Mental Health Carers Representation Program Review

The areas for improvement highlighted by Carers were the need:

1. for clearer and simpler processes to govern the appointment of Mental Health Carer Representatives
2. for better processes to support Mental Health Carers Representation Program members once they were appointed to committees
3. to enable Mental Health Carers Representation Program members feel safe, in order to encourage their greater participation and to attract new members
4. for Carers ACT to more assertively manage the Mental Health Carers Representation Program, and to more confidently discharge the role of being the peak body for Mental Health Carers in the ACT.

As the peak body for Mental Health Carers in the ACT, the report strongly recommended that Carers ACT contribute more soundly in these two key areas by:

1. Voicing strongly and clearly the needs and perspective of Mental Health Carers in specific systemic advocacy within the ACT, and
2. Increasing the number and capacity of Mental Health Carers participating in the Mental Health Carers Representation Program so as to broaden the skill base and create more opportunities for more representatives.

The report identified that a group of Mental Health Carers were experiencing a significant loss of confidence in the ability of Carers ACT to act as a peak body representing the needs of Mental Health Carers. While this is significant and distressing for all concerned, the report re-affirmed that Carers ACT is still well placed to be the peak body for Mental Health Carers in the ACT. The report then made several recommendations for improvements to the Mental Health Carers Representation Program.

What were the conclusions?

Overall, people believed that the election process of July last year was more complex and elaborate than required. Since that time, respondents have noted that relationships between those Mental Health Carers participating in the Mental Health Carer Representation Program had become increasingly strained. This has meant that a number of Mental Health Carers have become reluctant to engage with Carers ACT and the Mental Health Carer Representation Program. Carers also commented on the lack of information being provided on the work of the Committees and the fact that several useful meetings of Mental Health Carers that Carers ACT used to convene are no longer being held. In turn, Mental Health Carer Representatives have felt unsupported in their roles.

There is a need for more robust processes to be established so that Carers ACT can offer better support to its representatives, better communication with the broader membership and broaden the pool of talent from which to draw the Mental Health Carer Representatives of the future.

The election processes used by the National Mental Health Consumer and Carer Forum were held up as a good practice model, as were the processes, procedures and policies adopted by Carers WA in relation to its Mental Health Carer representation Program.

Carers ACT's effectiveness in representing the wider Mental Health Carer constituency is being adversely affected and it must be more active in seeking the views of Carers on priority issues so that effective advocacy can be more actively pursued.

Recommendations

There are a total of 18 recommendations, which if enacted, will result in significant change to the program. They focus on clarifying the rights and responsibilities of Carers ACT and Mental Health Carers so that that the Mental Health Carers Representation Program might be better supported and more engaged with both Carers ACT and with representing the voice, perspective and needs of all Mental Health Carers within the ACT. These recommendations are that:

1. Carers ACT should note the strategic priorities determined by Mental Health Carers in order to prioritise advocacy in 2011. Carers ACT should summarise and distribute the findings of this report to Mental Health Carers. Carers ACT should make the process of identifying Mental Health Carer priorities an annual process.
2. Carers ACT should note the results of the Mental Health Carers Representation Program member survey.
3. Carers ACT should reaffirm its preparedness and desire to fulfil the role of Mental Health Peak Body in the ACT.

4. Carers ACT should ensure that the Mental Health Carers Representation Program engages with the whole mental health Carer community not only users of Carers ACT services.
5. As part of the Mental Health Carers Representation Program participants should clearly understand they are representing the Mental Health Carer perspective on committees not Carers ACT.
6. Carers ACT should note the ideas arising from the group forum in regards to the Mental Health Carers Representation Program improvement.
7. Carers ACT should adopt a Carer Participation and Representation Policy which outlines the goals of the Mental Health Carers Representation Program and sets out a clear set of rights and responsibilities to apply to the Mental Health Carers Representation Program for both Carers ACT and Mental Health Carers Representatives. This new Policy should also include an explicit Code of Conduct for Mental Health Carer Representatives.
8. Carers ACT should agree that it cannot endorse any Mental Health Carers Representative who is not able to adhere to this set of rights and responsibilities.
9. All Carers ACT Mental Health Carers Representation Program members should complete an initial Member Information Form.
10. Carers ACT should note the election process used by the National Mental Health Consumer and Carer Forum.
11. Following the National Mental Health Consumer and Carer Forum's general approach Carers ACT should replace the existing election process with a new process – a Carer Representative Selection Panel.
12. Carers ACT should use an Organisation Seeking Nominee Form similar to that used by the National Mental Health Consumer and Carer Forum.
13. Carers ACT should use a Nominee Application Form similar to that used by the National Mental Health Consumer and Carer Forum.
14. Carers ACT should adopt a Mental Health Carer Representative Feedback Form.
15. Carers ACT should use a Mental Health Carer Representative's Orientation Pack similar to that developed by Carers WA.
16. Along the lines of the Mental Health Carer Alliance which once existed in the ACT, Carers ACT should establish an ACT Mental Health Carer Representative Forum which brings together all Mental Health Carers Representatives with Carers ACT support staff every six weeks. Mental Health Carers should chair this meeting which is designed to be an opportunity for both sharing and learning. Agreeing to stand as a Mental Health Carers Representation Program member would mean a person was also agreeing to participate in this ACT Mental Health Carer Representative Forum. Mental Health Carers who don't hold Mental Health Carers Representative positions would be encouraged to attend this meeting to provide Mental Health Carers Representatives with an opportunity to test or gauge Mental Health Carers' views, and for their own learning. Guest speakers would be invited to the ACT Mental Health Carer Representative Forum from time to time.

- 17.** Carers ACT should establish an ACT Mental Health Carer Issues Forum, which brings together Mental Health Carers Representatives with local service providers from all sectors to discuss the key issues of Mental Health Carer concern. The aim of the ACT Mental Health Carer Issues Forum would be to ensure Mental Health Carers Representatives were well connected with grass roots local service providers. This meeting should occur quarterly. One idea could be that every second meeting of the ACT Mental Health Carer Representative Forum could be split in two with the first half for ACT Mental Health Carer Representative Forum and the second half being this ACT Mental Health Carer Issues Forum with service providers.
- 18.** Carers ACT should assess annually the following performance measures with regards to the Mental Health Carers Representation Program:
- a.** How many Mental Health Carers are participating in the Mental Health Carers Representation Program?
 - b.** How many new Mental Health Carers are in Mental Health Carers Representative roles each year?
 - c.** Feedback from committees that has been given about the performance of Mental Health Carers Representatives. This is particularly important to prevent 'capture' and to assure Carers ACT that Mental Health Carers Representatives are fulfilling their remit, and
 - d.** An annual process to gather feedback directly from Mental Health Carers Representatives regarding the level and quality of support they are being given by Carers ACT.

Conclusion

Understanding, absorbing and implementing these recommendations will be an enormous task that will require careful thought, consideration, work and goodwill from Carers ACT and Mental Health Carers. However, they promise to greatly enhance the standards and the standing of the Mental Health Carers Representation Program, Carers ACT's capacity to support and sustain the Mental Health Carers Representatives, and Mental Health Carers' engagement with the processes involved.

Next Steps

The Carers ACT Board Policy Committee will be provided with a copy of the Report's Recommendations. Carers ACT will be recommending that all of the Recommendations be accepted.

Carers ACT will then convene a meeting in mid-late April of all Carer representatives and other interested mental health Carers to further discuss the Report's Recommendations and provide information on the process and timeframe for implementing those Recommendations.

A number of the recommendations relate to the representative selection process. It is important to note that the ACT Mental Consumer Network is currently examining its consumer representative positions to ensure that Consumer representatives are not only in the role that best suits their skills, but that mental health consumers feel confident that they are being represented in the best way possible. Carers ACT has the same aim in relation to Mental Health Carer representatives.