

Carer in Action in NSW Conference 2009

Working together to engage and enhance service provision for Mental Health Carers in remote areas.

Sandi James, Education & Training Officer Carers NSW

Tanya Clifton, Carer Coordinator Remote Cluster GWAHS

Engaging mental health carers in support and educational programs in remote areas provides many challenges to service providers. Some of these challenges are unique to these areas and others are faced by service providers everywhere. Often the challenges of living in small remote communities compounds the issues for carers and makes finding and accessing appropriate services more complicated. These same issues can also make providing relevant and appropriate service to carers difficult. A partnership between services and the use of creative and unique strategies to overcome these challenges is necessary if we are to engage carers in support programs.

Some of the barriers to engagement as identified by Mental Health Carers in this community include:

- lack of recognition from service providers including little involvement in the care planning and management of the person they care for
- stigma – being identified within their community as a “carer” or having someone within their family having mental illness
- lack of respite options available for those they are caring for
- the cyclic nature of caring
- not having a “voice”
- literacy levels
- the carers own health, including their mental health
- feeling “alone”
- family and work pressures, lack of time

Given the difficulties inherent in working with carers, and in particular mental health carers in remote regions, we have, in the Far West, developed a calendar of events

targeted at carers in the local community. This includes some unique events that had not been offered in this forum within our region previously. In developing the calendar we had consultations in many different forums with carers, looking at the shortfalls within our community, looking at the guidelines of the programs we were working in and looking at ways we could creatively connect with the community, not just carers but with the community as a whole.

The calendar has been developed with the focus being on education, self care and support for carers and family members. The backbone of the calendar is partnership building within our community. For instance, we partner with ARAFMI to conduct monthly morning teas, and we partner with the Broken Hill Art Exchange Inc. in running a series of multi art workshops.

One of the main educational programs taken up in the calendar has been the implementation of monthly information sessions on various issue such as health and wellbeing, self care and relaxation, managing crisis situations, as well as sessions on illness such as depression and anxiety. Participation for these information sessions is open to the whole community although it is aimed at family and friends of people with a mental illness or disorder. These information sessions are run twice a month, once during the day, and a repeat the following evening. This hopefully allows greater access to the sessions for anyone interested. Not only are carers and family members attending these sessions, but community members who are interested and more recently quite a large number of service providers have been attending.

A range of strategies are required as carers are individual in their circumstances and needs. What we have found is that some of the barriers to engaging and retaining carers in service provision can be overcome by forming partnerships and working together to ensure carers are receiving what they want and what they need to assist them to better care for both themselves and the person they care for.

Meeting carer needs as identified by themselves is paramount to services being relevant and in having carers attend and remain with the service. This has proven difficult at times from a service point of view, as a lot of our services are defined by statistics and receiving the support required from within the community to make

programs sustainable can be hard, even when we offer what has been asked for. This will always be an ongoing issue for service providers, but working creatively, flexibly and hopefully by continuing to “tailor” programs to carers needs these barriers will slowly reduce.

Working in partnership with other organisations offering similar programs within our region has benefited us enormously. Rather than all being in “competition” with each other, bringing services and carers together as a whole, has allowed the program to grow and become sustainable. Having an awareness of events that are happening in the community that can link into our program means we are developing sustainable pathways. This also may provide greater opportunities and pathways to carers and our community. Programs in the past have relied on one staff member from an organisation doing all. By partnering we have been able to share the load, as well as giving us access to a wider group of carers and community members, from many different backgrounds and walks of life. An example of this is that rather than four different organisations each running a morning tea every month with very small or nil attendance, we run one morning tea a month, with all organisations participating in organising, promoting, sharing the costs and a number of staff being available on the day. This not only allows for greater use of resources as in staff not having to attend each and every morning tea and services not spending money on duplicating events and resources. What we have found is that numbers continue to grow each morning tea, as we reach further and wider within our communities and services.

Statistically speaking, our morning teas started in February this year – with attendance being 5 carers. Our last morning tea held in May saw 16 carers in attendance. As one of the carers commented, “I almost turned around and went home as there were too many people there”. So if that is to become our next barrier, we will tackle that.

It is imperative that services remain open to feedback and criticism from carers and professionals alike and are able to adapt and change as required to better meet the needs of carers within their local communities. Only by working together can we meet these needs by building sustainable programs and realigning services to be more inclusive of the knowledge, skills and support carers provide to their loved ones.