

Drug workers need more than charity!

A new report has highlighted major shortcomings in support for alcohol and drug program workers who are dealing with some of the most demanding clients in Australia's health and welfare systems.

The startling findings are highlighted in the results of a large scale national study, a joint collaboration between peak alcohol and drug bodies and the peak training body for the alcohol and drug sector. The project was funded by the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation (AERF), in recognition that the quality of drug programs and services in Australia is partly dependent on the quality of staff employed in the field.

Speaking at the launch of the study, AERF Deputy CEO, Ms Tracey Purdam said, *'the specialist drug treatment system continues to struggle with very limited funding, often relying on volunteers and charitable support to be able to operate effectively. The system is characterised by underpaid workers in under-resourced agencies dealing with clients who often have long histories of major problems relating to mental and physical health, poor education, crime, family breakdown, abuse, homelessness and unemployment. This is a national issue that needs urgent attention from all governments.'*

The report highlights a growing divide between the increasing demand placed on alcohol and drug professionals and the levels of salary, terms and conditions required to attract and retain staff capable of fulfilling these demands. As a consequence, increasingly stressed workers and their agencies are struggling to maintain quality services. Other findings highlighted by the study include:

- Lack of access to professional training and development for workers
- Lack of supervision and support for workers
- Increasing complexity of workers roles
- Lack of quality improvement programs for agencies
- Stigma of drug users leading to limited support for the sector by governments

According to Carol Bennett, Executive Officer of the Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association (one of the collaborating project team), *"we know there will always be some people who believe drug users do not deserve access to treatment, but does that mean we should continue to run down the pay and conditions of those currently charged to provide drug treatment? Its not rocket science that helping people overcome drug problems ultimately helps the whole community in terms of reduced crime, social, economic and health costs. Why don't governments try and provide the real support and recognition workers need to provide quality services that can and do make a difference?"*

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