

Building an effective Specialist Homelessness Services sector workforce



Based on AHURI Final Report No. 409: Investigative panel into building and retaining an effective homelessness sector

What this research is about

This research examines the workforce preparation, attraction, recruitment and sustainment strategies required to deliver a better developed and supported specialist homelessness services (SHS) sector workforce.

The context of this research

The SHS sector plays a critical role in welfare by assisting Australians who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to find secure, appropriate and affordable shelter options over both the short- and long-term. The work undertaken within the SHS sector is, however, increasingly complex. SHS workers also support tenants to maintain their tenancies, provide outreach and case management or domestic assistance. Roles may also include specialist social services such as family violence and disability services, drug and alcohol counselling, legal/financial services and immigration/cultural services.

The workforce is predominantly female and well-educated, and employees are generally young enough for an ageing workforce to not be a significant issue. Formal education pathways into the sector exist but are not mandatory. Primary avenues to employment are through vocational education and training or a tertiary institution or through lived experience.

The sector is challenged by the ability to attract, retain and develop an effective workforce, resulting in high staff turnover and negative implications for organisation and service provision. Simultaneously, service delivery within the sector has become increasingly complex and demand for services have grown.

Key findings

SHS workers are motivated by the desire to help

Employees are predominantly attracted to the SHS sector as it aligns with their personal values including a genuine desire to help people. Personal experiences are also an important motivating factor for joining the sector. Quality and lasting motivation in the workplace is shaped by the capacity of employees to meet both their physical (e.g. financial security) and psychological (e.g. competence, autonomy and meaningful connections) needs. The SHS sector, however, is not providing adequate financial security as a function of remuneration or job security, nor is it meeting the psychological needs of employees.

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Workplace demands of SHS employees are high

SHS workers experience heavy workloads including increased administrative tasks as well as taxing emotional demands. For those working in frontline roles, the impact on mental health can be significant. Lack of funding, understaffing, placement of staff in roles that are beyond their competency, shift work and vicarious trauma and stress from exposure to distressing situations have the greatest impact on workers' mental health. Workers are also asked to support clients who experience a range of social, emotional, drug and alcohol, domestic and family violence, cultural, trauma and mental health problems, adding to the complexity of the work. In part due to education and training courses, graduates and job candidates are not always fully aware of the sector or the requirements of the work therein.

Employees working with specific communities require additional skills and knowledge. For instance, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, there are unique dynamics and cultural responsibilities to manage and follow, while those working in services that support LGBTQIA+ people need to be across inclusive practice and understanding of LGBTQIA+ experiences for meeting clients' needs.

Low remuneration and job insecurity in the SHS sector affects worker retention

Low remuneration, short contracts and the competitive funding model negatively affect employee financial security, with similarly adverse implications for staff retention. There is no consistency of remuneration between the SHS sector and community sector organisations generally, which means that SHS employees may not be paid at the same Award level as those in other sectors undertaking similar roles. Further, the competitive funding model and short-term funding cycle encourage short-term contracts and pay that is not commensurate to the nature and skill of the work performed. The consequence is that staff do not remain in the homelessness sector, culminating in a loss of critical sector knowledge and experience.

Many workforce challenges reflect the current funding model

Specialist homelessness services in Australia rely heavily on government funding (primarily through the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement). The remaining funding is delivered via non-government sources, including non-government organisations (NGOs) that deliver services on the ground, and philanthropy.

The existing funding model affects the SHS sector by:

- not appropriately funding SHS organisations to meet service agreements to provide staff with ongoing training or clinical supervision
- not allowing for the financial security of SHS employees (i.e. not providing sufficient remuneration or job security)
- hindering the capacity of SHS agencies to satisfy their employees' basic psychological needs (e.g. to have time to build meaningful connections or to reduce overly stressful working situations), negatively affecting employee engagement and retention
- hampering organisations' ability to attract and retain competent staff and to cooperate with other local organisations that would enhance the services provided.

Under this model, funding does not supply the resources needed to deliver adequate services to help prevent clients' homelessness and/or prevent relapse into homelessness.

The professionalisation of the SHS sector has required the addition of administrative personnel to support both front-facing staff and increasing reporting requirements. These roles are also not being reflected in service agreements. In a context of under-resourcing, administrative duties can detract from service delivery, with implications for service quality and worker morale.

What this research means for policy makers

Policy priorities for governments

Policy priorities include the need to increase Commonwealth funding for the sector based on recent data that reflect the real growth in demand.

Reform of the delivery framework through which funds are delivered by the states and territories is also needed. Reform of the competitive funding model used to distribute funds to the SHS sector should:

- recognise the complexity of work being undertaken and close the gap between contract costs and the price of delivering the services, including recognising place-based differences and the costs of administration and reporting requirements
- allow SHS agencies to respond to the needs in their local community by expanding specialist areas as required and supporting collaboration between organisations

- recognise the ongoing need for the services that are currently being delivered and commit to closing the discrepancy between the public and SHS sector. This could be achieved by mirroring the benefits available to staff in government positions and assisting to establish career progression pathways, thereby reducing job insecurity
- extend funding cycles and lead times for new funding commitments and the commencement of programs to enable organisations sufficient time for contract renewals and or recruitment of appropriate staff.

Significant investment in affordable housing and crisis accommodation for client groups, as well as intermediate forms of affordable housing for sector workers themselves, is essential to supporting an effective SHS workforce. The lack of housing not only affects the services the sector can deliver for clients (a core factor in worker job satisfaction) but also the capacity of SHS agencies to house the staff employed to deliver such services, particularly in regional locations.

Recommendations	Actions
Funding distribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Longer funding timeframes for service agreements • Longer lead time between service agreements • Funding for Aboriginal and CALD workforce development • Place based funding recognising regional challenges • Job security to match government positions • Career progression pathway supported by funding and training • Encourage cooperation among SHS organisations
Service agreements reflect real service delivery costs and be benchmarked	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding in service agreements increased to reflect demand / real service delivery costs • Funding to reflect real scale of administrative tasks / reporting requirements related to funding • Benchmarking of service delivery costs across different specialist areas
Training and development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicated funding for training • Offer paid placements as part of formal education • Develop and expand degree and certificate programs in specialist areas • Coordinated approach to placements with workload recognised in funding
Investment in social and affordable housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More investment in social housing and crisis accommodation for clients • Investment in affordable housing for sector workforce

SHS workplaces need to meet needs of employees

At the organisational level, SHS agencies could:

- share resources and provide more career pathways for staff, which would help with building skills within the sector (including exchange of knowledge), external supervision and staff retention
- focus on longer term targets and relieve managers from spending too much of their time on reporting and applying for funding. This would free up time for managers to adopt a more participative style of leadership to empower and engage staff, which would further improve services and reduce turnover.

Increased awareness of the sector and new recruitment channels needed to recruit the best staff to the sector

It is important to recruit strategically such that jobseekers of higher quality (i.e. those with relevant knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics) are more likely to be attracted. Opportunities include:

- investing in the employer brand or cooperating with other similar organisations to improve the overall brand of the sector as a great place to work, so as to attract and recruit skilled and qualified applicants
- working with tertiary education institutions to improve the skills and abilities of students to meet the requirements of the roles
- improving value proposition (i.e. what employers can offer to recruits) to attract skilled employees
- provide resources for the SHS sector to invest in upskilling in recruitment and selection practices, as well as resources to support training of new recruits
- expanding and diversifying applicant pools (e.g. increasing the number of applications from men, mature workers and workers from other under-represented groups) by targeted marketing and recruitment strategies while ensuring selection processes are not biased against these groups
- adopting a generalised workforce capability framework to analyse and describe roles and design selection systems.

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Improvements in work design could support worker motivation and retention

Opportunities to improve the work design (such that employees are empowered and their needs and capacities are met) could be achieved by:

- increasing levels of support, including peer supervision, manager supervision and clinical supervision
- further developing well-connected teams that can share resources and provide co-worker social support
- balancing the level of ‘stimulating’ and ‘agency’ characteristics in the work design
- utilising job crafting to empower workers to make changes in their work to better suit their needs and capacity
- reducing work demands where practicable, especially extraneous administrative tasks that could be completed by a non-frontline worker.

Methodology

This research undertook a literature review, interviewed homelessness sector workers and conducted three Investigative panels in WA, NSW and QLD to capture the views of SHS sector industry experts.

To cite the AHURI research, please refer to:

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