



# MEMBERS STORIES

*I work in the refuge sector providing support to women and children escaping domestic/family violence.*

*It is ironic that even though I am working at two jobs, I have found myself in the same situation as some of these families - we're both dealing with impending homelessness!*

- While my salary stayed stuck at 2005 levels, my rent here in Perth increased by more than 50% in 2007.*
- Travel allowance remains frozen while petrol prices have risen by approx 10%.*
- This means that I am subsidising this organisation while doing the required outreach work.*

*I lived below the poverty line for years while I studied for my undergraduate degree.*

*Now I am looking at living in housing conditions which are worse than when I was a student! Sometimes I wonder what is wrong with this picture - am I a total loser?*

- It can be hard work trying to provide support to someone freaking out about housing when I am as well!*

*Thanks for your work on this campaign.*

**A.A.**

I am a young person working part-time at a community legal centre while studying at university. I immensely enjoy the work that I do, however I find surviving on the wages and conditions offered in the Social and Community Services Award very difficult.

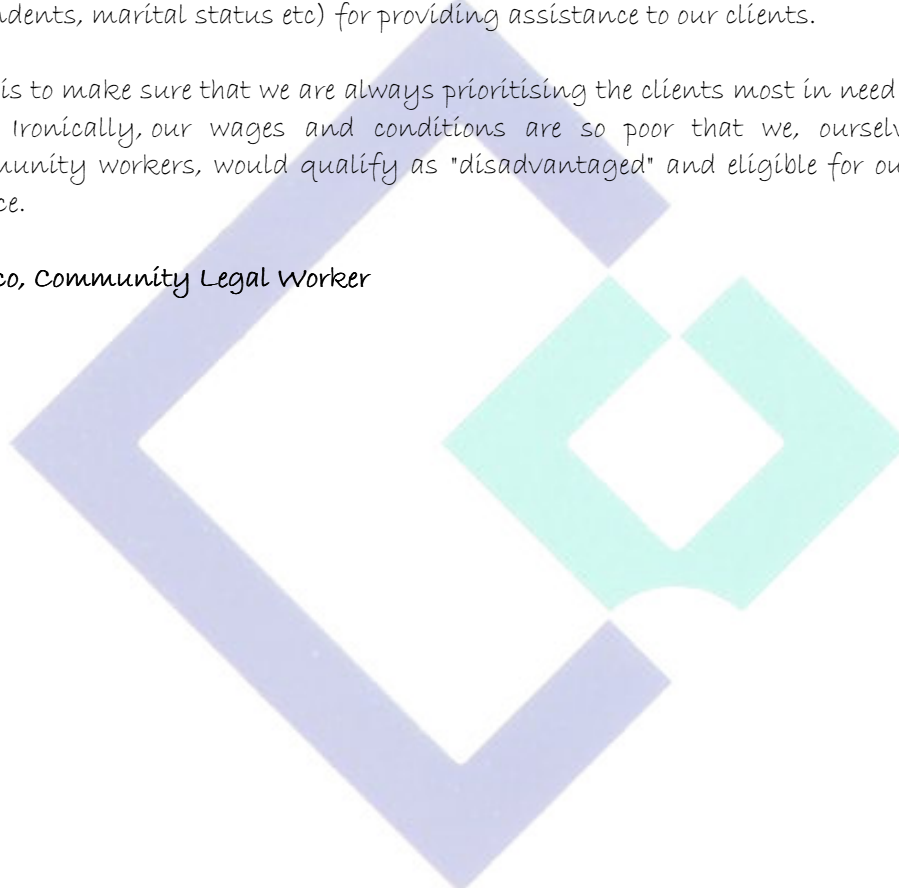
Unfortunately, these financial pressures negatively impact on my studies.

I think it is such a shame that those working in our community towards social justice and fighting for the rights of the disadvantaged and oppressed are themselves recompensed so poorly for their vital work.

For example, at my workplace, we have set criteria of disadvantage (income, dependents, marital status etc) for providing assistance to our clients.

This is to make sure that we are always prioritising the clients most in need of our help. Ironically, our wages and conditions are so poor that we, ourselves as community workers, would qualify as "disadvantaged" and eligible for our own service.

**Enrico, Community Legal Worker**



*I have worked for seven years in a specialised counselling program. The program is a fully funded program for vulnerable clients (with a specific issue) and their family members. I have enjoyed my work and with my colleagues built up some specialist skills in the field.*

*Now I have resigned from my job at least in part because of the poor pay.*

- I have experienced waves of frustration in recent years as our sector remained stagnant (in terms of pay) while costs have spiralled.*
- I left a secure government job to start working for a NFP Agency.*
- At the time I took a pay cut of \$10,000 (FTE) but I thought it was worth it for the training and experience I would gain.*
- In the seven years that pay differential (with my old govt job) has blown out to over \$25,000.*
- I felt increasingly undervalued.*
- I felt angry for the clients that the service delivery to them has been hammered by constant staff departures.*
- I have felt angry for younger colleagues having to give up their independent housing because they could no longer afford the rent.*
- Either that or they would find a better paid job outside the not for profit sector.*
- To say that my former workplace is decimated (in terms of staff leaving) is no exaggeration.*

*The NFP agencies continue to focus on undercutting one another to win contracts at the expense of their exploited workers. My feeling is that the whole sector is now probably at risk. I feel sad and frustrated and really needed to leave to try to look after myself.*

*My very best wishes with the campaign- I hope something can be salvaged.*

*Glenys*

It is really important for organisations in the community sector to be able to offer wages and career structures which are competitive with those being offered in the Government and private sectors for a number of reasons.

The most important is to ensure

- ease of recruitment
- and then to ensure that once recruited that we are able to offer competitive rates of pay
- and to then be able to afford to invest in maintaining workers skills by being able to provide them with ongoing training and career development opportunities.

Our sector is very bad at that, not necessarily due to lack of trying but often due to an inability to be able wringing any further benefit from a dollar.

And we are pretty good at being able to give Government a good value for their investment. Indeed we are often told by representatives of Government funders that they wouldn't be able to provide the service as cheaply as we can.

If we were able to provide our hard working employees with an opportunity to maintain a better standard of living whilst employed in the sector our service provision capacity would be greatly enhanced.

In some community organisations it would not be possible for staff to imagine

- not having to work double time prior to taking annual leave because if they weren't doing the job no one else would be
- or where being sick didn't mean working from home so that you could get the job done without making anyone else sick.

As a Manager I dream about being in a position

- where we don't have any ongoing job vacancies;
- where I don't have potential employees turning down offers of work because the wage structure is such that people who would like to work in the sector just can't afford to take such a pay cut.
- where I can afford to find full cover for any staff absenteeism due to sick or annual leave
- and where "burnout" wasn't an issue to be managed.

The big difference between us and the private sector is that in our sector;

- working harder does not bring increased profits or benefits,
- working harder can often translate into being expected to do more with less.

- Because our workers keep taking it on the chin until they can't take it any more because the last thing that they will accept are cuts to client services.

Debbie



*It was once said that the moral test of Government is how that Government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy and the handicapped, and those who support them.*  
(H.Humphrey)

*Imagine this:*

*You travel to work to pick up your work car but your paid day doesn't start yet, you still have to travel anything up to 45 minutes to work with your first client and then you pay starts.*

*Your client maybe one of up to three that you have at the same time and*

- cannot speak,*
- is not mobile without assistance,*
- often chokes or has fits*
- and cannot toilet or eat without your help.*

*You must organise a day of meaningful recreation for these clients but don't get paid to plan these activities.*

*In fact the organisation that you work for is so cash strapped*

- that you are often on your own as far as planning activities–*
- You also don't get paid to write reports about these activities;*
- You do this on your own time and with an extremely limited budget.*
- You must get this client in and out of vehicles,*
- Supervise them 100% of the time*
- And don't get a meal break for yourself.*

*At the end of the day you return the client home, often to a family member who needs emotional support and your empathy.*

*Once the client is home your pay day stops but you still have to return the vehicle.*

*Your pay for all of this?*

- *\$17.87 per hour,*
- *no holiday*
- *or sick pay*
- *If there are public holidays then you don't get paid.*

*This is the working life of many community service workers in;*

- *Youth,*
- *Mental health,*
- *Ageed care*
- *Disability service providers,*
- *Workers who provide care and compassion to the most marginalised everywhere.*

*Is it any wonder that emotional and physical burnout is so high in the community services sector?*

*You can however deliver pizza, pack boxes or work at a service station for \$25 per hour.*

*Employees in the Social and Community sector are now becoming eligible to access their own services, due to the low wages.*

*This is a disgusting fact that needs to be addressed now.*

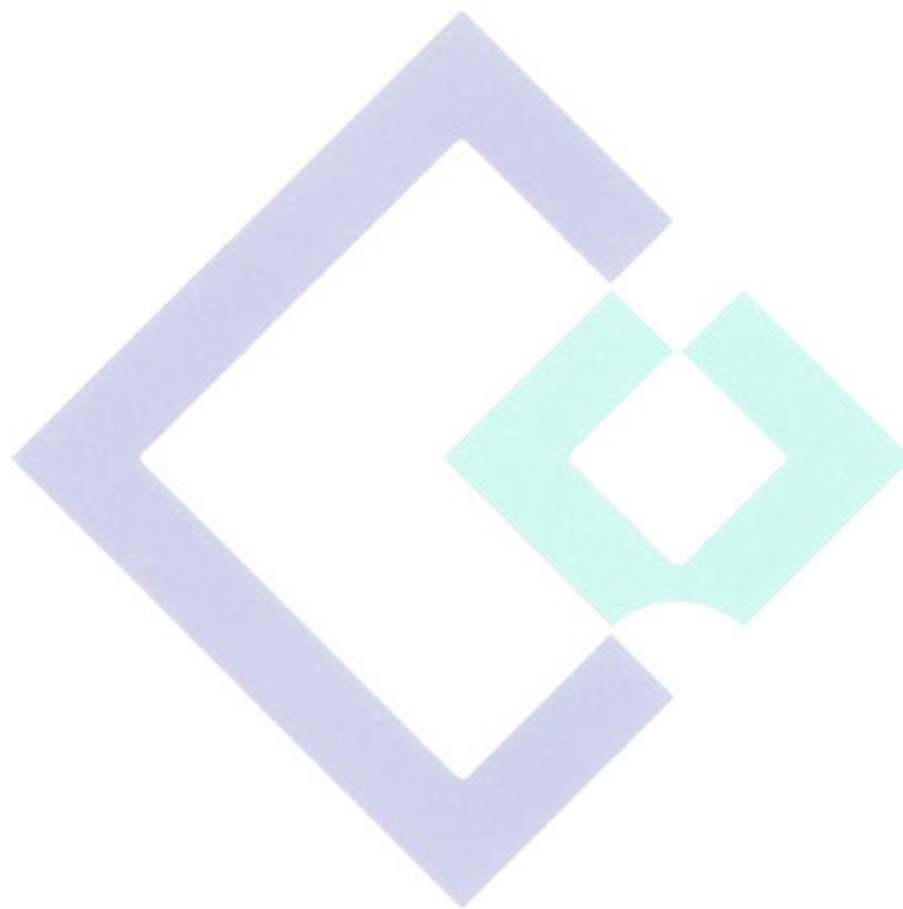
*Please support the Australian Services Union campaign "Community Services -What's it worth?" to increase the wages and conditions for community workers everywhere.*

*I urge all community sector workers to join the ASU.*

*Tell them your experience in the community sector and for the community to send a message of support to [member.service@asuwa.org](mailto:member.service@asuwa.org).*

*The work that Community service staff does is so important to the well being of our communities!*

*Denyse*



This is a short story about my life in a NGO within the community mental health support sector.

I arrived in Australia in November 1997 and was employed in an organisation that supported people living in the community with a mental illness. I started at this organisation in February 97 as a support worker and remained for, what felt like, ten long gruelling years.

At the time, the service opted for "self-referral" so we had no idea where an individual was in terms of their illness and/or whether they had a violent history nor indeed if they were receiving appropriate or any treatment.

I believed that this was a potentially explosive situation (and I did experience violent incidents) and I rallied and fought to change the referral system so as to have some level of accountability in terms of safety for both other clients and staff.

This fight was resisted by the Committee of Management at every step of the way, though eventually I was successful but I think only because the Committee was more concerned about avoiding any legal comeback than the real concern of safety for their workers and clients.

We had only two staff at each centre with an average daily attendance of 20 to 30 people (and sometimes more) a day attending the centre.

Frequently there was only one staff member at the Centre at any given time, for example when one of the staff members would have to go to do the shopping/banking; support a client within the community; take client groups on outings etc.

Whilst staff to client ratio was entirely inadequate for safety and duty of care to our clients, similarly the staff members, particularly when there was only one staff on premises, was potentially dangerous given the client population being individuals diagnosed with a mental illness at varying stages of recovery.

I believe this was dangerous, and indeed there were many occasions where I had to subdue (potentially major) incidents of violence.

No appropriate alarm system was ever put into place despite, for example, staff having to lock themselves into the staffroom to escape a volatile and violent client. There are other similar 'alarming' incidents. These were some of the issues that I had been concerned about in my many years at the Centre and why I had, and continue to have, grave concerns about the place of "volunteer" committee's of management and the lack of accountability that follows from this.

The money was dismal, as it still is now. I was earning roughly \$700.00 a fortnight and the Committee of Management would not allow salary sacrifice because they did not believe in it.

It is lawful and intended for people working in sectors like this who were paid extremely poorly.

I progressed to become a Coordinator at head office and my battles continued. Firstly it took me 3 years of argument to get salary sacrifice introduced for its entire staff. This was only achieved when Committee members changed.

Secondly, as Coordinator they put me on SACS Award scale 3, an outrage when other coordinators within the sector with a similar job profile were on scale 6. The battles continued when the CEO came up with his "own award" of a 5/6 which did not exist under the award. This enabled the organisation 6 further increments before I reached scale 6, i.e. to pay less for longer (and, I would argue, to exploit their staff).

As time past I was promoted to Team Leader/Coordinator which enabled me to act as CEO in the absence of the permanent CEO.

The CEO was not from a human services background, which I believe is a problem. This means they do not understand anything about human service practice or delivery and simply concern themselves and come from a perspective of dollars, balancing the books and delivering outcomes for the cheapest possible cost.

I also believe this to be dangerous for many reasons,

- Such as safety
- Accountability to our clients to deliver a properly funded and best practice programs or service.

During this period of my employment the organisation was seeking funding to open more centres in areas crying out for community based support services (once you are out of the clinic, there was not much to support clients...possibly because the state Labor government cut funding to these types of services when they first came into power in WA).

The Committee was supposed to do the submission but did nothing. I persuaded the CEO, to employ a former colleague whom was doing a degree at university, with myself overseeing and providing information over the course of the process.

The time frame this gave us to do the submission was roughly 5 to 6 weeks which entailed a lot of research, time and commitment. We were successful in getting a reasonable amount of money to expand service provision. The stumbling block to this process being resolutely successful was the CEO working from the premise of

coming in at the cheapest tender, my argument at the time was to allow for rent increases and growth, amongst other cost factors, that were not encountered at the time and my arguments in relation to properly costing the submission fell on deaf ears.

This later caused problems in one of the new Centre's in particular because the place was too small. Subsequently, due to this and lacking foresight to adequately cost factor price increases, it had to be relocated from a central location to a light industrial commercial unit.

This defeated the point of the argument stated within the submission i.e. integrating mental health consumers into, by being in the middle of main stream community life, instead of removing them to the outskirts of the community.

This is where lies the major issue in non-government services having to "tender" to provide services and hence cutting corners i.e. costs to be successful and "win" a tender.

Services are either not costed properly and, as is usually the case, staff wages are costed at bottom dollar i.e. there is no room for wage bargaining and staff are placed on the lowest awards possible and often not commensurate with their skills and experience.

An additional major concern is that NGO sector relies too much on the voluntary sector (a current concern in my current position within a HACC funded service) and this is because services are not resourced properly and, in a lot of instances, exploits the good nature of volunteers (let alone their staff and the many unpaid hours they are expected to do). The other concerns I have are that do voluntary committees of managements or boards, as they like to refer to themselves, actually serve a purpose? I believe in certain instances there can and often is huge conflicts of interest in whom sits on committees. Similarly, there is no accountability where committee's of management are concerned, nor to whom are they accountable.

I have heard of staff being bullied out of a job for mentioning the word union and the issue of union came up because of staff being exploited and not properly managed by Committees of Management whom interfere in the day to day running of services.

Also clients often get this type of treatment (bullying), a client who was on the committee and who was vocal was kicked off the committee (as a consumer rep) by the committee of management though they were voted to this position by clients.

If there was an issue with the person, they should have received support and counselling to perform this job and not just kicked off the board in such a way

that smacks of lack of accountability by the committee (after they had been bullied by the CEO in front of other clients).

I think members of committees often sit on committees to further their careers and only make certain noises if it furthers their careers, at least this has been my experience of the committee which was always inaccessible and totally unaccountable.

Finally the staffs earn deplorable wages for the responsibility they have, particularly when committee's of management and organisation structure and management do not support them (which has been my experience in both organisations that I work in, in the SACS sector).

I hope my experience assists you in the cause to get better pay and condition for the NGO sector and in my opinion I believe the whole sector needs looking into and this is coming from a person whom has worked their way up from support worker to management and is completely disillusioned with this sector and cannot wait to get out. I could say a lot more but this would end up becoming an epic.

**Mick, Aged Care Support Service Supervisor**

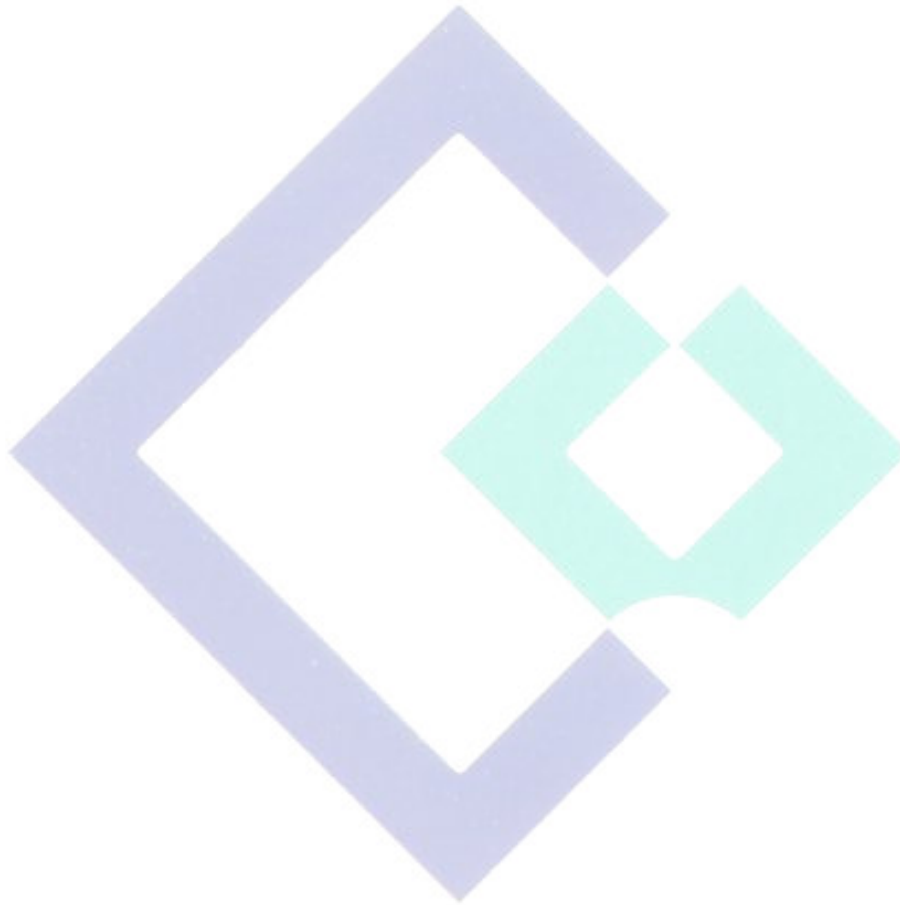


*As a paralegal at my work we are involved in very practical and challenging tasks. My work is rewarding however it is limited as there is no structured career progression.*

*For example, after your law degree you need to do articles to be a practicing solicitor. The centre does not offer article clerkship. So a lot of talent and experience moves through the centre.*

*Hopefully we will be back later in our career!*

**L.**



I am a community mental health worker in a regional area.

I write this email because of some serious concerns regarding the management of the company.

In the past 12 months there have been 6 members of staff who have resigned basically because of the ill-treatment given to them by the executive officer. We have been subjected to some rather belittling treatment, some bullying and general destruction of self esteem, self confidence, with her self indulgent attitude to say the least.

We have on many occasion throughout the last 5 years given the CEO opportunity to address this toxic situation and were assured by the CEO that they would rectify their insulting attitude.

We have had collaborative sessions attempting to address the problem with a psychologist from SW Mental Health division, this did not achieve the results we were wanting. One on one sessions with a counsellor did not give the desired effect. The situation would change for a short time, but then it was back to the soul destroying belittling behaviour.

Recently, the Acting clinical co-ordinator of the regional area Mental Health sent an email to the current chairperson with serious concerns regarding this situation. However they were literally fobbed off, and it was not given any consideration by the chairperson. Some committee members are also outraged that the situation has not been brought to their attention and are considering resigning from their positions.

Incidentally, some past employees are currently receiving medication i.e. anti depressants due to the bad treatment they were receiving.

My concerns are also with the consumers. They also have on occasions been subjected to some hostile treatment. Mrs Jones was requested to forward a letter of apology to each consumer concerned.

We as staff members are continually subjected to comments from other agencies, clinical staff, and psychiatric staff regarding her behaviour, causing some embarrassment to us all.

Bunbury Pathways is currently supporting consumers with unqualified/unsupervised staff due to lack of staff.

This matter should be given some urgent serious consideration by the Peak body for this service. It is as a last resort that this matter be brought to your attention.

I too, have since resigned from my position as Housing Manager/ Senior Support Worker and will not be available at this service as from Friday the 9th May.

We as current and past staff members of this service look forward to your input to this problem - Thankyou.

Mary, Community Mental Health Senior Support Worker



I have to respond to this as CPI has been a bane of contention to the NGOs over the years. The gallop government introduced the CPI Indexation Policy for deliverers of Human Services and NGOs some years ago with a lot of input from the Pilbara and that policy is quite exacting government agencies will pay the CPI increases on an annual basis.

The problem is not all agencies or departments of abide by or don't know about the CPI policy and those that do pay the CPI EXTRA amount some 9 months into the year.

For example: DCP pay the CPI and if the increase was estimated to be 4% for budget consideration then new contracts from July 1 will be increased by 4% - however the ACTUAL CPI figure is never known until after Christmas and then by the time the paperwork is completed and the correction funds sent out it is normally around April or May, as it was this year, when the funds are sent out.

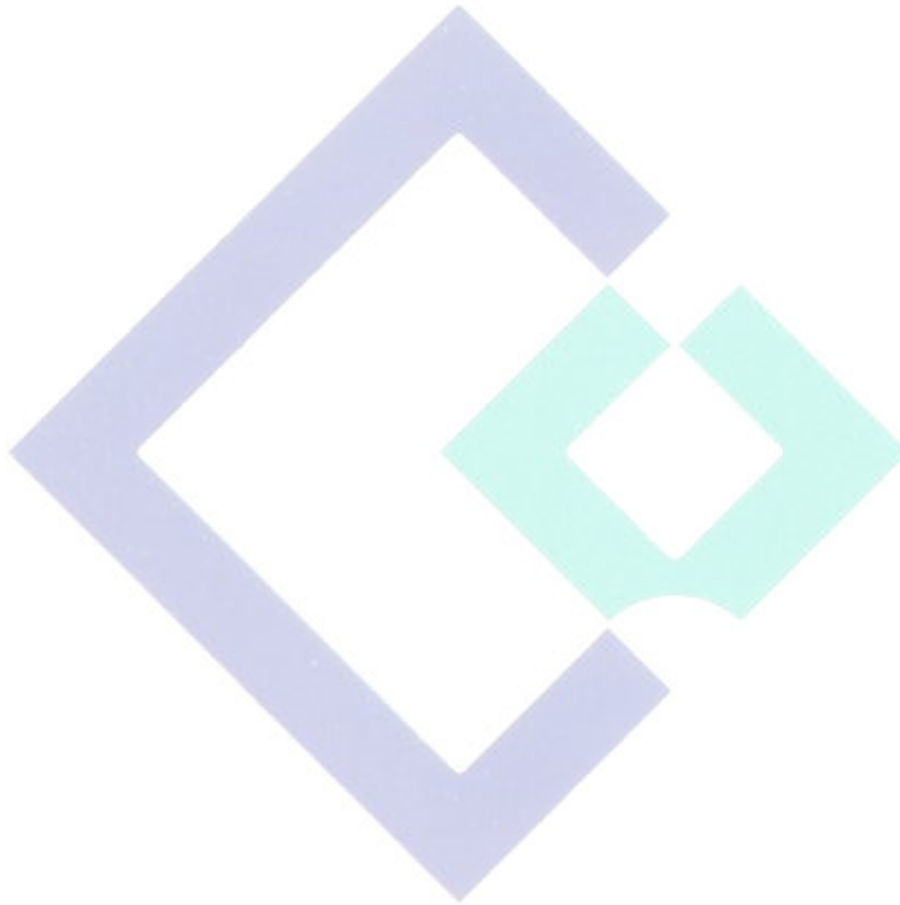
This causes cash-flow problems for NGOs in that the Actual CPI increase does not wait until government pays the money. IT HAPPENS NOW! The CPI this year is well above 5% for WA (probably around 15% for the Pilbara) and we were given a 4% (?) CPI increase by SOME departments for 0708 Financial Year, while inflation is running at a lot higher and we catch up a bit when the increased difference is sent to us, but it can be offset by the ADMIN costs of accounting for all these little bits.

The second example is that some departments within agencies (and I will name the unit of a Dept. will NOT pay CPI on anything but wages!! (and that only happened after a prolonged battle with the department). They obviously figure that petrol and other consumables do not increase along with CPI!!!

Federal government CPI increases are also based on National CPI (NGO's lose again!) and so it goes on.... the bottom line is the NGOs are always playing "catch up" and are NOT funded to the level commensurate with the resources needed to meet the outcomes within the contracts - particularly in remote areas such as the Pilbara.

*Hope that helps.....because we need help!*

*B, Chairperson*



In response to the Ministers letter re funding increases for increases in salaries:

There have certainly been no increases in this service that have not been individual service negotiations between management committee/staff driven to keep staff not linked to funding increases.

There have been no funding increases to programs.

At this service, CPI payments made to tenancy service, state clc program and dv service but these are on a year to year basis and we don't budget for them as we are not guaranteed them in every year or fund except tenancy (which isn't government funding but tenants bond money interest administered by DOCEP) and increases are in there funding grid for the 3+1+1 year agreement.

Federally, no increases but the AG has in April 2008 given every federally funded community legal service some money out of the recent 10million announcement. This is one off funding and ranges from 20k to about 120k I think, to be spent in the next year and we are not allowed to stockpile funds over 10%

And not all community legal centre's got that money either.

G, Coordinator

*I am the only employee of a Men's specific service.*

*I note that your survey found that 83% of employees in the sector are women.*

*Services for men have major concerns with the small number of men working in the sector. Agencies have difficulty in recruiting men to work with men and boys. There is a similar situation in teaching, particularly in primary schools.*

*As a men's service, we also look after organisations and individuals concerned with men's health, wellbeing and other issues affecting men and boys in Western Australia. We were established in 1997 and incorporated in 2000 and received financial support from the WA Department of Health.*

*A primary role is resourcing the sector through supporting service providers, organisations and professionals from various disciplines, who work with men and boys. In addition, we provide information to individuals about appropriate services and professionals, plus provide general community education and raises awareness of the issues affecting men and boys.*

***Executive Officer, Service Provider for Men***

Where is the government's workforce initiative so that providers can continue to strive for excellence?

Every day we struggle to fill the roster and more and more staff are working under more and more pressure. The demands made on them are huge.

Work related stress in the community services sector is real. In this industry not only do staff have to deal with work demands, they have client demands, constant change to duties or policy, and generally overwhelmed by the paperwork and administration. On top of all that are the rising cost of living and petrol prices that community workers often have out of their own pockets.

We all know that work-related stress can lead to

- Long stretches of absenteeism.
- Increase to workplace accidents or mistakes
- Ill health
- Workplace grievances and difficult work relationships
- Drop in work performance

As part of the OSH Act all employers should take steps to ensure that employees are not subjected to unnecessary stress.

The other aspect of staff dissatisfaction; is that clients may not get a quality service, they may have inconsistency due to all the changes of staff. Staff are in this industry because they are caring nurturing people, after all they can get more standing at the check-out. Majority of staff are female, and also have the carer (mother) role at home, and have to juggle their often part-time hours around their family.

Staff must be supported as if we don't have the legs and arms to start with, how on earth can we be a service industry? Also, staff are being pouched to government or private industry, because we cannot compete financially.

The other issue is that staff can be placed in unnecessary stress because of disgruntled clients or client's family by them making just one phone call to the Aged Care Complaints Investigation Scheme. A staff member only has to suggest something and the complaint can be about anything that affects the quality of care, such as care, catering, hygiene, security, activities, choice, comfort, safety, neglect or financial matters.

Staff or providers also need some form of protection, because the time, stress, mistrust, and administration of such frivolous complaints can almost destroy some staff, and managers. So who would want to work for pittance with such a high risk?

I am sure you are familiar with this. I agree with the concept that we need to continually improve. But how can we improve without the staff?

7 April 2008

JE08/29

Minister for Ageing Justine Elliot today pledged to continue to work in partnership with older Australians, aged care providers, unions and consumer groups to improve quality in residential aged care.

As part of the measures, next financial year, the Aged Care Standards and Accreditation Agency, the independent watchdog, has been instructed to undertake a record 7000 announced and unannounced visits to aged care facilities across the nation.

"The Government has made a firm commitment to continual improvement in the delivery of aged care and I look forward to working cooperatively with providers and service deliverers to achieve the best outcomes possible for our older population," Mrs Elliot said.

Thank you

**Tanya Sander**



*"My name is "S" and I am a community support worker at a women's health centre in Western Australia.*

*On a daily basis I carry out a variety of tasks from basic administrative duties, to statistical analysis, finances, reporting, marketing and promotion. The bulk of my time however is spent communicating with women in high stress situations.*

*These women have experienced domestic violence, stalking, are victims or crime, sufferers of post natal depression and other mental illnesses, often suicidal, terrified and in desperate need of assistance. Assistance that is not available to them in the public sector and so they are 'handballed' to us in the non-for-profit sector.*

*Our clinic provided over 40,000 services to the public of this kind last year and this number is growing rapidly. We do this in a small team of five dedicated staff, who regularly work unpaid over time, long hours, use our own cars, food and resources to meet the ever growing needs of our community.*

*For this work, full time, I am paid \$36,000 a year. I struggle to afford my ever increasing rent and have a run down bomb of a car that I bought before I took this job. I love my job, but this is being grossly taken advantage of. The organisation I work for cannot afford to pay me more as we are constantly required to increase our outputs but never receive any increased financial input from the government.*

*Despite loving who I work for and what I do I am seeking employment outside the industry as I simply cannot afford to live on the wages I earn. This is an awful shame and a sad reality but as a young woman with a future ahead of me I need some level of financial security that is just not available to me here."*

*S.*

I'm a youth worker, and I've been working with homeless young people for three years now. I got into this work after completing a three year degree at university.

I was coming home on the bus the other day, and bumped into an old client. I had helped him get off the streets and referred him to a program that would help him find work. He did a day course in the responsible service of alcohol. He now has stable accommodation and has now been working for over a year and just got a promotion. He's overseeing all the glassy's at a local club. He earns \$21 an hour and \$23 on weekends. I'm just about to have my yearly pay rise and that will take me from \$21 an hour to \$22 an hour. Surely using my university degree to help homeless youth should earn me more than a head glassy at a local club?

Is that all my work is worth?

**Matt Pearce, Youth Worker**

