

# Support worker forums 2018: National feedback

Te Pou o te Whakaaro Nui and Platform Trust held three support worker forums in July 2018. Support workers are the largest occupational group in the adult mental health and addiction workforce.<sup>1</sup> Support work roles have evolved to be very diverse in nature, and the size of this workforce has been forecasted to grow substantially. The purpose of the forums was to discuss the key questions in *Fast Track: challenges and opportunities for the community support workforce*, and to identify strategies for further growth and development of the support workforce.<sup>2</sup>

The forums were held in Christchurch, Wellington and Auckland with a total of 134 attendees.<sup>3</sup> Around three-quarters (74 per cent) were from NGOs, 18 per cent from DHBs, and six people from educational institutes. Of those who identified their occupational role (115 people), over half were support workers and around 10 per cent were in peer support roles. People working as managers, coordinators, educators and consultants also attended the forums.

The forums involved panel speakers who shared local stories of innovative practice, and open space group discussions about the key issues identified in Fast Track listed below. In each of the group discussions, the key discussion points were recorded onto A3 sheets of paper. Some of the group discussions identified the top three issues for each area, however, this could not be summarised at a national level. Themes were analysed based on the written notes recorded during group discussions, and facilitators' feedback from the discussions is also included in this report.

## Themes in the national feedback

The key questions in the Fast Track discussion paper included:

- recruitment and retention
- training and development
- professionalism
- education and career pathways
- role clarification
- health and wellbeing.<sup>4</sup>

Individual attendees rated their top three priority areas from Fast Track. Across the three forums, training and development was most commonly rated as a top priority, followed by health and wellbeing, and education and career pathways. These priority areas were consistent across individuals from the mental health, peer, and addiction workforces. Table 1 provides a summary of feedback themes for the six discussion areas.

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<sup>1</sup> Reference: Te Pou o te Whakaaro Nui. (2015). *Adult mental health and addiction workforce: 2014 survey of Vote Health funded services*. Auckland: Te Pou o te Whakaaro Nui.

<sup>2</sup> The Fast Track discussion paper is available on the [Te Pou website](#)

<sup>3</sup> Unique attendees; this count does not repeat people who attended more than one forum.

<sup>4</sup> Health and wellbeing is not part of Fast Track but was added for the forums at the request of the advisory group.

Table 1. Key Themes Across the Support Worker Forums

Support worker forum – key themes in prioritised order
<p><b>Training and development</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Health and Wellbeing Level 4 and other qualifications</li> <li>Building specific skills to meet complex needs</li> <li>Training, supervision and career pathways</li> <li>Having clear role descriptions and being valued as a profession</li> <li>Organisational support factors</li> </ul>
<p><b>Health and wellbeing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organisational support factors</li> <li>Maintaining personal health and wellbeing</li> <li>Access to ongoing training and supervision</li> </ul>
<p><b>Education and career pathways</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Greater recognition for support work roles</li> <li>Improving access to education and professional development</li> <li>Having more career and promotion opportunities</li> <li>New Zealand and service appropriate learning</li> </ul>
<p><b>Professionalism</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being recognised and valued by other professions and the public</li> <li>Access to ongoing training and professional development</li> <li>Potential development of a formal registration or professional body</li> <li>Having clear role descriptions and boundaries</li> </ul>
<p><b>Role clarification</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scope of practice – how support workers work with people and clinicians</li> <li>Acknowledging the differences between settings and roles</li> <li>The role of experience, training and qualifications (particularly in relation to Level 4)</li> <li>Pay scales and other organisational factors</li> </ul>
<p><b>Recruitment and retention</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Having clear role descriptions and career pathways</li> <li>Being recognised and valued by other professions and the public</li> <li>Ensuring accessibility to student placements, training and supervision</li> <li>Attracting future students and staff</li> <li>Organisational support factors (particularly team structure and dynamics)</li> </ul>

## Training and development

Training and development was identified as a top priority, and feedback largely focused around the Health and Wellbeing Level 4 qualification. The Level 4 qualification is a required as an entry level qualification which is now part of the pay equity settlement. Attendees indicated the increasingly complex work of support work will require more than the Level 4 qualification, and suggested that Level 4 add-ons could help support workers to upskill in particular areas relevant to their work. Specific training and skills identified as useful add-ons includes cultural frameworks, recovery tools, mindfulness, de-escalation, and cognitive behaviour therapy, as well as training to support people experiencing traumatic brain injury, substance use, family violence, and older people. Accessibility of

training, placements, and supervision were also emphasised. Attendees indicated organisations can provide support through professional development planning, improving the quality of training, and acknowledging lived experience.

## Health and wellbeing

Health and wellbeing was rated as one of the top three priorities by attendees. Feedback largely focused on what services or organisations can do to support staff. Support workers can benefit from having time-off when they are feeling stressed, control over their work hours and who they work with, specific breaks “not a bite to eat in the car between clients”, meaningful team building, supportive management, robust bullying/harassment policies, health and safety, and debriefing. It was also recognised that a number of organisations are doing quite creative things for the health and wellbeing of their staff. Training and supervision (particularly external) were identified as important factors in health and wellbeing across all three forums. However, the accessibility of supervision and coaching was a frequently discussed issue. Attendees also acknowledged their own responsibility in maintaining health and wellbeing, including diet, exercise and having a positive outlook.

## Education and career pathways

Feedback indicated a need for more career and promotion opportunities, and recognising support work as a career in its own right rather than being a stepping stone to something else (eg practitioner, social worker). Attendees were interested in having clearer pathways for moving into leadership roles, becoming trainers, and advancing into clinical roles such as nursing. This will involve having opportunities to build specific skills to do complex work and mapping out career pathways in relation to the Level 4 qualification. Supportive factors include increasing funding for training and supervision, acknowledging prior experience, developing a professional or governing body, implementing support worker-led training, and exposing secondary school students to support work.

## Professionalism

Being recognised and valued for the role of support work was a key theme in professionalism. Attendees highlighted a need to recognise support workers for their interface with clinical roles, qualifications and training, clinical work, and integral role in building rapport and relationships with people.<sup>5</sup> Some of the group discussions focused around the potential development of a formal professional body to help strengthen the credibility and identity of support workers. However, there were some concerns that a professional body may limit the freedom and development of the workforce.<sup>6</sup> Supportive factors and barriers for professionalism were also discussed. Having clear role descriptions and boundaries, and developing standardised and evidence-based training were

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<sup>5</sup> Some people are choosing to work in support work roles when they are registered health professionals, as this gives them more opportunity to work alongside people.

<sup>6</sup> A concern was raised by one person that if there is a professional body will this inherently challenge the mutuality that is the inherent focus of peer support between a worker and a person.

identified as support factors. Limited incentives and opportunities for upskilling were identified as barriers.

## **Role clarification**

Role clarification and descriptions were common themes that related to most of the other discussion areas. The feedback largely focused on the scope of practice for support workers. Working with people involves building rapport, advocacy, instilling hope, setting goals, networking, assessments and interventions, navigating health and social systems, and supporting independence and daily activities. It is also important to consider the similarities and distinctions across job titles, such as peer support workers, senior support workers, DHB orderlies and navigators. Attendees identified opportunities for improvement in working with clinicians; this includes better handover processes and understanding of peer support roles. Training, qualifications, care settings, professional recognition, and pay rates were also highlighted as factors involved in role clarification.

## **Retention and recruitment**

Forum feedback indicated role clarification, training and supervision, and how others perceived support work roles were important factors for retention and recruitment. This includes having clear job descriptions and career pathways, addressing stigma in the community, and promoting the positive attitudes about the sector. Education providers need to ensure future students have access to placements, and attendees suggested having designated coordinator roles or a database of local organisations that will accept students. Attendees identified the following organisational factors supporting retention and recruitment: induction or orientation to the role; positive relationships with clinical roles; supervision (peer and external); and working effectively as part of integrated teams. Recruitment of casual support work roles can be challenging and was identified as an area for improvement.

## **Conclusion**

The forums provided an opportunity for support workers to discuss the priorities and issues that are important for developing the workforce. The key questions in the Fast Track discussion paper were useful in guiding these forum discussions, and attendees highlighted their top priorities were: training and development; health and wellbeing; and education and career pathways.

The feedback gathered from all three forums will be used to guide further discussions in the upcoming national support work summit in December 2018. The forum feedback from Christchurch, Wellington and Auckland are summarised in separate reports.