

EVENT BRIEF	
Title of Event	Community Sector Consultative Forum
Date	5 July 2006
Time	8:45am – 12:30pm
Length of time allocated to speaker	30 minutes
Location	Midland Town Hall
Organisation	Swan Communities

Welcome...

What is the community sector?

What are we talking about when we say 'the community sector'?

The term 'community sector' describes a key part of civil society and includes all the formal and informal associations, networks, groups of people who gather together and perform some type of activity that benefits, sustains or strengthens the social fabric of our society and contributes positively to the well being of our communities.

At its broadest, the definition of community sector therefore consists of thousands of not-for-profit organizations, some government agencies (child protection) and an increasing large number of for-profit providers (eg childcare and aged care providers) that deliver vital services and support to people in need.

It has been estimated that 65% of all Australians over the age of 14 belong to one or more community group. These range from sporting clubs and recreational clubs, local environmental groups, arts groups, cultural groups and includes the many diverse so -called 'human services' organizations, which WACOSS represent.

The non-government human services component of the community sector includes those of us who provide childcare; child welfare; personal and social support; financial and material assistance; and residential care and accommodation for the aged or people with a disability.

In fact almost every Australian, at some time in their life, will make use of some form of assistance from the community services sector.

These organisations often undertake advocacy work by raising awareness, contributing to policy development and speaking on behalf of people and organisations that might otherwise not be heard.

Although the organizations and individuals within the community sector come in a wide array of shapes and sizes they all largely share a common goal.

They are people committed to working towards a vision of a socially just and sustainable West Australian society, where people care for each other and have access to the resources and opportunities necessary for their wellbeing.

WACOSS believes that the basic rights for every person are:

- An adequate income to cover basic needs.
- Being able to live in safe, secure and affordable housing.
- Having the opportunity to live a physically and mentally healthy life.
- Being able to develop intellectual capacities and skills.
- Ability to raise children in a safe and secure environment with support from family, friends and the community.
- To be able to participate in the community free of discrimination on the grounds of race, sex, age, disability or marital status.
- To be able to access appropriate information and resources to enable you to make your own decisions and to work out or choose solutions to your own problems.

- To be able to work.

Issues of self esteem, skills, belonging and lack of access to basic physical and social infrastructure all create complex barriers to people achieving these basic rights. However, with assistance and support many of these barriers can be broken down, and in many cases that assistance and support comes from these dedicated individuals and organisations within the community services sector.

The importance of the community sector

Even on traditional economic measures, the contribution of the community sector in Australia is substantial. In total there are around 700,000 community organisations across Australia, which:

- Provide employment for over 600,000 people
- Contribute 3.3% to Australia's GDP
- Contribute an estimated \$42billion to Australia's economy

The community sector specifically employs at least 237,000 people, and relies on at least double that number in volunteers.

So not only are we a crucial part of the social fabric of this country, but we are also an extremely important part of Australia's economic system!

But as mentioned previously, the community sector is more than a provider of services.

We also:

- Promote a heightened sense of community and social responsibility which goes beyond the provision of services;
- Work with and on behalf of disadvantaged groups as a voice for those most marginalised
- And importantly, we help to shape public and community priorities with government, highlighting areas of need and providing on-the-ground experience of policy in

action.

Challenges of the sector

Today, despite our best efforts, and despite its obvious importance, this sector is in crisis. And this has dire consequences for those in need. Many of you may have direct experience of this in your own organisations.

The Australian Council of Social Service undertakes a survey of the community sector organizations every year, and the 2006 report was released recently.

Across Australia the survey found that:

- Demand for services has increased:
 - With a 9% increase in the number of people helped in 2004-5 compared to the previous year.
 - Organisations reported they turned away 29% more people eligible for a service last year than the year before.
- The needs of clients are becoming more complex, putting further pressure on community organisations, for example:
 - Many people using services had multiple disadvantages. 53% of service users were jobless and 32% of people using services had a disability.
 - 15% of people using services were Indigenous and 21% were from a non-English speaking background.
- Capital and service infrastructure costs are increasing – but funding is not increasing appreciably.

The Australia wide results for the Community Sector Survey are echoed in Western Australia, with demand rising, number of people being turned away increasing, and a significant increase in the unfunded work by staff and volunteers.

Services most in demand by Western Australians were income support, long

term housing and crisis and supported accommodation. These are basic needs, and if, as the saying goes, society is judged on how it treats its vulnerable members then these statistics show that we are failing.

The report also shows that:

- The work of the non-government human services sector is characterized by the dominance of voluntary labour, which constitutes 67% of the workforce of respondent agencies.
- In an effort to meet excess demand, agencies have had to squeeze more out of their existing resources, which includes the use of unpaid staff labour.
- 58% of respondent agencies experienced difficulty attracting appropriately qualified staff during 2004-05.

These results provide compelling evidence of the increasing difficulties for the non-government community services sector in attracting and retaining expert and experienced staff; which further intensifies the crisis that currently exists within the sector.

Compounding this situation is the issue of wage parity for our sector. As many of you will be aware of, if you are working in our sector, and you have a family and a mortgage then you may well be in the category of “working poor”. The salaries in our sector are not competitive and for many agencies that are not able to offer salary packaging for staff, there is little financial incentive to look for a long-term career in the community sector. Poor salaries and conditions lead to high staff turn over and our inability to attract and retain qualified personnel. These factors work against our stability and therefore our sustainability.

Potential of the community sector

And yet, despite these challenges the sector continues to pull together. Community service agencies and organizations continue to seek advice,

representation and training opportunities from their Peak body, while Peaks continue to represent and advocate on behalf of the disadvantaged groups in our community.

The call to governments to support community led responses to issues of poverty and disadvantage is getting louder. It is a cry that demands a response and is one that, I hope, signifies a reconnection to the values that Australians have, until recently, held as fundamental – giving a fair go to everyone, treating people as we would like to be treated, caring for each other and recognizing that everyone is not starting from the same place in this world and being prepared to work together to find the best way forward, rather than in competition for the best bite at the cherry.

Those of us in the community sector share at least two other beliefs:

- A commitment to meeting the needs of low income and disadvantaged Australians, and doing what we can to deliver people better quality of life outcomes;
- A belief in the power of people and communities to change their own lives

The question is how do we harness these similarities and start building the future we want.

Benefits of collaboration

When responses are community driven and people come together at all levels their capacity to respond to major social issues is increased.

There are different types of collaboration...

- Collaboration between organizations in the community services sector, for example: when NGOs share services eg share the costs of buying a vehicle that suits the needs of several agencies, sharing resources such as accounting or human resources.

- Collaboration between the community services sector and the corporate or small business sector eg WACOSS and Creating Communities, Hills Community Support Group and Whitemans Bricks.

Social responsibility is not just a buzz word for businesses, governments and non-profit organisations. It is a whole of community approach to addressing disadvantage.

Social responsibility is about examining the ways in which partnerships between businesses, governments, the community services sector work together and impact upon the big issues of poverty, social isolation and disadvantage. It is about each and every one of us taking responsibility for creating an inclusive community, one that looks after those unable, for whatever reason, to look after themselves.

By establishing partnerships with local community organisations, businesses and other organisations that do not have direct, grass roots connections, can find out what are the best ways that they can provide real assistance, either to the community organisations directly or directly to the people that the agency assists. This assistance can be in many forms – it may be as simple as organising your staff to go and volunteer at an agency periodically, collecting money for the agency, donating goods or services to the agency.

Alternatively, your business can look at ways of assisting the clients of community organisation directly. For example developing a volunteer program that takes on people that are experiencing difficulties in terms of employment and offers them highly supported, skills development within your workplace.

The crucial factor is to find out what is wanted and needed locally and commit to working together with community organisations, local governments and other stakeholders in addressing these needs.

These sorts of partnerships or social enterprises take an active role in integrating social responsibility into their operations. The focus is very much on creating value – on improving the well being of your community.

Conclusion

Swan Communities vision of a vibrant, effective and cohesive community sector is one I am sure we all share and one which I believe can be achieved. Forging partnerships is imperative to achieving this vision as is community consultation. This Forum offers an opportunity to do just that. If we can all find ways to work together, taking the strengths from what different parties have to offer then I believe that we can find community driven, sustainable solutions to addressing disadvantage in WA.