

The mental health of workers in Queensland's youth services sector: Initial findings

December 2012

Background

March 2012 heralded the beginning of significant changes in the Queensland Youth Services Sector, with a new State Government taking power in Queensland. Between then and the end of October 2012, in line with the 'cost rationalisation' drive of the Government, youth services have been at the frontline of funding losses, resource cutbacks and redundancies.

As the peak body for youth services in the state, the Youth Affairs Network of Queensland (YANQ) heard much anecdotal evidence that these changes, being deep and widespread, were leading to a sense of desperation amongst workers and were placing significant additional stresses on those working at the front-line with some of the most marginalised people in the state.

On the 25th October 2012, YANQ therefore created and promoted to the sector an online survey instrument designed to gather quantifiable data on the impact of the Queensland Government's changes, and the support that workers had been provided during this period of change.

Initial Report on Workers' Mental Health

Between 25th October 2012 and 21st November 2012, the survey was promoted to over 3,000 Queensland workers in the youth sector via email. Insofar as the email asked them to pass the survey link on to their networks, the survey methodology resulted in a mixture of convenience and snowball sampling, but given the networked nature of the sector, this methodology was seen to be quite comprehensive of youth workers in the state.

So far, 43 have completed the online survey. Of these, 60.5% are workers that work with young people, and 39.5% are managers or co-ordinators of services that work with young people.

Workers had the option of leaving their specific position, and these included:

- ⤴ Guidance Counsellor
- ⤴ Teacher of Youthwork
- ⤴ Manager in Mental Health specific service
- ⤴ Manager of a Youth Arts Organisations
- ⤴ Clinical Psychologist
- ⤴ Get Set for Work Co-ordinator

The first series of questions asked respondents to consider the impact of the changes resulting from funding cuts or funding uncertainty on their mental health and/or emotional well-being in the context of both private and professional life.

Overwhelmingly, there have been impacts on workers in the professional sphere. 83.7% of respondents answered in the affirmative to **Q2. *Have the changes resulting from funding cuts or funding uncertainty had an impact on your mental and/or emotional wellbeing?***

These concerns were broadly split between the following themes in order of prevalence:

- ⤴ Stress surrounding job security and the impact on life, worry about not finding a new job
- ⤴ Low morale, anxiety, stress, saddened and problems with focusing on work. Dealing with own and clients' desperation
- ⤴ Trauma associated with having to cut staff hours and services (managers), yet work loads increasing. Difficult to plan for the future when cuts come in the middle of a funding cycle
- ⤴ Confusion and lack of information on job cuts, an environment of fear and paranoia
- ⤴ Increased workload with corresponding lack of support, professional development, strategic management and policy advocacy
- ⤴ Reduction of referral pathways, fewer service options, greater demand for services

The sense of nervousness about job insecurity and tense work environments comes through in most responses:

Huge paranoia and stress in our work place, nobody feels safe everyone feels like everyone else is watching and waiting to gather evidence for the witch hunt

In terms of workload and stress, one respondent recounted that workload does not just impact on the workers, but on young people themselves:

My work load has almost tripled. I feel constantly fatigued and have insomnia. I have had to go to counselling as a past client of mine suicided because he was unable to access the service that he was dependent on and went had a panic attack and had no outlet.

The concern about job security was also the main worry in **Q4. Have the changes resulting from funding cuts or funding uncertainty impacted negatively on your private life?**, of which 62.8% responded in the affirmative. The main impact on private life comes from the stress of having to find alternative financial arrangements (*can't pay the bills, will be out of work and have a mortgage*), but there is also pressure from working longer hours and the negative impact that this has on relationships with family and friends.

Respondents also mentioned added stress from the environment of paranoia created:

I now have to filter what i do and say everywhere even outside of work. I was essentially told have an opinion just don't share it with anyone, anywhere.

80.5% of respondents reported feeling compromised in **Q5. Have you been feeling compromised in any way as a result of funding cuts or funding uncertainty?** These feelings fit into several categories:

- ⤴ The Government cutting professional support and leaving workers on their own, feeling abandoned *"Feeling unappreciated and the quality of the work that I do is definitely being compromised by the lack of value this government gives our sector"*
- ⤴ Not being invited to have a say over which services get cut – feeling powerless in the face of top down decisions leaving services gutted *"It would be nice to have a say in what gets cut and what doesn't"*
- ⤴ Cuts meaning that services are forced to do whatever they can to support young people, even if this is not best, or even good, practice *"Closing of TP placements have meant young people who should not co-tenant due to significant trauma and resulting behaviours are now being places in general residentials and impacting on other young people, staff, and most significantly themselves as they are not able to manage in that environment."*
- ⤴ Forced to cut down on advocacy work and just 'do service provision' *"I still have to do my job, just leave out the advocacy and holding people to account, be prepared to filter your thoughts, words and actions 168 hours a week despite only being paid 37.5 a week. But if*

you stuff up we will hang you out to save our own skin.” and “a positive program with positive outcomes, now just feel like babysitters”

Interestingly, less respondents agreed with **Q3. Have the changes resulting from funding cuts or funding uncertainty impacted negatively on your work with young people?**, although 65.9% still did respond in the affirmative. This lower response rate may be attributed to the mentality of some workers who see themselves 'on-the-side' of marginalised young people:

I refuse to let external factors impact on my direct work with young people. At the end of the day, they are the reason I do this job and to do it poorly because of external factors would only be detrimental for those who are already marginalised and often affected by trauma and other issues.

On the other hand, there were some major concerns with the impact on people's ability to work with young people because of:

- ⤴ A reduction in the number of staff available who have developed relationships with young people
- ⤴ An overall lack of services and referral pathways available for young people
- ⤴ Introduced fee for service making programs inaccessible
- ⤴ Increased stress levels reducing productivity
- ⤴ Young people being upset with workers because of loss of programs, “now they are just another social worker who has let them down”
- ⤴ Being unable to advocate for young people “cannot advocate for my clients unless its telling the powers that be how wonderful they are”

Support for workers

The second series of questions asked respondents to consider where they are currently receiving support and asked them what support they required, and the role that their peak body could play.

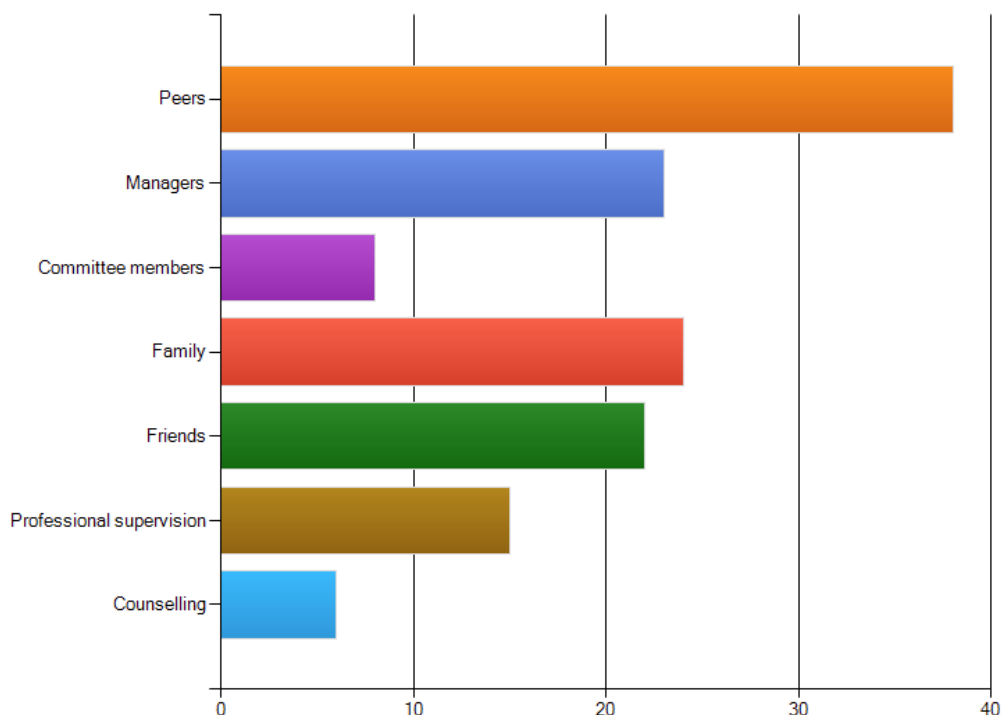
At least half (53.5%) of respondents answered in the affirmative to **Q6. Have you received adequate support at work to deal with these issues?** Those that did related the specifics of this support, including:

- ⤴ Regular supervision and briefing by line management
- ⤴ Staff meetings, 'check ins' and regular communication with peers and management
- ⤴ Counselling
- ⤴ Team building exercises, strong team, promotion of self- and team-care
- ⤴ Feminist work framework

Overall, what was found to be most beneficial was Management working very hard to ensure alternative funding arrangements to minimise job insecurity. In those situations where this was not the case, peer and management emotion support did not appear to make much of a difference “As much [support] as possible but it does not change the situation”.

In response to **Q7: Are you receiving INFORMAL support from...**, peers played by far the most significant role in informal support to respondents, with 90.5% noting that they have received support from fellow workers. Managers, Family and Friends were all ticked by 52-57% of respondents, with professional supervision (35.7%), committee members (19%) and counselling (14%) receiving fewer responses (see table below)

Are you receiving INFORMAL support from... (please tick all that apply)



Finally, the survey asked if respondents were aware of any sector-wide strategies that existed to support the mental health of workers. 70% responded saying they had not heard of any strategies, with other respondents relating work they knew of:

- ⤴ Advocacy – petitions, surveys, media articles (5 responses)
- ⤴ Information dissemination of cuts by YANQ and other bodies (3 responses)
- ⤴ Opportunities for collective action and advocacy by sector forums (2 responses)
- ⤴ Professional mental health support by Department or Organisation (1 response)
- ⤴ Individual program promotion (1 response)

Most of the 70% used their answers to suggest ways that the sector could work collaboratively. Combined with **9. Should YANQ explore peer support and/or sector support strategies as a priority? Please detail how you think YANQ should respond**, below are themed suggestions on how the sector, and YANQ, should respond.

- ⤴ Development of sector-wide peer support mechanisms
- ⤴ Collective advocacy to ensure funding is reinstated and the value of youth work and workers is recognised
- ⤴ Advocate for the reinstatement of funding for programs for marginalised young people. Some respondents who prioritised secure funding were adamant that focus on peer support was a distraction from the real issue – the Government cutting funds
- ⤴ Need a sector-wide, unified response to Government led changes to promote awareness and change. Lobby for the sector to have some say in which programs are most beneficial, and which are less
- ⤴ Use the opportunity to try new things, build reliance and reclaim radical moments *“I’m not sure? I honestly feel disempowered at the moment. We need a leader/s to take control and start doing something radical and different!”*