

Feeling Deadly, *Working Deadly*



NCETA
Australia's National Research Centre
on AOD Workforce Development



S5. RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION AMONG ABORIGINAL & TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUG WORKERS

Theory Into Practice (TIP) sheet for managers/supervisors

This TIP sheet is intended for supervisors and managers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander¹ alcohol and other drug (AOD) workers. It is part of a suite of resources that has been produced by the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction (NCETA) at Flinders University to enhance Indigenous worker wellbeing and reduce work-related stress.

The resources were developed following a review of relevant literature; and an extensive consultation process involving public submissions, a national on-line survey, interviews and focus groups. Quotations from the consultations appear in italics in the TIP sheets.

Introduction

The AOD workforce in general encounters significant staff recruitment and retention challenges. These can stem from heavy workloads and client pressure; inadequate resources, pay, training, support and autonomy; and stigmatisation.

The Indigenous AOD workforce faces these difficulties and more, including having a client base with particularly complex needs which require culturally appropriate responses. Lack of culturally appropriate resources and support from mainstream organisations can make workers' roles more difficult. Challenges can be further exacerbated by intermittent and uncertain funding, comparatively low salaries; and a lack of clearly defined roles, training protocols, and career opportunities for Indigenous AOD workers.

Recruitment

Many Indigenous health agencies have difficulty recruiting AOD staff and filling vacancies. There are not enough new Indigenous workers coming

¹ The terms Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander and Indigenous are used interchangeably throughout this document. We understand that some people have a preference for using one term over the other and we have used the terms interchangeably to be sensitive to these differing perspectives.

into the health field generally and this problem is particularly acute in the AOD field. Even where funding and resources are made available to increase staff numbers, agencies often have difficulty in achieving a full staff complement.

“We’ve only ever held the Health Worker workforce capacity above half way. Even though we’ve got those positions, we’ve never reached 100% capacity for various reasons.” (Indigenous manager)

It is not just difficulties associated with filling vacancies that are problematic. Recruitment can sometimes result in the appointment of staff who are not the best match for the job. Such appointments can stem from pressure from Indigenous communities to fill vacancies quickly. This may be in response to unmet community needs and a perception that “any person in the job is better than no person at all”.

However, poor recruitment choices (i.e., poor person-job fit) can have a range of negative consequences for the organisation, the worker and the community including:

- Higher rates of turnover
- Reduced performance and effectiveness
- Lowered job satisfaction
- Reduced work motivation.

Increasing the number of Indigenous AOD workers is important. It not only ensures that there are enough staff to provide the services but can also impact positively on the existing workforce by reducing their workloads. This, in turn, can help future recruitment and retention as workloads become more realistic and the jobs, more desirable.

Strategies that can improve recruitment of Indigenous AOD workers include:

- Promoting a positive image of the AOD field to potential applicants
- Paying above award wages and providing other incentives such as increased annual leave to staff as a way of recruiting and retaining them

- Ensuring that an up-to-date job description exists which contains information related to:
 - » specific tasks and activities required for the job
 - » the knowledge, skills and abilities required for effective performance by the job incumbent
- Having an effective recruitment strategy which considers:
 - » appropriate sources of recruitment (i.e., advertisements, personal referrals, employment agencies, direct applications)
 - » appropriate recruiters (e.g., supervisors or co-workers).
- Evaluating the recruitment strategy to determine its efficacy. For example, conducting a cost-benefit analysis of the number of applicants referred, interviewed, selected, and hired and comparing the effectiveness of applicants hired from various sources
- Recruiting Indigenous high school students into tertiary education by pre-employment workshops, support for literacy and numeracy, prevocational and introductory courses
- Flexible traineeship and apprenticeship on-the-job programs.

Retention of Existing Staff

Retaining workers is a major issue for the AOD field in general and for organisations employing Indigenous AOD workers in particular. Keeping effective workers is important for a number of reasons including ensuring:

- A highly skilled and effective workforce exists
- The organisation receives a return on the costs of formal and informal worker training
- Development of groups and teams that work well together
- An available pool of mentors and supervisors exists.

A range of factors can influence a worker’s decision to leave an organisation, including issues unrelated to work (e.g. illness, spouse’s new job). Many employers of Indigenous AOD workers

experience difficulties with staff turnover or a continual “bleeding out” of existing staff.

Factors contributing to high staff turnover include:

- Poor pay
- Lack of job security and tenure
- Lack of career development opportunities
- Poor working and employment conditions
- Short-term or uncertain funding
- Using non-government organisations as a “stepping stone” to more attractive jobs in the government sector
- Poor people skills of the manager/supervisor
- Difficulties of working in rural areas (e.g., isolation)
- A lack of training opportunities
- The stigma associated with working with clients with AOD issues
- Having conflicting roles and responsibilities (e.g., administration and clinical work).

Turnover creates a substantial drain and impost on Indigenous health services in general and on AOD services in particular. Turnover can be costly, particularly when it involves the unplanned loss of workers who leave voluntarily and whom employers would prefer to keep.

In addition to the direct costs of recruiting a replacement, indirect costs of turnover include:

- Lost productivity
- Decreased worker morale
- Increased stress
- Reduced quality and availability of services.

*“What needs to happen is more places for Aboriginal workers to come on board. You can share that workload and not carry all of that burden. So you’re not the one who’s out there in the community being questioned by client’s family members on a constant basis.”
(Indigenous manager)*

However, reducing turnover is not necessarily the optimal outcome in all circumstances. Workers who choose to remain in their jobs but are disaffected and do their job poorly can be just as costly to productivity as high staff turnover.

Offer Professional Development Opportunities

An important way to retain existing staff is to ensure that effective professional development programs are in place. Professional development refers to the ongoing provision of opportunities to develop and improve skills, competencies and knowledge. Apart from helping to retain workers, professional development programs have a range of benefits for individuals, organisations and clients, including:

- Improved worker performance and skill base
- Increased confidence and motivation
- Improved service delivery
- Higher levels of commitment to the organisation.

There are five important steps in implementing an effective professional development program:

1. Conduct a needs assessment for individuals, teams and the organisation which determines the professional development requirements of individual workers, teams and the organisation as a whole.
2. Set goals for professional development to ensure that activities are of greatest relevance and benefit.
3. Instigate a professional development plan to coordinate all aspects of a program including the individual, team and organisational goals and needs identified in the previous two steps.
4. Identify and implement activities beyond education and training. A range of approaches can be provided in-house to use “corporate” skills and knowledge already held in the organisation. Alternatives to education and training include mentoring, clinical supervision, study groups, site visits, cross-organisational exchanges and online learning.
5. Conduct an evaluation to make sure that the greatest benefit is obtained from an activity, and to identify future improvements.

More Retention Strategies

Strategies to retain effective staff include:

- Providing an effective and formalised induction and orientation program for new workers to help them understand the organisation, their role and where they “fit” within the organisation
- Offering a mentoring or “buddy” system, in which new workers are paired with experienced workers from a similar area to “show them the ropes” (see the TIP sheet on Supporting Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Alcohol and Other Drug Workers)
- Offering measures to reduce work-related stress and prevent it escalating to burnout (see other TIP sheets in this series)
- Maintaining sound supervisor-worker relationships which allow for open communication
- Providing professional development opportunities to enable workers to develop their knowledge, skills and abilities
- Providing challenging and varied work to workers
- Ensuring that adequate clinical supervision is provided
- Offering rewards and recognition for good work
- Supporting workers’ capacity to balance work and family life
- Providing new or potential workers with realistic work expectations in regard to professional development opportunities, promotion opportunities and career mobility
- Conducting exit interviews to identify organisational issues or problems.

Where to get more information

To find out more information about what is available to you locally, we recommend that you contact your relevant state or territory’s peak community controlled health organisation. Most of these organisations offer a wide variety of workforce support options, including

ACT: Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Services
Ph: 02 6284 6222

NSW: Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of New South Wales (AH&MRC)
Ph: 02 9212 4777

NT: Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory (AMSANT)
Ph: 08 8944 6666

QLD: Queensland Aboriginal & Islander Health Council (QAIHC)
Ph: 07 3328 8500

workforce development units, health worker networks, accredited training courses and newsletters and magazines. In most instances they should be able to refer you to an appropriate organisation in your region.

SA: Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia (AHCSA)
Ph: 08 8273 7200

TAS: Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre
Ph: 03 6234 0700

VIC: Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO)
Ph: 03 9411 9411

WA: Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia (AHCWA)
Ph: 08 9227 1631



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Produced with funding from the Australian Government Department
of Health and Ageing

This TIP Sheet forms part of the 'Feeling Deadly, Working Deadly' resource kit on Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Worker Wellbeing developed by the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction (NCETA) and funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. For further details and the suggested citation please see the document 'About This Kit' in the full Resource Kit.

Copies of resources developed as part of the 'Feeling Deadly, Working Deadly' Resource Kit are available for download from the NCETA website: www.nceta.flinders.edu.au