

Workforce planning:

Summary of composition, trends and issues

Introduction

People with a disability who require support from service providers often need access to skilled care, necessitating ongoing development and maintenance of a well trained workforce for the disability services sector. Unfortunately, recent years have seen the disability services sector face increasing difficulty in recruiting and training staff in the face of high turnover.

There will be an expanding need for a capable disability services workforce for years to come. The numbers of individuals who have a disability is increasing as the general population increases. In addition, increased prevalence of disability will occur as people grow older due to a larger proportion of the population ageing. Similarly, gains in life expectancy in the general population are accompanied by an increase in years lived, both for those people who do not acquire a disability as well as those who have a disability, thus necessitating extended years of support.¹ Increased life expectancy is also occurring for people with early onset disabilities, thus requiring increased services over the lifespan. Finally, the ratio of informal carers to people with a disability is projected to fall over coming years requiring demand for more formal or paid support.

Key issues impacting on workforce development in the disability sector are explored with the aim of informing long term planning processes.

Key Issues

Occupations covered by the title 'disability workers' across Australia include special needs teachers, residential care aides, disability services officers, integration aides and aged and disability care workers. Although the Western Australian disability workforce includes a number of alternative occupations, thus making comparisons somewhat difficult, the overall characteristics of the Australian disability services workforce show:

- over 75 percent of the workforce is aged over 35, many work part time and 85 percent are female; and
- in 2004, average weekly ordinary time earnings for the disability sector was \$811.80 compared to \$848.70 for the health and community service sector and \$867.50 for all industries.

A number of challenges face the disability sector in relation to workforce, including:

¹ (AIHW, life expectancy and disability)

- funding models to service providers - to the extent that the Commission also provides services of its own, it 'competes' with funded disability organisations for funds and staff, which are subsequently put at a disadvantage as the Commission is better able to respond to unforeseen wage increases above indexation rates and can fund its own capital works programs (funding provided by the Commission is not permitted to be spent on capital projects). Moreover, funding to external providers for training is ad hoc and non-recurrent which can make it difficult to plan and manage professional development for staff;
- the public image of the sector - the disability sector has a poor image with prospective employees due to lack of understanding and knowledge of the sector, adversely affecting attraction, retention and morale of workers.
- high labour turnover – due to comparatively poor remuneration, particularly direct care staff, and the lack of effective and coordinated training and staff development;
- increasing demand for disability workers - at the same time as (1) other human service industries are seeking large increases in staff, for example the aged and community care sector, (2) the economic boom is luring workers to higher-paid industries, and (3) in light of a diminished number of generation X and Y workers available in Australia in the next 15 to 20 years;
- adapting to changes in workforce composition – there may be an increased CALD workforce imported from overseas to fill gaps in the human service industry and there is untapped potential for Aboriginal workers to enter the disability sector (see Aboriginal monograph). Mobilising, recruiting, training and supporting these workers will require new strategies;
- changing skill demands on the future disability workforce – the need for new skills associated with increased need for community-based support; and
- the need for better planning - associated with improved measures of client demand at a strategic level.

Next steps

Strategies need to be developed to address these challenges as part of Disability Future Directions 2025 planning. A group of disability stakeholders with expertise in strategic workforce issues will be invited to explore these and related issues in greater depth and develop future directions.