



Policy Platform: The ACT Youth Sector

Youth Coalition of the ACT

The youth sector in the ACT is both diverse and unique in its composition and delivery of services to young people aged 12 – 25 and their families. The Youth Coalition considers the youth sector to be comprised of over 90 programs and services, many of which deliver cross-sectoral services to young people and their families.

The youth sector has strong linkages with a range of other sectors in the ACT, including (but not limited to): housing / homelessness, mental health, alcohol and other drugs, education, employment, justice, family support, disability, health, arts and recreation, out-of-home-care, and the broader community sector. The youth sector also works with a range of population groups, including (but not limited to) young people who identify as: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, multicultural and newly arrived, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and/or intersex, carers, homeless or at risk of homelessness, young women, young men and parents.

The youth sector utilises a range of delivery models to support young people and their families. Examples of these include: centre-based, outreach, street outreach, in-reach, case management, case work, residential, crisis support, active holding, peer-based support, mentoring, counselling, family-based, clinical support, group-based work, recreation-based activities, and education.

A range of professionals work within the youth sector, including (but not limited to): generalist youth workers, specialist youth workers, health workers, mental health workers, alcohol and other drug workers, social workers, counsellors, statutory workers, nurses and doctors, educators, psychologists, family workers, lawyers, volunteers, and management staff.

In recent years two significant initiatives changed the landscape of the youth sector. These include the implementation of the Children, Youth and Family Services Program, which combined youth and family support services, and the significant reforms in youth housing and homelessness services. Other areas where the ACT Government is currently driving a significant change agenda across key areas of service to young people and their families include: youth justice; care and protection; and education.

Workforce Development

It is vital that the workforce of the youth sector be supported to acquire the skill-sets required to work effectively with young people and their families to ensure that they are not further disadvantaged in the transition to the new service delivery frameworks.

It is essential that strategies to support the reform agenda include those that address the workforce capacity and resources to effectively implement change. It is also essential that evaluations of each reform are conducted in a timely manner.

Youth workers can experience many challenges that are often a result of systemic barriers; including being overworked, underpaid, under-resourced, under-valued, having limited supervision and limited access to professional development opportunities. In addition to this the youth sector continues to face increased and more complex client loads as well as insufficient funding for recruitment, training and retention of workers within the sector.

The youth sector sees some highly skilled and experienced workers, who engage in extremely complex, innovative work with young people, and the Youth Coalition notes the importance of supporting these workers to remain in the sector. The Youth Coalition developed a profile of the youth sector workforce in 2010, which identified that over 50% of workers hold tertiary qualifications.¹ This supports the argument that the youth sector is a highly skilled and motivated workforce.

There can be limited career pathways in the youth sector with few opportunities to advance in positions of direct service provision, resulting in many frontline workers moving into management positions or out of the sector, considerably undermining the corporate knowledge of the sector. As such, the youth sector in particular continues to experience pressure in recruiting and retaining fully qualified and trained workers. This in part is due to competition with ACT and Australian Government sectors that are able to provide greater professional development opportunities, better working conditions, better opportunities for advancement and higher wages.

The 2010 workforce profile of the ACT youth sector also indicated that over half of respondents did not know how long they would continue working in the youth sector, or intended to leave within two years; suggesting a high level of uncertainty which may be due to funding arrangements for projects, programs and positions; along with wages, conditions and limited career paths.

Limited resources can also limit organisations' and workers' access to on-going training and professional development. While the Youth Coalition is committed to providing on-going, free, subsidised or low-cost training wherever possible; services experience barriers to participation that include difficulties backfilling staff or coping with staff turnover.

Workforce development aims to ensure that responses stem from, and are implemented and sustained by, a well-informed and highly skilled workforce that operates within supportive environments and systems designed to sustain and optimise efforts. Changes and development should concentrate and be addressed on three separate levels:

1. Systems (legislation, policy, funding, recruitment and retention, resources, support mechanisms and incentives);
2. Current workers (formal education, training, workplace training, mentoring, on-the-job learning, on-line learning and best practice guidelines); and,

3. Future workforce (recruitment strategies, offers of education and training, affordable and accessible education and training, ensuring adequate service funding to employ staff, and supporting and facilitating policies).²

Workforce development initiatives have commenced in the ACT alcohol and other drugs sector, mental health sector, and broader health sector. This includes strategies relating to both the government and non-government workforce in these sectors. The ACT Government has committed 2% of the Children, Youth and Family Services Program (CYFSP) funding to workforce development. Whilst this commitment is welcome it is limited to the workforce of the CYFSP itself. The Youth Coalition encourages the ACT Government to progress this commitment to workforce development through the development and implementation of a dedicated and adequately resourced plan. Such a plan should also address organisational capacity and quality assurance, for the broader youth sector.

Youth Sector Remuneration

Along with many areas of the community sector in the ACT, the youth sector experiences ongoing workforce development and sector viability issues. Youth services consistently report issues around staff recruitment and retention, which are often attributed to wage levels and conditions (including worker burnout). High worker attrition is a particularly pertinent issue in the ACT, with a large public service workforce that earns significantly higher wages than the youth and community sectors. This was supported in the findings of the ACT youth sector workforce profile.

The Youth Coalition commends the ACT Government's commitment to funding the outcomes of the Community Sector Equal Pay Case over the next eight years. The outcome of the case, and the ACT Government's commitment to funding it in the ACT, will greatly support the long-term viability of the community sector and its workforce.

It is important that other initiatives are implemented to complement the wage rises for the community sector that seek to address workforce development issues.

Commitments:

1. Advocating for the ACT Government to work in partnership with the youth sector to develop and implement a dedicated and adequately resourced ACT Youth Sector Workforce Development Plan.
2. Advocating for regular updated workforce profiles of the ACT Youth Sector.
3. Advocating for evaluations of significant Government reforms including the restructure of the Youth Homelessness Sector and the Implementation of the CYSFP Service Delivery Framework.
4. Supporting the full implementation of and advocating for full funding of the Community Sector Equal Remuneration Order.
5. Providing on-going training and professional development opportunities for workers and services in the youth sector, at a free, subsidised, cost recovery, or low-cost wherever possible.

6. Providing on-going opportunities for workers and services in the youth sector to participate in networking and other sector development activities.
7. Advocating for and supporting on-going research towards further developing the evidence-base for the youth sector.
8. Advocating for access to high quality infrastructure and resources for the youth and community sectors to enhance the quality of service provision.
9. Continuing to support and auspice the Youth Worker Practice Network.

¹ Youth Coalition of the ACT (2010) Motivation, Money, Making a Difference: A Profile of the ACT Youth Sector Workforce, Canberra

² Ann Roche (2006) 'What is this thing called workforce development?' McDonald, J. Roche, A. (pd) Systems, Settings, People: Workforce Development Challenges for the Alcohol and Other Drugs Field.