

Challenges and opportunities for the non government alcohol and other drug workforce

Background

The non government alcohol and other drugs sector is in the midst of a workplace crisis. Prior to COVID-19 the sector struggled to attract, recruit and retain the workforce required to deliver quality treatment. Services are now operating with low staffing levels, in response to rising service demand, workload and support needs of people accessing services.

The chronic under funding of AOD treatment has been demonstrated in a number of sector reports, with one study showing that unmet demand may vary between 26% and 48% of all people who will seek and are appropriate for AOD treatment. The situation is now critical, with current demands on funding and staffing unable to be sustained.

This paper outlines the pressing issues facing the non government AOD sector workforce and calls for immediate and collaborative action from key stakeholders. It is informed by feedback from NADA members and data arising from the Special Commission of Inquiry into the Drug 'Ice' Report.

We request that Government, peak organisations and service providers collaborate to develop a National AOD Workforce Development Strategy, with aligning state-based strategies, informed by timely and accurate data. The strategy should give consideration to the whole employee lifecycle, address gaps and priorities and grow the workforce. It should be accompanied by an implementation strategy with appropriate funds to successfully embed actions.

Attracting and recruiting staff to deliver quality care

Non government AOD services face multiple barriers to recruitment and are in some cases unable to fill vacant positions, placing additional pressure on existing staff. A key factor is the inability of the NGO sector to compete with public services salaries, working conditions and job security that comes from long term contracts. Poor awareness and public profile of AOD work, further contributes to low recruitment response and with no casual staffing pool available, there are few options to provide relief to the workforce. Regional, rural and remote locations face further impacts with limited availability of a local workforce with the required skills.

Actions:

- *Government and peak organisations*, as highlighted by the Special Commission of Inquiry into the Drug 'Ice' to implement a consistent and routine method of data collection on the size, profile and make-up of the specialist AOD workforce to provide an accurate picture of the current workforce and enable targeted planning and resourcing.
- *Government, peak organisations and service providers* together to develop, implement and evaluate a National AOD Workforce Development Strategy, with aligning state-based strategies to attract, retain, support and strengthen the workforce, addressing gaps and priorities. This should consider robust approaches to attract, retain, support and grow the Aboriginal workforce and a clear vision for the important role of consumers, peers and the lived experience workforce.
- *Government* to implement strategies to encourage workers to move between public and non government services, such as secondment arrangements, and transfer of leave entitlements and other benefits.

- *Funders* to provide adequate funding to attract a variety of staff profiles to support NGO AOD work, including nursing and allied health professionals.
- *Funders* to allocate financial and workplace incentives that attract people to AOD work, grow the workforce locally as well as encourage relocation to regional, rural and remote areas. This should include provision for professional development and workplace supports.
- *Training providers and peak organisations* to ensure equitable access to training in regional areas in order to attract and build the workforce locally.

Retaining existing skilled staff

A considerable number of AOD workers are leaving the NGO sector, decreasing the capacity to provide frontline support as well as administration and management. Organisations are losing their most experienced staff as people are retiring earlier than planned. This creates a skill and knowledge gap that is difficult to replace. The NGO AOD sector has continued to provide crucial supports throughout the pandemic, however the ability to maintain adequate staffing levels necessary to continue service provision is now under threat.

The impact of the mandatory vaccination as a result of the NSW Government Public Health Order has seen further staff losses as people choose not to be vaccinated. As face-to-face services resume, workers can feel anxious about returning to face to face work, while some seek improved working conditions, flexibility and work-life balance.

Supporting worker wellbeing

Workforce retention has been impacted by a decline in worker wellbeing. Staff face ongoing pressure to work at an increased capacity, brought about by greater service demands, staff shortage, staff being on leave due to cold symptoms and getting tested, the additional tasks due to COVID-19 restrictions as well as anxiety about providing face-to-face work. A study of the NGO AOD sector showed stress and anxiety levels of staff were perceived to have increased (97%, n=32) and staff wellbeing (60.6%, n=20) decreased due to COVID-19.

Actions, in addition to those already mentioned:

- *Funders* to adopt appropriately resourced and sustainable funding models that are long term and reflect population need, the workforce required to meet demand, comparable pay and conditions to public sector, and covers operating costs including technology infrastructure and workforce development. Service providers also require contract flexibility to rollover funds accrued as a result of staff vacancies.
- *Funders* to include a requirement within contracts for supervision and professional development and cover the cost of training and backfill of staff.
- *NSW Health* to enable access to HETI and other public sector training for NGO AOD workers.
- *NADA* to enable access to quality training and professional development opportunities across NSW.
- *Service providers* to enable regular supervision and professional development and apply engagement strategies for early career workers through to career progression for established staff. Incentives such as additional leave entitlements may improve retention of senior staff who have reach maximum award level.
- *Service providers* to offer flexible working arrangements where practical and support workers in the transition to face to face work.

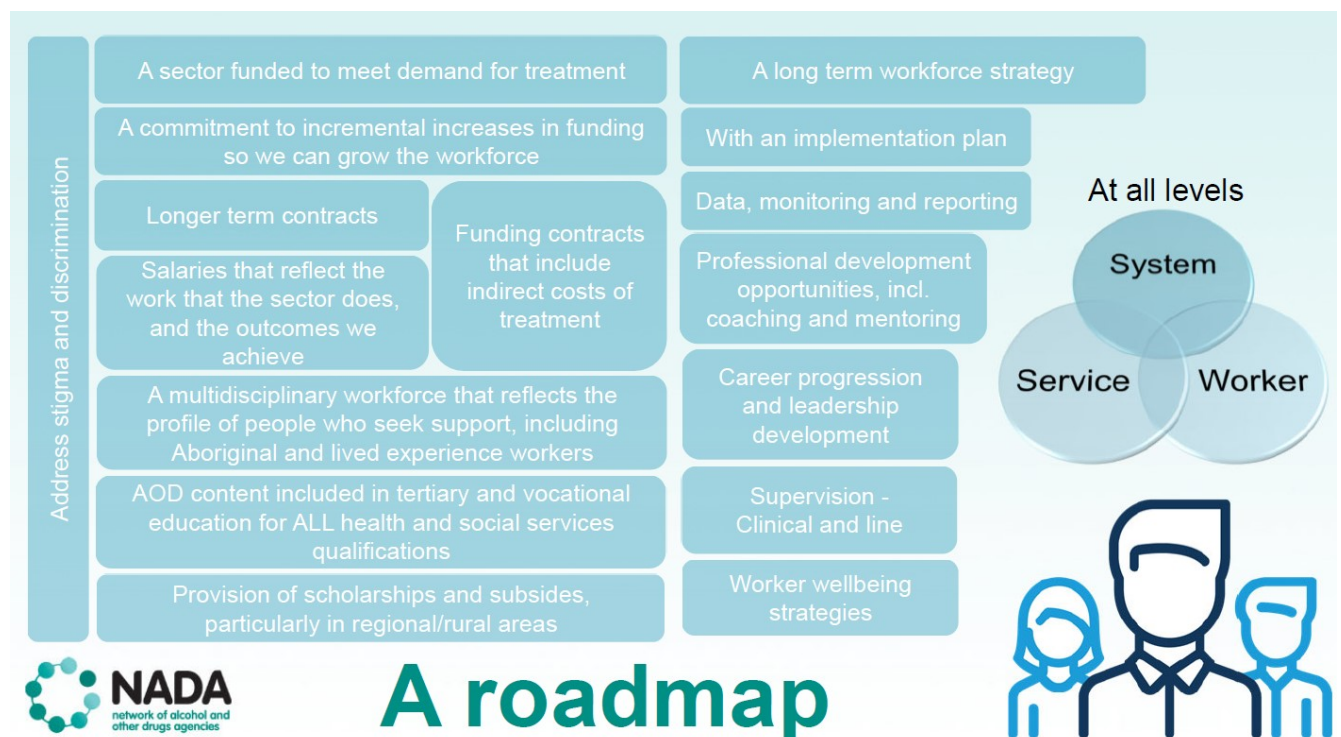
Building and promoting career pathways

To address the current workforce shortage there is a pressing need to attract and broaden the pool of workers available for AOD work. To build clear and effective pathways into the sector, vocational AOD training must swiftly upskill new workers without financial barrier. Education should reflect contemporary practice and successfully lead students to AOD work. Inclusion of AOD knowledge within tertiary health and social welfare course offerings presents a crucial opportunity to attract nurses and allied health workers. These approaches will promote awareness of AOD as a career option, raise the profile and address perceptions of AOD work. It is also imperative to consider the specific pathways necessary to attract, support and expand the Aboriginal workforce and the peer and consumer workforce.

Actions:

- *Government and peak organisations* to build relationships with tertiary *education providers* to ensure mandatory inclusion of AOD course content, establish practice placement programs in the NGO AOD sector and improve training access in regional areas.
- *Government and education providers* to provide accelerated training alternatives to the current lengthy qualification pathway, such as an AOD skill set, cover costs of training and practice placements and incentivise training completion.
- *Peak organisations and government* to advocate for development of a peer work qualification in AOD in consultation with *peer and consumer workers and service providers*.
- *Government and education providers* to establish an Aboriginal AOD workforce initiative to provide AOD positions in NGO AOD services with concurrent AOD training, cultural supervision and opportunities for further training to support career progression and leadership.

A road map to attract, retain, engage, develop and support the workforce:



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