

## **‘A local response to Welfare to Work’: a methodology of story collection**

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### **Abstract**

*The Federal Government introduced the Welfare to Work legislation in 2005. The legislation was intended to shift people from welfare to (paid) work, largely through punitive measures such as reduced payments and harsh penalties. Community agencies in inner south east Melbourne were interested in monitoring any harms caused by Welfare to Work and developing policy responses. ‘A local response to Welfare to Work’ (the ALR-W2W project) did this through a ‘story collection’ method, which has enabled us to raise awareness of the issue and have input into policy processes. There were challenges in collecting stories from people affected who might be in crisis, suspicious of anything that looked like a bureaucratic or invasive response, or facing other barriers such as limited literacy, language barriers or mental health issues. This article discusses the methodological issues involved in collecting stories of people affected by Welfare to Work*

### **Eddie’s story**

*Eddie was on Newstart payments after losing his job due to distress and mental health problems following a family breakup. He signed an activity agreement and was told to attend an interview for a cleaning job. Eddie refused to go, saying that he already had work doing medical research. He was told to send the documentation to Centrelink, which he did. He heard nothing back from them, but two fortnights later, Eddie stopped receiving payments. A few weeks later, Eddie was evicted without notice from his rented house after not paying rent. He was not able to take anything with him. After staying at his Uncle’s for a short while, he went to a housing agency who found him accommodation at a local rooming house. He became even more mentally unwell, and finally the CAT team had to be called. He was hospitalised for one month in February 2008. Since his discharge from hospital, Eddie is living in temporary accommodation. His payments have finally been reinstated, but he is back on Newstart. He is not well enough to work, and fears being breached again (March 2008).*

### **Introduction**

‘A Local Response to Welfare to Work’ (ALR–W2W) is a project based in the inner south east metropolitan area in Melbourne, monitoring the impact of Welfare to Work by disseminating information to local workers and collecting personal accounts from people affected by Welfare to Work. The aim is to understand, from the perspective of those affected, any harm from Welfare to Work to people in our local community, and to develop appropriate community and policy responses. (Individuals are referred to appropriate support services if they need assistance in sorting out their individual problems). Stories like Eddie’s reveal the effects of Welfare to Work on the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in our community.

In 2005 the Federal Government introduced the 'Welfare to Work' legislation, based on the principle of mutual obligation which assumes that welfare is not an entitlement, but a contract between government and individuals. As the name suggests, the policy aims to move people from welfare payments to the (paid) workforce. The legislation targets two groups in particular: people with a disability who were assessed as being able to work 15 hours a week or more (having partial capacity for work) and parents on parenting benefit whose youngest child turned six (partnered parents) or eight (sole parents). These people were now to receive Newstart payments, which are substantially lower than the Disability Support Pension or Parenting Payment, involve the loss of other benefits, a steeper rate of tax 'clawback' and an obligation to meet 'activity requirements', to look for a certain number of jobs per week or undertake other training or activities approved by Centrelink. The legislation also imposed new requirements on long term unemployed and mature aged jobseekers and a harsher regime of penalties, including 'breaching', whereby Centrelink may delay payment of benefits or stop payments altogether for up to eight weeks.

There were some additional resources for training and support under Welfare to Work but they were limited and the major thrust of the legislation was punitive. As the legislation has progressively come into effect, the number of people affected and the number of penalties have sharply increased.

Centrelink data shows that there were 31,789 eight-week non-payment periods (breaches) imposed from July 2007 to March 2008, more than double that for the whole of the previous financial year (O'Connor 2008:1). While these statistics give us a sense of the enormity of the problem, they do not convey the full physical, social and emotional impact on people affected by the legislation.

From the beginning of Welfare to Work, many community and welfare agencies were concerned about the likely impacts, especially on disadvantaged and vulnerable groups (Australian Council of Social Service 2006). The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), as the peak body for the sector, put in place a number of responses, including a case study library to collect case studies of people who had been affected by Welfare to Work.

In the inner south east area of Melbourne, a number of agencies were concerned about the impact of Welfare to Work on their clients and the community. Inner south east Melbourne, though a generally wealthy and increasingly gentrified area, still contains pockets of severe disadvantage, particularly people living in rooming houses, public housing, supported residential services, community residential units and other forms of low-cost or insecure housing. Residents include people with disabilities, particularly mental illness, drug users, street sex workers, people who have served jail sentences, socially isolated people, people of migrant and refugee background and sole parents, many of whom may have experienced family violence. Many of these people were likely to be affected by Welfare to Work.

## **Methodology**

Port Phillip Community Group (PPCG) and the local Primary Care Partnership, the Inner South East Partnership in Community and Health (ISEPICH), hosted two

awareness-raising forums on Welfare to Work for local agencies and community members, supported by the City of Port Phillip. Following the second forum, agencies who attended were invited to participate in a project to respond to Welfare to Work.

Those involved in setting up the project had been interested in working with ACOSS, however we had concerns about the methodology ACOSS was using, in particular the proposed method of collecting case studies. The case studies were to be collected through a website and the collection forms required participants to provide a lot of detail, not just about what benefits they were on and what had happened to them, but other information such as their age and family status.

Our experience, from working with vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, suggested this approach would have limited success. Many would not have the required levels of computer literacy or literacy in written English. Moreover, they were likely to be suspicious of anything that might seem invasive or bureaucratic. The challenges for case study collection include:

- Those affected are often in crisis and telling their story is not a high priority
- Regardless of their circumstance, people affected often feel they are at fault, and prefer not to reveal details about themselves
- The W2W legislation is complex, and it is challenging to distinguish which issues are related to this legislation, and which are a result of other Centrelink responses
- Community workers rarely have the time to retell the stories they've heard
- Communication across the sector can be patchy so workers who hear stories don't know that they can be reported.
- Assistance available to people affected is limited.

To address and reduce these barriers, ALR – W2W has adopted a story collection rather than a case study model. While less rigorous in terms of data collection, this method ensures that stories collected identify the impact that the laws have on those affected without any requirement to divulge information. It also allows workers to retell stories simply and directly and enables the project to understand the impact of Welfare to Work on people most affected.

On the basis of practice experience, we believed people were much more likely to provide information if they could do so through simple, flexible systems, which also gave them the opportunity of providing it through existing relationships with trusted workers. Therefore we set out to develop a system that would allow them to do this.

There were many methodological considerations and the project steering committee, which included people who were or had been welfare beneficiaries, as well as workers, spent several months planning the project. We developed 'story collection' forms that were in plain language and accessible to people of limited literacy, and allowed people to tell their own story in as much detail as they wanted, with

identifying and contact details if they wished, or alternatively, to provide minimal details, anonymously, through a worker. People did not even need to sign the form if they did not want to, as the form provided an option where the worker could verify that the person gave consent but did not want to sign. In this case the worker would provide his or her first name and agency details. Pilot testing confirmed our view that this approach was necessary and useful.

With the aid of a community grant from the City of Port Phillip and support from the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO) we were also able to engage a graphic designer to develop publicity materials for the project. Again, considerable thought was given to these materials. They had to be eye-catching and use plain and direct language that would be accessible to people of low literacy and also make a personal appeal (people are both more likely and more able to read material that engages them emotionally). The images of people portrayed in the material as telling and listening to the stories were important, since we wanted to convey a non-verbal message to potential participants that there were people interested in hearing their stories, who were not bureaucrats or 'social workers'. The telling and listening figures were even intended as far as possible to be of indeterminate gender, ethnic or cultural background, in order to avoid stereotypes, while still being human and engaging. We were lucky to have a talented graphic designer to achieve these aims.

The verbal content of the material was equally challenging, and in this case the steering committee had to compromise, since some wanted to have minimum content so that people would not 'switch off' in response to too many words, while others wanted to provide sufficient explanation to ensure we obtained stories from people affected by Welfare to Work, rather than people who were just generally disgruntled with Centrelink or their employment service provider. In the end we agreed on a poster with minimum information, and a DL leaflet providing more detail about who was affected and what kind of impacts they might experience.

A project plan was developed on QIPPS (the Quality Improvement Program Planning System) which also enabled us to develop an evaluation framework for the project. The plan was developed on an action research model, allowing us the flexibility to develop further stages of the project on the basis of the results of previous stages.

Once the initial planning was completed, we began engaging more agencies. Port Phillip Community Group was the project leader and hub for receiving stories. The Chairperson of ISEPICH sent a letter to member agencies (49 in all) explaining why the Executive Committee supported the project and urging agencies to become involved. A student on placement then contacted agencies (including agencies that were not members of ISEPICH but were potentially interested), providing agencies with materials for display and, if they were interested in collecting stories, arranging for a member of the project steering committee to visit the agency to discuss the project in more detail. Agency visits, usually through presentation at staff meetings, had significant additional networking and education benefits. Over 60 agencies were contacted, most agreed to display materials and about six have been involved in collecting stories.

The basic conceptual and theoretical models we are drawing on can be summarised as: the social model of health (Department of Human Services 2008a); the integrated health promotion approach (Department of Human Services 2008b); community development and participant action research, within an overall paradigm that has usefully been described by Guba and Lincoln as participatory, and leading to 'action to transform the world in the service of human flourishing' (Guba & Lincoln, 2005:196).

## **Ethics**

During the planning stage we also considered the ethical implications. The project was not a formal research project but a consultation for the purpose of providing services (advocacy), so it did not require formal ethics approval, but it did need to meet privacy principles (Department of Human Services 2005) and respect people's rights under Victoria's Charter of Human Rights. The processes below were intended to meet these general requirements and specific ethical requirements of being realistic (not raising people's expectations about what the project could do) and supporting participation (allowing people to choose the degree to which they wished to participate). The key aspects were:

- Provision of plain language project information in accessible formats (a plain language sheet was provided or explained to all potential story tellers in addition to the project publicity materials), including a clear explanation of the aims of the project, its limitations (in particular that we did not provide support with individual disputes but would refer people to the Welfare Rights Unit) and the name and contact details of the individual (Sandy) and agency (PPCG) with overall responsibility for the project.
- The option to be involved to the extent that the person wanted, including the right not to participate or to withdraw at any point, without suffering adverse consequences
- The option to provide contact details or remain fully anonymous (as previously described)
- Participants being able to receive regular information about project progress and achievements
- Participants being able to have an ongoing involvement in the project and be involved in the development of responses (eg. policy advocacy) or to limit their participation to the degree they wished
- The lead agency keeping the stories in safe and secure conditions

## **Results**

We received 22 personal accounts, both through workers and direct from people affected. In relation to harms, some key themes are:

- Psychological harm, disempowerment and increased dependency on community services as a result of their experience
- Housing loss/insecurity/risk of homelessness (particularly as a consequence of being breached)
- Reduced incentive to seek work
- Food insecurity

On the basis of stories received, the project has been successful in raising the profile of the issue through stories in local and metropolitan media and through a regular project newsletter. The steering committee was able to advocate to candidates in the 2007 federal election, and to relevant Ministers after the election. In early 2008, the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations hosted a meeting between steering committee members and a Ministerial adviser, to discuss recommendations arising from the project. Steering committee members also presented on the project at the International Mental Health Promotion Conference in Melbourne in September 2008.

Several aspects of Welfare to Work are now under review by the Rudd Government, with changes expected to be introduced at the time of the 2009 budget. Key areas of expected change include a more flexible approach to breaching, ie. people may be breached only for the days they did not meet their participation requirements rather than the mandatory eight weeks removal of the disincentives for people on Disability Support Pension to work by allowing them to retain their pension despite work or volunteer activities, and removal of the \$25 rule, which had meant that single mothers had to take a job even if they were only \$25 per week better off than if they had remained at home with their children.. In conjunction with a wide range of community organisations and peak bodies, the ALR-W2W project has contributed to these changes, in particular by highlighting the personal impacts of Welfare to Work.

## **Conclusion**

In political terms, marginalised groups are often caught in a vicious circle. Because they are marginalised, they do not have a voice in policy-making processes and may be suspicious of these processes. This lack of voice in turn contributes to their further marginalisation. By detailed attention to methodology, this project has been able to ensure that voices of people affected by Welfare to Work have become part of the policy debate.

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