

# Embedding community participation into alcohol and other drug service provision and policy

Alex Bird & Tenille Hellier, Community Partnership Program, Drug & Alcohol Services South Australia, SA Health

## Background

Since the 1980's, consumer groups have contributed to alcohol and other drug (AOD) service and policy development by representing the experience of people who use AOD. [1,2] Active participation at the individual, service and systems levels is a key quality improvement strategy that respects the value brought by community experience, and the rights of health care users. [3]

There is a growing expectation and requirement of organisations to be utilising community participation practices. [4] There is also recognition of the importance of supporting community members and workers to ensure that participation is meaningful. [5]

## Our approach

In 2014, Drug and Alcohol Services SA (DASSA) decided to embed community participation into its practice. This involved preparatory work (literature reviews, consultation, and establishing systems) and adopting a change-management approach (consultation, pilot projects, formative reviews, and training). Through the DASSA Community Partnership Program, DASSA is systematically implementing participatory practices.

## An overview of the Community Partnership Program:

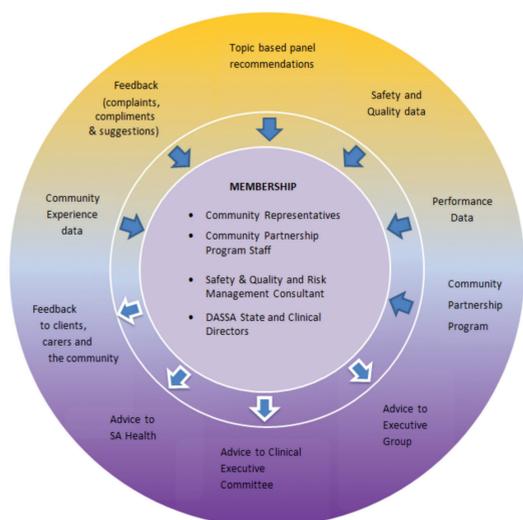


Community members who participate at DASSA play an important role and assist in continuous quality improvement activities to ensure the best service possible. There are two key roles for community members at DASSA:

- > Community Participants, who are inducted and trained community members that actively participate and provide advice as a result of their own lived experience;
- > Community Representatives, who in addition to the above represent the experience of a particular sub-set of the community

## The Community Advisory Council

The Community Advisory Council (CAC) is a strategic committee for clients, carers and community members to participate in the development, implementation and evaluation of DASSA services and programs and alcohol, tobacco and other drug policy. The group meets on a bi-monthly basis, and the below infographic outlines the way in which this Council operates:



## Workforce development

To ensure a welcoming culture was established at DASSA, the Community Partnership Program worked with the Health Consumers Alliance of South Australia (HCA) to develop the 'DASSA Community Engagement and Participation Training' package. This is a mandatory training for all staff, which is co-facilitated by one of our Community Representatives. Since February 2015 over 176 DASSA staff (82% of our workforce) have been trained.

## Key Findings

All divisions of DASSA have utilised Community Participants, and at 25 September 2016, sixty four (64) community members were registered with the program. Activities have included:

- > Community Representatives being an equal member of staff selection panels;
- > 'Community Advocate' positions on the DASSA Executive Group and Clinical Executive Committee;
- > Lived experience presentations at staff training and development days to provide a community perspective and reduce stigma;
- > 'Community Surveyors' who conduct our Client Satisfaction Survey across sites.

This practice has enabled the provision of direct and informed advice, and partnerships with a diverse group to: review public information; re-design physical environments; and review strategic outcomes.

Qualitative feedback thus far outlines the positive impact active participation has achieved. The following are some quotes from our community members and staff:

"I would be eager to participate in this event again and would urge any community representative invited to, to do so. This was a tremendous learning experience and the impact of the feedback I have been able to offer the community thus far has been wonderful." – Community Participant

"When (DASSA Staff Member) attended my first meeting as a community participant she made an effort to approach me and thank me personally for wanting to be involved. She went on to say DASSA values consumer input and my involvement is important to them ... I really appreciated her comments and I felt a great sense of inclusion." – Community Participant

"It has been a pleasure to have community participants attend four events of which I was a part. These were on an interview panel staff awards committee training session, and our recent staff planning day. All staff report that the experience was enjoyable and that it was refreshing to have a member of the community present at such events as it was an immediate resource for decision making processes, as well as being an opportunity to work in closely with those accessing our service." Manager of the Woolshed

## Discussions

Facilitators to the success of the DASSA Community Partnership Program include:

- > having strong Executive leadership support
- > establishing a robust induction and training process for Community Participants
- > establishing a group of staff 'Engagement Champions' to lead this change at the local level
- > developing and delivering a workforce development package to all staff to ensure a welcoming and supportive environment.

Challenges have included:

- > overcoming staff concerns
- > achieving cultural change to welcome community members as partners
- > achieving diversity in representation.

The DASSA Community Partnership Program continues to recruit community members to broaden the diversity in representation. This currently includes:

- > people with differing relationships to alcohol and other drugs (abstinence, maintenance, and harm reduction approaches);

- > people from diverse backgrounds (Aboriginal people, and others from culturally diverse populations);
- > and people from metropolitan and regional centres.

Further representation is required for:

- > the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, intersex and Queer (GLBTIQ) community
- > people in remote communities

## Case Study – DASSA Public Information Review Panel

The Public Information Review Panel (PIRP) provides a forum for clients, carers, and community members to partner with DASSA staff and review the content and delivery of information

Key achievements of this Panel include:

- > partnering with a diverse range of staff and community members to review the current public information system
- > identifying processes to ensure ongoing review of content by community members
- > developing a range of recommendations for improvement to this system for consideration by DASSA Executive Group

## Implications for Practice or Policy

The utilisation of participatory processes at all levels of an organisation enables meaningful collaboration in the planning, implementation and review of treatment services and policy.

There are a number of ways in which DASSA is sharing its learnings to expand community participation progresses in the alcohol and other drug, and broader health sector. These include:

- > Offering training places to staff from Local Health Networks (LHNs) and non-Government organisations (NGOs)
- > Supporting LHNs and NGOs to develop their own workforce development packages,
- > providing Community Participants to present on specific topics and share their lived experience of alcohol and other drugs

With appropriate resourcing and leadership support, the comprehensive approach to engagement and participation at DASSA could be adapted to any organisation.

## References

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