



Roundtable Summary – Community Services Providers

Date: Thursday 27 June 2024

Hosts: Ms Robyn Kruk AO, Panel Chair, and Dr Angela Jackson, Panel Member, Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

Participants: This roundtable brought together a range of participants from the community services providers sector to discuss the experiences of the sector during the pandemic.

Purpose of this roundtable

- The community services sector played an important role in supporting individuals and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. This sector also faced a surge in nature and level of demand for its services as the pandemic and its effects progressed.
- This roundtable provided representatives from the community services sector with the opportunity to share their thoughts on what the Australian Government did well and what could be improved for a future crisis.

What we heard at the roundtable

- The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally changed demand for services across the sector. Many community services providers saw a shift in the type of services that their organisations were delivering. This was in some part due to the pressure that the pandemic created, but also due to a lack of access to family and other support outside of the household. This led to an increase in the complexity of services sought, and organisations needed to think through how to provide services in a newly restricted and isolated environment.
- The pandemic also caused a significant shift in the type of individuals seeking services. This was partly due to the increase to income support payments. Some of those eligible for increased payments and who had in the past regularly sought services from organisations stopped coming, whereas many individuals who had lost incomes or did not qualify for income support, including temporary residents, sought services for the first time.
- The pandemic and related responses also impacted significantly on their own workforces, with burn out reported across the sector impacting retention and compromising the ongoing delivery of their services.

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- One of the biggest challenges for organisations was the need to pivot services and service delivery models quickly in response to the health and activity restrictions. This required a rapid upskill for staff. In some cases, the pivot to online services helped in reaching additional people. In other cases, it entrenched the disadvantage of individuals and communities who could not afford or utilise digital infrastructure.
- Eligibility for JobKeeper was critical to organisations being able to retain staff. It also enabled some organisations to redeploy staff in areas that became more critical during the pandemic. Without JobKeeper, some organisations would not have been able to continue through the pandemic.
- Governments did not appear to understand the role of community services providers and therefore did not take full advantage of the expertise of organisations in providing these services to their communities. Trying to build understanding within governments about the existing capability and expertise within the sector while in crisis mode was very difficult. In future crisis events, it will be important to look at the community services sector as a critical partner in providing services to the community. This includes investing in the sector to maintain key capabilities and sustainability to ensure systems and processes to ensure that key foundations are adequate and able to be ramped up to respond in future emergencies.
- The phase out of the Coronavirus Supplement has created ongoing issues and a change in demographics of the people accessing services again in the post-pandemic period. In future public health emergencies, the phase-out of income support and the post-pandemic transition should be considered more carefully in pandemic planning based on these experiences.
- The pandemic saw a significant reduction in the sector's volunteer base, impacting its ability to provide services. The recovery of volunteering in Australia has been slow and, in some cases, remains below pre-pandemic levels.
- Lack of clarity regarding the definition of essential workers and its application across different jurisdictions significantly impacted the ability of staff and volunteers to provide services. Providers did not have the information needed to effectively communicate with their staff and members. Available information from government referred to employers and employees but was unclear whether it covered volunteers. In a future crisis, definitions of essential workers need to be broadened and made consistent across jurisdictions to ease compliance for individuals and organisations and ensure access of key supports to individuals and communities at risk.

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- Flexibility in funding arrangements through government contracts was appreciated. However, the pandemic, and subsequent reversion to business as usual arrangements exposed sustainability challenges of current contracts for funding and grants for services. Current grants do not cover all costs associated with service provision, and increases don't keep up with increases in wages and costs. There is very little margin in grants to deal with disruptions to services. Government funding should also recognise that crises increase the number of referrals to a broader range of services providers, beyond frontline acute touch points such as crisis helplines and other telephone and digital support services.
- Access to key decision makers in government was initially challenging. An effective advisory group with a broad range of community service providers was essential. Participants noted that the National Coordination Group (NCG) was stood up during the pandemic and became the primary body that the Government engaged with. The NCG met weekly to discuss issues for the sector, such as demand for emergency relief and where it needed to go. While the NCG was able to achieve a lot of progress for community services providers once it was stood up, the delay in its introduction meant that it had to play catch-up.
- While the pandemic had significant social impacts, it was the health advice that largely drove the response. In a future health crisis, it will be important for governments to take a broader lens and understand the social, economic and other impacts of the crisis and appropriately address them as well.