

The Role of Peer Facilitators in the New and Next Program

O'Brien, P., Taylor, D., & Riches, T. (2018)

In 2017, the Australian Government established the Innovative Workforce Fund (IWF) to help to develop, expand and communicate innovations in workforce practices in the disability sector in order to support the Australia-wide rollout of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). The NDIS is a national initiative that provides individualised funding packages to assist individuals with disabilities in Australia. The IWF was allocated \$AUD4 million to fund projects that would explore innovative workforce practices to answer the need in the disability sector to re-examine existing workforce structures and practices in response to the NDIS rollout and its impact on the sector.

The IWF funded 29 organisations throughout Australia to undertake workforce related projects. Plumtree Children's Services Inc. (Plumtree) secured funding from the IWF to research and document the use of paid peer work in the Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) sector. Plumtree undertook to analyse its own experiences with paid peer facilitators to understand more fully the benefits of peer work to the ECI sector and its stakeholders, and to use those experiences to interrogate the conditions for success when utilising a peer workforce to complement and supplement traditional allied health, educator and professional ECI staff.

Servicing the communities of the Inner West and South East of Sydney, Plumtree has been providing support for young children (aged 0 to 8 years) with a developmental delay or disability, and their families, for over thirty years. Since 2015, Plumtree has been employing paid peer workers. Initially, Plumtree employed peer workers to develop and facilitate its unique family capacity building program, Now and Next. More recently, however, Plumtree has recognised the broader potential for a peer workforce in the ECI sector and has employed peer workers in a variety of roles to complement and supplement its allied health and ECI workforce. Its IWF project thus committed both to researching and to documenting Plumtree's experiences employing peer workers in ECI.

This report by the Centre for Disability Studies (CDS) was commissioned by Plumtree as one component of that IWF research and documentation. The report is complemented by an extensive literature review (primarily considering the mental health sector research) and a summary literature review situating mental health research findings within the ECI and disability contexts completed by Plumtree. The conclusions and recommendations in this report have informed other deliverables arising from the project, including a toolkit for ECI organisations of guidelines and resources to support the integration of a peer workforce.

This report provides a compilation of the data obtained from a series of focus groups run at Plumtree by a team of researchers from the CDS concerning the integration of Peer Facilitators into the services at Plumtree. Responses to each question have been categorised by the individual focus group and then ranked from highest to lowest based on the tally of the preferential vote given by each participant of a given category. A compilation of all of the individual responses that were placed into each of the categories can be found in the Appendix 1.

The report concludes with some comments on, and analysis of, responses overall followed with a list of recommendations arising from the findings.