

ACCESS SERIES: Young people's access to health care

Spinning the Web:

BETTER CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SERVICES
WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

RESEARCH REPORT August 2006

caah
the children's hospital at Westmead

NSW Centre for the Advancement
of Adolescent Health

NSW  **HEALTH**

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NSW HEALTH

About this report

Under its revised Strategic Plan 2004-6, NSW CAAH is committed to capacity building and partnering with agencies involved with youth health and well-being. The *Spinning the Web* project (both research and anticipated action phases) covers three of the Centre's four key focus areas, namely: developing information and resources, building staff and organisational capacity, conducting applied research and developing good practice.

This document presents the research findings of *Spinning the Web: Better connections between services working with young people*, and is divided into four sections for easy navigation and reading:

Report Summary: contains the *Executive Summary*, briefly outlines the *Main Findings* and *Key opportunities for action*

Introduction: provides the project background information, literature review, research aims, objectives and methodology

Findings: presents detailed analyses and discussion of the five research themes

Conclusion: outlines future directions and strategies arising from the research

NSW Centre for the Advancement of Adolescent Health (CAAH)

The NSW Centre for the Advancement of Adolescent Health (NSW CAAH) was established in 1998 under the Youth Health Policy, to create better health and well-being for young people across the State. Primarily funded by NSW Health, the Centre works from The Children's Hospital at Westmead, with health care, non-government, education, academic, community and advocacy bodies to ensure better youth health outcomes.

NSW CAAH's four key focus areas contribute to improving adolescent health:

- Developing information and resources to increase knowledge and understanding of youth health issues.
- Professional development and capacity building around adolescent health and development issues.
- Undertaking applied research and promoting good practice in adolescent health care.
- Supporting advocacy and policy development to increase leadership and action for adolescent health.

Further information about the Centre can be found on the website: www.caah.chw.edu.au

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A list of participating organisations and interagencies is provided in Appendix A.



Associate Professor David Bennett AO
Head
NSW Centre for the Advancement of Adolescent Health

Executive Summary

Report Summary

There are two major ways in which access to information impacts on service delivery for young people. Firstly, when addressing the complexity of young people's health needs, workers must access information on a variety of cross-sectoral services and programs in order to make appropriate referrals. Secondly, when designing new youth projects, workers need to locate existing resources and make best use of lessons learned in order to avoid 'reinventing the wheel', and to maximise effective programming.

Recent studies show, however, a picture of inconsistent communication and knowledge-sharing between health-related services (Booth et al. 2002, Howes et al. 2003, Lowcay & Kalucy 2003), especially those involved with issues of young people's health and well-being. Although there has been some interest in improving access to information - NSW Health has requested NSW Centre for the Advancement of Adolescent Health (NSW CAAH) to set up a statewide clearinghouse of youth health-related services, and the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) proposes establishing an evidence-based clearinghouse (Howes et al. 2004) - there has been little research so far to confirm that creating new online websites and databases would result in the required connectedness or communication between services working on young people's issues.

The purpose of the Spinning the Web research was to ascertain workers' actual information-seeking behaviours and the reasons behind their usage of different methods, as well as to identify strategies for improving information-sharing and networking across the State. This study was undertaken as part of the NSW Centre for the Advancement of Adolescent Health 2004-6 Strategic Plan to support services working in youth health, and to inform decisions on setting up a clearinghouse for services and projects dedicated to the health of young people.

The researchers conducted focus groups with a convenience sample of 150 workers - all of whom provide services to young people - across a wide range of health, welfare, education and other sectors, from greater Sydney and regional/rural areas (NSW North Coast, Central Coast, Illawarra). Using guided

focus group discussions and questionnaires, the study obtained data on:

- how workers find out about other youth health related services and programs
- how organisations promote their services to other agencies
- workers' experiences of using various communication channels (advantages, disadvantages and good practice use)
- the role of organisations in supporting communication and connectedness
- suggestions for improving communication between services on a local and statewide level

The study found a much greater reliance on personal rather than technological means of information-seeking. The vast majority of workers (almost 80%) prefer to get information directly from immediate co-workers in the first instance (face to face or by phone), before using other methods such as printed directories and making enquiries by email. Yet information is only one element of communicating with others; workers consider that developing connectedness, trust and strong relationships with other services is an essential step towards making appropriate referrals.

However while contributing to overall quality service delivery, the word-of-mouth approach means that not all services become part of these informal networks. Networks are more likely to succeed where a nominated worker or agency takes responsibility for coordinating the group, especially if the lead party's position supports a cross-sectoral approach (e.g. local Council).

The importance of professional relationships partly explains why the use of electronic databases, clearinghouses, journals, websites and list-servs is significantly lower in contrast; between half and two-thirds of respondents 'rarely or never' use the various online methods. There is an overall sense that good programs and projects are being implemented around NSW but very few are ever written up in journals, creating an evidence 'vacuum'. In several cases, workers experience lack of computers in the workplace, or restrictions on internet access (either

Report Summary

Executive Summary

from the organisation, or due to lack of subscription to fee-paying databases). In general, most respondents say they face difficulties in seeking out evidence when developing new projects, due to lack of training/skills and the absence of an easily accessible information exchange point on youth projects and interventions.

The research revealed a large number of existing directories and other information resources, but found workers' knowledge and use of these was scattered. Of the forty-six directories nominated, the vast majority (80%) are used by less than five workers in the sample. Some of the more comprehensive resources, such as the Cyrus Youth Directory CD and LINCS Council online directory, are likewise largely unknown to the sample group, nominated by only 12% and 3% of survey participants. Thus, workers' information-seeking practice can be supported through increasing knowledge of existing information resources, access to computer technology and appropriate training, awareness of good practice use for different communication methods, and skills in conducting literature searches/reviews.

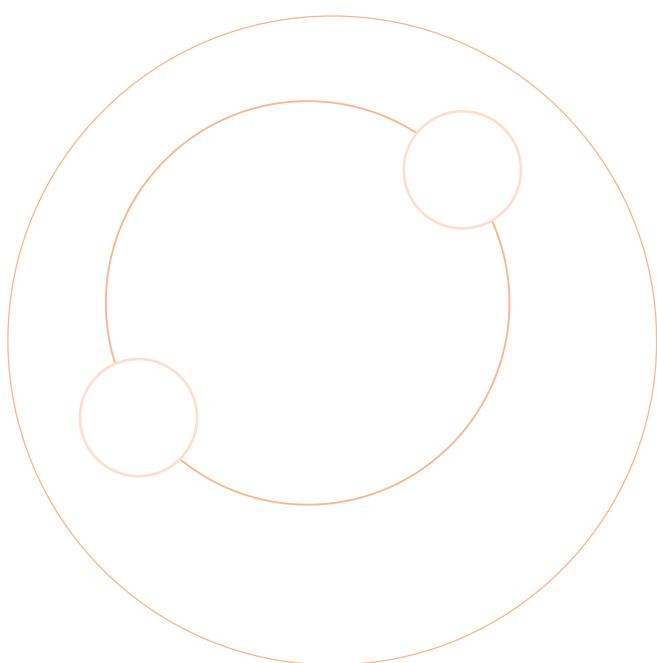
Many focus group participants recommend the creation of a centralised information hub on services and programs for young people, but advise that developing such a service involves complex design issues and is extremely resource intensive (in terms of funding and human inputs). While there does appear to be a need for a focal information exchange point (especially for 'soft' evidence), the current low levels of preference for, and use of technology-based communication mediums suggests that in order to develop an effective and user-friendly product, the clearinghouse development process will require close consultation with intended users, careful planning and design, widespread promotion, consumer training and ongoing maintenance.

The study has found that achieving a high level of connectedness is as much dependent on the support of organisational communication systems as individual actions, if not more so. Ways in which organisations can ensure good communication and effective networking with other services include: providing proper induction/handover for new workers, valuing

networking as a core performance activity, promoting access to computer technology and training in its use, and providing up-to-date shared information resources for staff teams.

Through the research, NSW CAAH was able to identify two opportunities to assist connectedness between youth-related services in NSW. Using the benefit of study participants' experiences and feedback, the Centre proposes developing resource tools for good practice information seeking and service promotion, as well as conducting further consultation in order to develop a clearinghouse proposal and plan.

Research findings from *Spinning the Web: Better connections between services working with young people* project demonstrate that the practice of information-sharing is in fact multifaceted, requiring a balance of worker and organisational skills development as well as technological improvement. They also show that improving communication and connectedness between services remains a priority area for enhancing service development and delivery outcomes.



Report Summary

Main Findings

The Spinning the Web research found that:

- Although many organisations address young people's health and wellbeing needs, not all participate in networks or are aware of other services and projects in their area. Workers feel that strengthening connections between organisations is an essential step towards improving both initial referrals and subsequent youth access to services.
- Workers seeking information are strongly reliant on more personalised forms of communication (face-to-face visits, phone). This is considered important because it builds professional relationships and trust. Workers also prefer printed rather than electronic directories.
- Workers acknowledge that knowledge and evidence should be shared to avoid 'reinventing the wheel', but report difficulty in finding details of programs in different areas of the State because very few reports are published in journals. Most of their searches are conducted by word of mouth, and limited to a local region.
- All communication channels are used, but to varying degrees; workers feel these could be used more efficiently, since each has perceived advantages and disadvantages. Technology is seen as a potentially useful resource, however it is not widely used due to workers' preference for person to-person communication in the first instance, and other methods regarded as more accessible and user-friendly.
- A higher degree of networking is more likely to occur within a sector or around a particular issue of interest; outside of this, the linkages are less strong. Networks often need a focal point person to coordinate and drive the process, and local Councils sometimes play a constructive role in bringing together and maintaining links between different sectors.
- Time, resources, attitudes and skills affect the extent to which organisations promote their services to others. Workers generally use the same channels to promote their programs as they do in seeking information, but face difficulties when trying to target multiple audiences (young people, community, other professionals and services) with the same resource.
- While improvements in information-sharing would enhance referral, this would not necessarily guarantee young people's access to services; workers report many agencies with long waiting lists due to staff and resource shortages.
- Workers strongly recommend the creation of a centralised information hub on services / programs for young people. This would require significant consultation and development, as clearinghouses have been demonstrated to be both complex and resource-intensive. There are a significant number of existing information exchange systems (e.g. directories, databases, websites), although workers' overall awareness of these is extremely variable.
- Organisations themselves play a major role in determining the level of connectedness between workers and services. Some have proactively developed good internal and external communication systems. Key areas of influence include: ensuring proper induction/handover for new workers, valuing networking as a core activity, promoting access to computer technology and training in its use, and providing shared information resources for staff teams. Although workers remain committed to networking, they are often constrained by job structure or other priorities.

Report Summary

Key opportunities for action

Improving workers' access to and use of information

- Increase workers' awareness and use of existing directories and information resources
- Ensure all workers have access to computer technology and appropriate training
- Enhance workers' skill and good-practice use of different communication methods
- Build skills in searching for evidence, conducting literature reviews and developing project proposals

Improving service promotion

- Increase organisational awareness of, and skills in service promotion methods and strategies
- Develop alternative means of promoting programs and lessons learned ('soft' data) beyond journals
- Make arrangements so that staff can get access to journal databases (e.g. public or departmental libraries, universities etc.)

Strengthening organisational communication systems

- Standardise staff handover, orientation and support processes
- Create regular opportunities for information exchange both internally (e.g. meetings) and externally (shared forums, service exchange visits)
- Ensure that networking is valued, and regarded as a performance indicator
- Assist employees by providing internal information resources (e.g. internal directories, lists of websites and drop-down 'favourites' as a starting point for all staff)

Supporting a sectoral/cross-sectoral approach

- Provide alternative sites for storing project reports and data (not necessarily in journal format)
- Identify a key position or agency to take responsibility for leading and coordinating an interagency or working group, to ensure its sustainability

Future opportunities for Spinning the Web: Better connections between services working with young people project

- Based on research participants' experiences and feedback, develop worker training and organisational tools for good practice information seeking and service promotion.
- Conduct consultation and research in order to develop a clearinghouse proposal and plan (a central information exchange hub as requested by workers).



Introduction

Background

According to NSW CAAH's *Access Study Phase 1* (Booth et al. 2002), one of the major barriers facing young people seeking access to health care has been the lack of easily accessible information on existing programs and services. This has posed significant challenges for workers who are responsible for identifying appropriate services and referring young people in the shorter term, as well as designing evidence-informed programs for longer-term development.

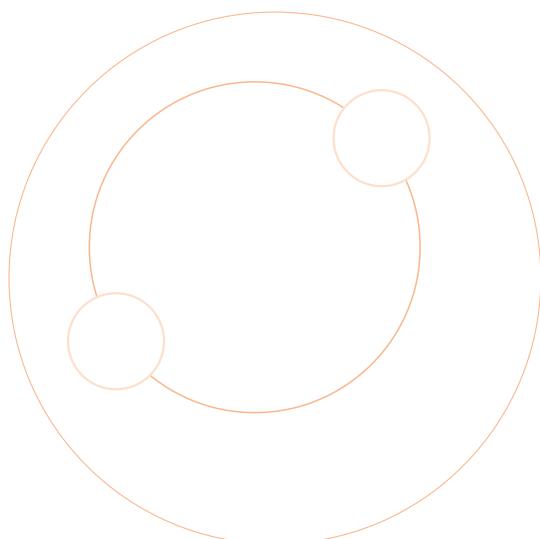
A literature search was undertaken in order to identify previous research or projects aimed at improving inter-organisational communication and coordination, within both Australian and international health service contexts. A broad search of more than seven databases and search engines revealed that few articles or resources are available on the subject of inter-organisational information sharing and the use of technology in human services settings.

The Primary Health Care Research and Information Service (PHCRIS) research report '*Sharing the know-how: An exploration into knowledge sharing between Divisions of General Practice*' (Lowcay & Kalucy, 2003) found that although DGP workers were very interested in sharing knowledge, proactive information exchange was not a priority between their agencies, which play a key role in supporting and improving the quality of care in general practice through training and capacity building projects. In this context, information sharing and knowledge transfer take place largely on an informal basis (e.g. face to face) rather in a systematic manner.

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) Clearinghouse Feasibility Study: End of Phase One Report (Howes et al. 2003) also identified significant challenges for professionals in locating information; refining searches was difficult given existing database designs and the inconsistent presentation of articles and abstracts. Participant feedback indicated workers are often unaware of the vast array of information available, have difficulty in accessing appropriate internet or database sites, and find the process time-consuming and frustrating.

Review of current literature also suggests that despite the rapid growth of communication technologies (such as websites, online clearinghouses and databases, listservs, e-mail), little research has been undertaken to determine how often and how successfully these methods are being used (Durham, 2000), especially in the health and welfare sector. The often prevailing assumption that technology will provide a 'quick fix' has yet to be confirmed. This clearly suggests the need to understand current information-seeking and service-promoting behaviours, and subsequently identify how services can become 'better connected' through improved communication strategies.

NSW Health has long recognised the need for greater communication and coordination among services working with young people, and in 2003 requested that NSW CAAH develop a clearinghouse to enhance current networks and knowledge sharing systems. The research component of *Spinning the Web: Better connections between services working with young people* was initiated to support the potential development of a clearinghouse which would be relevant and useful to its anticipated user base. Given the current paucity of data on how workers communicate, *Spinning the Web* research provides an opportunity to explore how information seeking and knowledge transfer take place at the service level, between workers and organisations working directly with young people.



Introduction

About Spinning the Web

Project Goal

The overall project goal of *Spinning the Web: Better connections between services working with young people* is to work with services involved with young people's health and wellbeing, in order to:

- strengthen communication practices and improve referral linkages between services, and
- increase access to, and the use of, lessons learned, evidence and good practice in youth related programming.

The project comprises an initial research study, followed by the anticipated development of relevant resources, advocacy and capacity building activities.

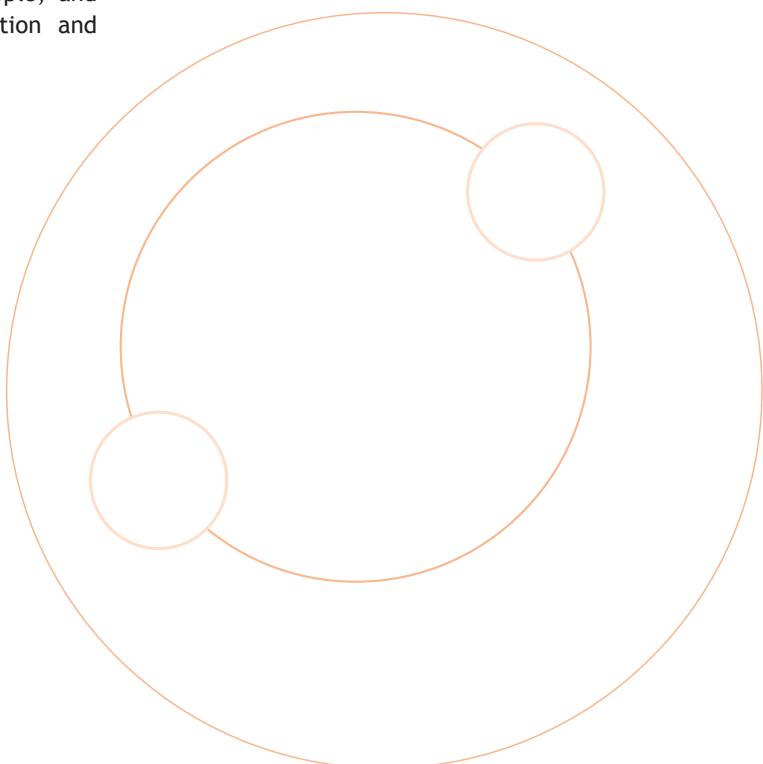
Aim

The aim of the research study is to understand information-seeking and service promotion practices in agencies providing services to young people, and to identify ways of improving communication and connectedness between organisations.

Research Objectives

The initial study is designed to:

1. Understand how workers find out about other youth health-related services, programs and resources,
2. Ascertain how workers and organisations promote their activities/services to other agencies,
3. Explore workers' experiences (positive and negative) of using different communication channels,
4. Increase understanding of the organisational role in supporting communication and coordination, and
5. Identify strategies for increasing staff and organisational communication.



Methodology

Introduction

Sample description

The study involved NSW workers and organisations representing a variety of sectors, service areas and types. Researchers approached existing networks in the first instance (interagencies, project partners, CAAH Advisory Board members), inviting members to convene focus groups (4-16 people) representing a cross-section of sectoral, geographic or organisational interests. For inclusion, study participants had to be involved with young people's issues, either through direct contact, managing a service or participation in a network. The final convenience sample comprised 28 focus groups of 153 workers from Sydney and selected regional / rural sites.

There was strong representation (approx 60%) from youth-specific services (e.g. youth centres, youth health centres, youth workers, schools). Although the remaining 40% of workers provided for all age groups, they nonetheless implemented specific projects and initiatives for young people. For two-thirds of respondents, young people made up between 50% and 100% of their client base.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

Category	Subcategory	#	%
Gender	Female	104	69.3
	Male	46	30.7
Type of Agency	Government	98	65.8
	Non-government	51	34.2
By Sector	Welfare	49	33.1
	Health	43	29.1
	Education	24	16.2
	Cross-sectoral	24	16.2
	Other	8	5.4
Location	Urban	118	80.3
	Rural/Regional Centre	21	14.3
	Statewide/Mixed	8	5.4

Table 2: Young people as percentage of clients

Youth client percentage	#	%
< 10%	14	9.9
= 10 < 25%	24	17.0
= 25 < 50%	11	7.8
= 50 < 75%	11	7.8
> 75%	81	57.4

Research tools and analysis

The researchers designed a set of standardised tools for collecting both qualitative and quantitative data, which were used in all consultations.

Using graded scales, a **self-administered questionnaire** captured participants' own accounts of how often they use, and how useful they find, a range of communication methods. Questions also focused on service promotion avenues, specific sources of information (e.g. database, website and directory names) and participant profile data.

During **focus group discussions**, a continuum exercise elicited participants' overall perceptions of access to information in their area. Focus group members responded to a series of statements, placing their votes on an opinion continuum ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. Continuum statements addressed:

- local status of information seeking and awareness ("Workers often aren't aware of all the other services available for young people in their area"),
- use of, range and quality of evidence ("When setting up a new project/program for young people, workers generally use a range of information sources to find out what already exists"), and
- status of communication systems and networks ("There are good information sharing systems networks between all services working with young people in my area").

Research groups also responded to **three scenarios**, relating to information-seeking and referral behaviours (being a new worker in an unfamiliar youth-related service), finding and using evidence (starting up a new youth program on an unfamiliar issue) and service promoting practices (advertising and promoting the new program to other agencies). Participants were also asked to describe advantages and disadvantages of using specific communication channels, and to provide good practice tips on usage.

Researchers took notes in addition to tape recording all focus group interviews. Tapes were later transcribed and resulting material arranged according to the original research themes. Questionnaire data was entered and analysed using SPSS.

Findings

Information seeking behaviours

How do workers find out about youth services and programs?

A questionnaire asked how often participants use different communication methods to find out about other services and programs, while focus group discussions explored people's reasons for using different mediums.

Table 3: Information sources used most often

Top 5 Information sources used most often	
1.	Colleagues inside the organisation (78.8%)
2.	Workers from other organisations (45.4%)
3.	Printed directories (37.5%)
4.	Queries via email (37.5%)
5.	Internet search engines (31.8%)

Participants primarily seek information about other services through colleagues (within their organisation) in the first instance, and then externally - using a combination of the phone and visiting in person. Interagencies and printed directories rank as the next most used ways of contacting other workers. Although some workplaces internally offer an online service directory, many people use the directories in traditional printed form:

"We rely more on printed copies because you can turn around, grab it - you're familiar with it. The Service Finder (computerised database) is great... but the reality is, that's not what we tend to use!"
- Centrelink Customer Service worker, Parramatta

Table 4: Information sources found very useful

Top 5 Information sources rated as 'very useful'	
1.	Colleagues from within the organisation (74.2%)
2.	Workers from other organisations (57.6%)
3.	Printed directories (55.6%)
4.	Queries via email (40.4%)
5.	Networks and interagencies (38.5%)

The researchers asked focus group participants about their use and experience of fifteen key information seeking avenues - covering interpersonal, electronic/internet based, printed and CD-based mediums. Questionnaire results show that although relying heavily on personal contact and printed directories, participants do use other methods to varying degrees. Although respondents rate some other communication methods as 'very useful' in principle, this does not automatically result in correspondingly high levels of usage. Some reasons for this included: difficulties in using the medium (e.g. limited computer access) and the tendency for materials (e.g. brochures) to go out of date quickly. What emerged from discussions was that all mediums have advantages and disadvantages, and user skill largely determines any method's overall effectiveness.

Many of those interviewed demonstrate initiative in establishing and maintaining contact with other services. Workers mention using a range of methods to develop new connections, especially when starting a job and being offered little by way of induction and proper handover processes. While relying heavily on interpersonal contact for communication, workers try asking colleagues and peers for assistance,

Continuum statement

"Workers often aren't aware of all the other services available for young people in their area." Response: majority members agree/strongly agree

Although some services are better networked (often drawn together on a specialised issue such as mental health, early intervention), connections are notably weaker as one moves away from an immediate sector or topic of interest. Networks are most successful when driven by a particular agency or person.

Findings

Information seeking behaviours

contacting the local council, using the telephone directory to look up local services, developing a personal resource folder containing contacts and information, trying to locate existing youth networks through word of mouth, even talking to clients about other services they liked and used.

Only a few workers describe positive experiences relating to orientation and handover, where a colleague has taken them 'in hand' and personally introduced them to other services. The majority report that 'getting to know the ropes' was often not very structured, but more like a process of random discovery:

"How did we find out those services existed? Basically: interagency, word of mouth, ringing up councils, stumbling onto a network. Once you find one person they can lead you to another."

- Youth Interagency Member, Ashfield

Personal relationships are the most important

Research participants clearly prefer more person-to-person forms of communication, such as face-to-face contact during visits, meetings and interagencies. Although significantly more time-consuming, these facilitate the building of trust and new relationships in a way that cannot be achieved when communicating by phone or email.

"You need to know what services are offering... you also need to get a sense of who they are."

- Early Intervention Network member, Sydney Inner West

Table 5: Interagency usage patterns

Interagencies attended on a regular basis	%
Attend an interagency	83
Attend between 1 - 2 interagencies	50
Attend between 3 - 10 interagencies	33
Found intergencies useful	
Somewhat useful	58
Very useful	39

Workers also strongly emphasise the importance of having sound professional relationships, prior to recommending other services to clients. Getting to know the services well - both what they offer and the people working within them - is considered essential before making an appropriate referral:

"I spent an hour talking to the service before I would recommend them to the school or not. I had to work out what was their thinking - and how they [would] approach it."

- Early Intervention Network member, Sydney Inner West

Personal opinions from co-workers sometimes lend weight to a worker's decision in making referrals to another agency:

"I used to ring up my friend in paediatrics... Not only would he know about the service, he knew if it was right for somebody. Sometimes you send people to services and they come back and complain - because it was just not what they wanted."

- Division of General Practice member / General Practitioner, Canterbury Bankstown Region

"With your clients, they trust you better if you've spoken with that person and can say, 'I've met her, she's a really nice lady.'"

- Social Welfare NGO worker, Campbelltown Region

Developing relationships also facilitates new project opportunities and partnerships, as indicated here:

"I was in a coffee shop, talking to a friend and colleague of mine. She introduced me to this other person who was involved in [private] industry... In just having conversations you just don't know what's going to come out of it!"

- Youth Interagency member, Lismore

Findings

Information seeking behaviours

Staying connected: Issues and Challenges

The most common way participants maintain up-to-date knowledge and sustained relationships is by attending interagencies, local 'expos' or forums, and exchanging friendly service visits on a regular basis, up to several times per year. Other local resources include using the local media (e.g. local papers).

There is a strong overall recognition that networking is an important activity; it helps to build partnerships, reduces duplication of services, provides support and maintains the organisation's profile. There are, however, situations where study participants clearly find themselves more isolated; this often occurs with sessional workers (doctors, school counsellors) who have little by way of communication technology to keep them in contact with others (e.g. lacking internet and email access). Those with multi-site workplaces and a large client base (e.g. health workers responsible for multiple regions, school counsellors servicing four large schools on a part-time basis) find it particularly difficult to engage in local networks due to time and resource constraints:

"As a counsellor since 1990 I have had no links with the local government."

- School counsellor, Western Sydney Region

According to the study participants, staff turnover is particularly high in the community and health sectors. This means that people whom workers get to know soon leave, thus making it difficult to maintain networks. Geographic service boundaries also change frequently, and are not the same within or between sectors (health, education, welfare). In this dynamic environment, keeping up to date requires considerable effort.

Databases and directories very quickly become out of date, owing to high staff turnover, transfers and changes to short-term project portfolios. Although 88% of participants stated that their organisation does have an internal resource folder, these are often considered redundant after a while (more than half rating them as only 'somewhat useful'), and the major challenge is

finding somebody to keep them updated on a regular basis. For this reason many workers develop their own personal resource in response, but this valuable knowledge is often lost to the organisation once the worker leaves for another job, taking the folder with them.

"Anytime I pick up a pamphlet I've got that in my own little folder. [There is] a general resource folder downstairs in a common area... with information from 1988!"

- Early Intervention Network member, Sydney Inner West

Many workers report a higher degree of networking within a sector (e.g. health, education) or between services with a shared interest (e.g. mental health, disability), but outside the immediate issue, the linkages immediately become less strong.

"I think there are some good networks in some areas of the North Coast but not the whole area... it just depends pretty much on the enthusiasm in a particular area. It's a bit sporadic in some ways."

- Youth Interagency member, Lismore

The perception also prevails that many mainstream organisations (in contrast with youth-specific ones) are not as well connected, and for various reasons do not invest in wider networking. Some of this is related to particular issues around confidence in identifying young people's complex needs and then finding appropriate services for referral:

"Maybe most workers have a bit of fear of young people's services because of culture and personal issues... and knowing how to deal with the situation..."

- Refugee Services worker, Statewide

"Generally if they find out what they (young people) need - they don't know what to do. I think sometimes they (health providers) don't even ask that question, so they don't have to do something about it..."

- Youth Health Network member, Wyong

Findings

Information seeking behaviours

"I asked [another service] to help me find accommodation for a Year 10 girl who was homeless. They could only come up with one solution - yet through my own networking I found somewhere else - and lots of agencies that could have helped find a young person permanent accommodation! They just ask the prime agencies and they're not really finding out who else can help."

- School Counsellor, Wyong Region

"One of the problems with referrals is that some services will say, 'Oh but we don't do that', but they won't even say, ' - but this is where you can go [instead]'".

- Centrelink worker, Liverpool

It is also apparent that many workers are unfamiliar with some existing resources. The following resources were praised by a small number of users as among the most helpful and comprehensive:

- Come In Youth Directory, a CD search engine of generic youth services in NSW
- Datadiction/LINCS database, detailed services and organisation listings within local council areas
- Greater Western Sydney Community Services Directory, established by TRI Community Exchange Inc and still active although currently defunded

Although they clearly find such resources useful in terms of content and search capacity, only 12% of respondents mention using Come In, 3% Datadiction/LINCS and 1% the TRI Community Exchange Directory. Setting up regional websites and directories, while rewarding, also takes a lot of time and energy - as one Western Sydney group discovered while trying to make locating services easier:

"[Together we found] the need to develop a project called www.hillsinfo.com. From that [we] had a lot of people working many, many hours free of charge who went for funding to get the project up and running. As a result of that they now have this website that anyone in the district can access... there's everything from disabled to young people, refugees, health..."

- Centrelink worker, Parramatta

Many workers demonstrate a strong commitment to keeping up to date as much as time and resources allow, despite an often competitive funding environment:

"There's a lot of competition and 'Okay, it's my client but I can't refer him to you because I need that client to justify my funding'... I suppose the difficulty is that everyone starts to get that autonomy to work on your own but not work together as a group. And there is a tendency for an organisation to try and be everything."

- Youth Interagency member, Marrickville

During the study participants freely shared good practice tips on how to use different communication methods most effectively. However, effective networks do not guarantee that services will be available for young people, especially where under-resourcing has contributed to long waiting lists in the areas of counselling, mental health and accommodation. Thus, it would appear that communication and networking can greatly enhance, but never replace, the delivery of services.

"A lot of the time you think, what's the point of promoting something that already has a waiting list?"

- Social welfare NGO worker, Campbelltown region

Feedback on information-seeking shows that there is a need to promote existing directories and resources, as well as ensuring that staff are skilled in using a wide range of communication methods for maximum effect.

Key areas for action

- Improve handover and orientation support processes
- Increase workers' awareness and use of existing directories and resources
- Ensure all workers have access to computer technology and appropriate training
- Enhance workers' skill and good-practice use of different communication methods

How workers find evidence for new projects

Finding and contributing to evidence

"When people are setting up new programs they don't always look at what already exists in much detail..."
- Refugee Services worker, Statewide

Table 6: Information sources used least often

5 Information sources used least often (rarely or never)	
1.	Electronic databases (67.3%)
2.	List-servers (64.2%)
3.	Articles and journals - Electronic/online (44.4%)
4.	Articles and journals - Printed (41.4%)
5.	Electronic newsletters / E-zines (40.8%)

"I see a lot of reinventing the wheel. I'll tell you what; every time you want something it is bound to be out there - somewhere - but everybody seems to feel that you have to make it up again yourself!"
- School Counsellor, Parramatta Region

The practice of finding out about what already exists (project evaluations, resources and lessons learned) to inform new project development and planning is very similar to the often 'random' and ad hoc process of identifying services - only more so. The research found that participants primarily rely on word of mouth to find out about past projects and resources, prior to designing their own interventions. While many effectively use local networks to follow up on local examples of work, in many cases their search is limited by local, or at best, regional boundaries.

Interviewer: "In terms of setting up a project, would you use journals or newsletters and things like that?"

Participant 1: "No, I would tend not to. I would go straight to the phone."

Participant 2: "[It's] often very local."

Interviewer: What about going outside the area?

Participant 2: "Never occurred to me... [it's] too far..."

The methods **least used** by survey participants for acquiring information about other projects and resources - online databases, printed and electronic journals - are in fact sources where articles on good practice, evidence-based interventions can be found. However, there is limited access to many fee-paying databases - unless workers are also studying, or working for academic institutions.

The research found that although workers rate these rarely-used sources as reasonably useful, there are significant barriers to their proper use, including:

- Lack of access to computers
- Restricted internet access
- Lack of access to fee-paying research databases
- Limited knowledge and skills in using appropriate research engines

Many focus group participants believe there are good projects being implemented, which other people simply do not get to hear about. A number of workers feel that most interventions are not recorded or publicly shared beyond reports to funding bodies. Many report having neither the time nor the training to write articles for journals.

The identification and use of good practice for evidence-informed projects is sometimes constrained by tight submission timeframes or lack of support to inexperienced workers:

Findings

How workers find evidence for new projects

"Sometimes I don't think they (new youth workers) have been trained or have the skills to set projects up. And I think people set up projects without actually asking, not knowing that there are people who can greatly assist them and provide information."

- Youth Health Network member, Wyong

In some situations the search for evidence isn't deemed necessary, either because projects financed with end of year funds come with pre-designated conditions, or because similar projects have already been implemented:

"You get these projects and often it's just something that has been done before - but the names are a little different - you remember [it] was called something else before. It's just a rehash!"

- Centrelink worker, Wollongong

A few workers presented an interesting paradox relating to journals and more formal sources of information, questioning the value of contributing to these more academic knowledge exchange systems. They describe their priority focus as the immediate welfare needs of clients i.e. service delivery, which leaves little time for sharing lessons learned. Yet they also expect - and depend upon these very same journals to supply them with the evidence they need, from other organisations.

"Tell me how promoting programs to other services via a journal would be useful? I am just wondering if that is not a waste of time. That would be my hunch. We just don't get time..."

And later:

"The journals are where a student does the research... knows what to find in the last year or two [and] has actually got some lessons learned... So they [can be] saying what's out there, what works and what's being published in journals."

- Youth Service worker, Sydney Inner West

There are obvious limits to expanding a knowledge or evidence base, when its users are seeking information more often than contributing to it themselves.

Some of the larger organisations, such as the Smith Family, have developed research units and libraries which their workers around the state can approach for assistance. On some occasions, workers have sought help from librarians, but also look for lists of previous grant recipients (on State/Federal websites, or annual reports) and approach organisations with similar projects. Some funding bodies now require evidence of literature searches, consultations and partnerships in proposals, all of which are regarded positively:

"The requirements now demand that you go out and speak to other services about the project. For the local funding body (Macarthur Area Assistance Scheme) you need to prove that you've gone out to x amount of services and talked about your funding submission so you're not doubling up. I think it's good."

- Family and Community Development NGO worker, Campbelltown

Several workers also feel that service or project development should also involve more community consultation and partnerships:

"If I go and talk to [young Aboriginal kids], about what might happen in an area, their opinions may be very different to those of service providers. A real good project is one that engages all those services and young people as part of the team so they've got ownership right across the board..."

- Youth Interagency member, Marrickville

Key areas for action

- Build skills in searching for evidence, conducting literature reviews and developing project proposals
- Provide alternative sites for storing project reports, resources and data - not necessarily in journals

Service Promotion Strategies and Approaches

Findings

How do workers and organisations promote their services to other agencies?

Using the questionnaire, study participants indicated the communication avenues used to publicise their organisation's services and programs. In focus groups, they described who is targeted during promotion, and how.

Table 7: Service promotion avenues

Service promotion methods used most
1. Personal contact / word of mouth (90%)
2. Flyers and brochures (71%)
3. Interagencies and networks (70%)
4. Email (65%)
5. Newsletters (42%)
6. Local media - newspapers, radio (36%)
7. Forums, Conferences (34%)
8. Directories (20%)
Methods used least - less than 12%
• Other organisations' websites
• List-servers
• Journals
• Clearinghouses

All interviewed organisations practise some form of promotion, either directly to beneficiaries (young people), professionals in other services, or a combination of the two. While all agencies advertise their services and projects in some way, it appears that service promotion is not always a high priority. There are mixed feelings about the usefulness of promoting one's service beyond the immediate target group (i.e. to other agencies/networks), and outside the service's immediate geographical area of concern.

With the pressure of busy workloads and time constraints, participants' efforts to inform others about projects and services are often ad hoc. Several workers feel that promoting their service is a waste of time because it takes 'time away from doing things for the kids.' They see their core business as directly working with beneficiaries; engaging with other agencies and

networking is considered a luxury that organisations, in particular smaller ones, cannot afford. Facing external pressures to demonstrate 'achievement' in the statistical form of number of client visits, time spent in interagency involvement and promotion, cannot be quantified as a 'result' or outcome.

"The kids don't get any benefit out of it."
- Youth Service worker, Sydney Inner West

"I guess there is some benefit from promoting more widely but it is pretty limited... it's only a benefit for those other services."
- Youth Service worker, Sydney Inner West

Thus, some services limit their promotion almost exclusively to young people. Despite their own reluctance to engage more widely with other services, these workers nonetheless expect other agencies to advertise so that they are able to inform and refer their clients to other places.

During interviews, one respondent realised how wider promotion has, in fact, led to greater things:

"We're only funded for the local area, we're not interested in [promoting our work] too broadly, so we really don't go into journals... But [when] one of our youth arts projects became very big I spoke at a conference. Then my paper got online with the Premier's Department, and it kind of grew... a lot of people consulted with me about the project because of that. It got into [an] arts training magazine, then I was on an advisory committee... [Initially] it was controversial for the government to even acknowledge that you could do graffiti arts. Now everyone's doing it!"
- Youth Arts Program worker, Sydney Inner West

The majority of respondents feel that it is extremely important to invest time in publicising their work outside the local area, outside the immediate client group and to other organisations, sometimes for political reasons:

"In terms of being able to get funding... so you can get funding or corporate sponsorship. And maybe for other services to connect to you. But it's a huge thing to do, to be able to promote [your services]"
- Youth Centre worker, Sydney Inner West

Findings

Service Promotion Strategies and Approaches

Promoting services: how workers do it

Most workers promote their services and programs by direct personal contact and word of mouth. Consistent with information-seeking behaviour discussed in the preceding section, people primarily draw upon their relationships in interagencies, networks and existing partnerships where their work is trusted and they can rely on support to 'get the word out there'.

Fact:

Survey results show that the vast majority of organisations use from three to eight different methods when promoting their service or program.

Workers largely favour sending announcements via electronic means (email) over regular post, because of significant advantages in time, cost and ability to reach the receiver directly. Technological developments have, however, drawbacks of their own, with complaints of overwhelmingly swamped inboxes, receiving the same message from many sources, receiving too many messages and not having enough time to read them.

Although flyers and emails are used regularly, many workers learn early on that these are no substitute for in-person visits and outreach:

"I did a mail out in [local region] addressing youth-at-risk. A basic letter introduced myself, [saying] this is what I can do for you, come down and see me, and here is my phone number. I sent out about two hundred letters. I had two people respond. And it's 42% youth unemployment [here]."

- Centrelink Customer service worker, Liverpool

"With us, [using] brochures means dropping in, going to the service... face to face. Your relations are a lot stronger. Then they're more likely to ring you in certain situations and be comfortable doing that, because you know them. It makes a really big difference I think."

- Family & Community NGO worker, Campbelltown

"People who give a flyer directly to a young person is more effective than just pointing to a table of flyers and saying, 'Take what you like.'"

- Youth Interagency worker, Ashfield

More than a third of participants use media such as local papers and radio, and feel that these are extremely successful because of the capacity for local coverage. Local media are also an inexpensive way to advertise (most organisations submit press releases, articles and photos and have them printed free of charge) as well as promoting positive aspects of the program. There appears to be less sensitivity and more immediacy in dealing with local media than national counterparts, the latter often involving processes requiring prior management and public relations approval.

"The local papers can be quite supportive of a project that is running in the area... They might do initial, follow-up, in-between articles - or they may just even advertise it in their community section. So quite often in our local papers you find out a lot about the projects that are happening in the area."

- NGO worker, Campbelltown

Developing positive relationships with journalists and papers seems to be the key element for success, especially when the two parties can support each other through information exchange and promotion. Shared understandings and agreements are important because sometimes different perceptions can affect how an article turns out:

"We did have a problem with one paper. It was a health promotion / drug prevention project. The idea was that young people have access to drug and alcohol [service] information. When it went to print it was focused on Indigenous drug and alcohol abuse in the area. So it ended up a negative image in our community - and it wasn't like that at all!"

- NGO worker, Campbelltown

Some reported that conference presentations and posters are good ways to publicise work, although the cost of attending such events does not make these a regular promotion channel.

Service Promotion Strategies and Approaches

Findings

Two-thirds (66%) of study participants said that their organisation monitors incoming referrals. The more popular referral sources are (in descending order of frequency): word of mouth/other clients/community members, schools, other services and self-referrals. Other responses included specifically named organisations.

Promoting to others versus promoting with others

Focus group analysis suggests that approaches to service promotion may have undergone a cultural shift: from promoting one's service to a community, to promoting one's service with others to a community. Some organisations have also moved towards promoting their service *with others including* the community.

A few services direct their promotion efforts almost exclusively to young people and communities, commonly using flyers, brochures, wallet-sized reference cards, chalk advertisements on pavements, word of mouth, noticeboards in public locations and youth peer educators.

However, the majority of organisations are exploring ways of casting the net wider, and in some cases bringing in other partners' resources for greater impact. Workers described strategies for disseminating information involving external parties: visiting other services or hosting 'get togethers' for information exchange, using peak bodies to disseminate information, involving a focal person (e.g. chairperson) in an interagency or network, writing stories and press releases for local media, bringing in the local Council to help with a launch.

Other workers explained the greater value in promoting their services alongside others in a coordinated manner; setting up an online, multisectoral map of services within a region, participating in regular expos or local fair days, and being part of multi-event launches.

One social worker described the local council's recent launch:

"That's what they do with the Youth Services Directories, the Youth Magazine and the Passport - an official launch, [with] someone from Council launching

three different products. Then after, they made it available to services, and hired out a factory unit where [young people] could actually come in to pick up resources."

- Centrelink Service Liaison worker, Liverpool

Such collaborative events are perceived to have extra benefits, because they:

- provide ways to update both communities and professional workers,
- are more likely to draw greater attention through joint presence,
- create networking opportunities,
- spread costs across a number of agencies, and
- present a diverse and more helpful range of services to client groups with multiple needs.

"There are expos around - whether a disability expo or an open day, stuff like that. So we try and tap into them and perhaps have a chat and do some networking. There's one coming up next week. We'll set up a stall, but it's more about networking."

- Centrelink Community Liaison worker, Liverpool

There are also opportunities to engage with corporate business:

"I would try and get [financial] supporters, like [private enterprise] and do a talent night... something the community is interested in, like dance. Invite all the agencies and youth and community and talk a little... then of course the entertainment. Have all the brochures, flyers, things like that around."

- Centrelink worker, Liverpool

The need to have credibility and connections within the community is also apparent:

"From my experience with multicultural stuff... If I invited Pacific Islanders or Samoan customers [to] an information session and [said] come along - and didn't mention a worker or someone from that particular group, I would be lucky if anyone would turn up! If you know someone who they are familiar with - police liaison officers, local workers from resource centres [who know them], then they come."

- Centrelink Multicultural Liaison worker, Wollongong

Findings

Service Promotion Strategies and Approaches

Differences between searching and promoting behaviours

It can be reasonably expected that if workers consistently choose particular channels for information gathering, they will promote their services along the same routes. However, respondents promote their own services in ways and places which are somewhat different from those by which they find out about others.

For example, 71% use flyers and brochures for regular service promotion, yet for information seeking, more than half of the workers appear much less enthusiastic about using this medium themselves, saying they use it only *sometimes* to locate other services. Many commented that although good in principle, such resource materials date quickly, are hard to store and aren't always sent to the right person. In a broader sense, the difference might result in many people producing promotional materials, but few people reading them. In this case, participants said that flyers and brochures are intended for communicating with clients and other services, so the difference may be explained by the fact that the use of flyers helps to reach a different audience.

Service promotion - not one audience, but many

One worker described a learning experience of putting together a brochure, recalling the challenges in deciding on its appearance, what and how much information should be included - finally realising that it is difficult to design an effective resource that will appeal to both clients and referring agencies.

In this situation, the young person's resource may have eventually contained brief information on the organisation, a particular project or programs available, time and location, and how to become involved, with basic contact details. The worker's resource, on the other hand, while containing similar information might market the service from a slightly different angle: the organisation's client group, catchment areas, types of services on offer, types of referrals they are looking for, referral process, different staff roles and contact numbers.

"[They had] an official launch [of a youth service directory] with someone from Council, invited all these people... school teachers... counsellors... and careers advisors. Needless to say there were zero young people there."

- Centrelink worker, Liverpool

"We had a skate park launch and all the local services were invited... I think maybe two people (workers) came. I think that generally if you're running that kind of event for young people, workers don't need to be there."

- Youth Interagency member, Ashfield

The above scenarios suggest that the organisations involved have one promotion strategy directed towards a composite audience group (comprising young people, community members, other organisations and their staff). The low attendance of one group in each case suggests the need to have different approaches for engaging primary consumers (young people) and referral agents (professional workers).

"Many young people don't read the [local] papers, don't listen to the news..."

- Centrelink worker, Liverpool

Promotion may be more successful when services develop separate communication strategies for different audience groups, making a clearer marketing distinction between messages for beneficiaries and those targeting other workers.

Key actions

- Increase organisational awareness of service promotion methods and strategies
- Develop alternative means of promoting programs and lessons learned

Findings

Getting the most out of communication methods

Workers' experiences of using different channels

Focus groups discussed the advantages and disadvantages of a number of communication channels, providing tips on 'best use'. The main categories included:

- Interpersonal (face to face)
- Email
- Groups, networks and interagencies
- Printed newsletters, circulars and flyers
- Directories (printed and online)
- Articles and journals (printed and electronic)
- Internet sources (listservers, websites, databases)

Interpersonal

Table 8: Communication channels used most and found most useful

Communication channels used most
1. Seek help internally from colleagues (79%)
2. Seek help externally from other organisations
Communication channels found most useful
1. Seeking help internally (74%)
2. Seeking help from external colleagues (58%)

Personalised communication, especially face-to-face contact, is seen as critical to establishing rapport with workers from other services. This greatly assists referral processes between agencies, because workers feel more confident in informing clients about a 'known' service. Face-to-face contact is also perceived as developing professional relationships, beyond emailing and telephoning other services.

Several workers invest time walking from agency to agency in the area in order to make initial contact. These participants express a strong liking for regular personal visits to other local services as an ongoing way of getting updates, as well as maintaining their own agency's profile. Much of the in-person contact occurs between individual workers rather than at a broader organisational level. This is identified as a potential problem, because of high turnover of staff and the loss of colleagues from other services.

"You get connected with one particular person and then all of a sudden... ring and they say 'I'm sorry but they're not here anymore,' - and you start all over, reconnecting yourself, telling them what you're doing... It just gives you a very bad feeling, especially if you've been a little bit dependent on that person."
- Centrelink worker, Parramatta

Two interviewed organisations have systems in place, enabling their mutual relationship to continue despite loss of workers. The services have created a memorandum of understanding, ensuring regular contact between respective managers, in addition to worker-worker contact.

Email

Table 9: Email usage patterns

Facts and Figures: Email
1. Ranked 2nd as 'used very often'
2. 38% use email very often, 33% use it sometimes
3. The majority rank email as 'somewhat useful' (63%)

"You get so many emails in a day and you have to do your work on top of that... it just doesn't end and that's why emails can also be a drawback."
- Centrelink Worker, Liverpool

Participants said that they spend a lot of time reading and replying to email, but feel that senders could use the medium more efficiently by being concise, and through their choice of words in the subject line. A few agencies have attempted to streamline the route by which emails enter an agency, to avoid repetitive cross-postings. One agency provides only one email address and as a result, all incoming correspondence is filtered by one worker who forwards messages to whomever s/he deems the most appropriate person. While this system reduces the number of emails received by individuals, it also requires good understanding of who should receive certain messages. It is considered appropriate for general correspondence, but not for worker or client messages with confidential content.

Findings

Getting the most out of communication methods

Groups, networks and interagencies

Table 10: Interagency usage patterns

Interagencies attended on a regular basis	%
Attend an interagency	83
Attend between 1 - 2 interagencies	50
Attend between 3 - 10 interagencies	33
Found interagencies useful	
Somewhat useful	58
Very useful	39

"The major [advantage] for me is networking... getting to know workers, because I don't just refer to anybody - I need to know who that worker is."

- Youth Health Service worker, Penrith

During the focus groups, few other communication methods stirred as much debate as interagencies. At their best, they are seen as useful places for networking and professional development and a vehicle to lobby government on youth issues. At their worst, they are directionless and insular, a waste of time.

Youth sector interagencies vary greatly in their functions, structure and composition. Some are incorporated as organisational entities, while others simply provide a space for sectoral/cross-sectoral workers to get together and share information. While many interagencies provide useful information exchange opportunities, others do not fulfil members' expectations or needs:

"[The main] rule is having a practical result rather than popping out for a chat. For me it's a bit of a wank... Sometimes I have left there (interagency meeting) and been frustrated by the lack of action."

- Youth drug and alcohol worker, Sydney

Another recurring criticism is that interagencies often lack direction:

"... The lack of direction... Someone's got to drive that interagency. And if it's not driven in a good direction, then it's not going to go anywhere, and people will get bored."

- Youth service worker, Sydney Inner West

This lack of direction or purpose, leading to boredom and frustration, often results in busy workers not attending meetings or participating in interagency activities. While some interagencies rely on terms of reference or other documents to guide them, many are heavily reliant on the enthusiasm of one worker to lead and drive the network.

Local council workers are cited as crucial leaders in several geographically-defined interagencies, ensuring the inclusion of cross-sectoral partners. In Sydney's Inner West, where workers' scope of service often extends beyond one local council's boundaries, a number of interagencies regularly convene joint, cross-council meetings.

Newsletters, Circulars and Flyers

Table 11: Newsletters, circulars and flyers usage patterns

Facts and Figures: Newsletter, circulars and flyers

1. 58% use them 'sometimes'
2. 59% rank newsletter/flyers as 'somewhat useful'

Newsletters, while generally well regarded as a current and good source of information, also have significant drawbacks. Workers reported receiving too many, and that several are often too long or contain too much information.

Although flyers are considered useful, participants explained that many brochures they receive are not well designed and lack clarity. It is often unclear who they are intended for: clients or referring agencies, sometimes a mix of both. Another concern is that many services either lack appropriate display cases, or have little time available to update the display for clients.

Findings

Getting the most out of communication methods

Directories (printed and online)

Table 12: Organisational resource folder

Access to an organisational resources folder	%
Report having access	89
Resource folder usefulness	
Very useful	38
Somewhat useful	58

Participants often develop and maintain their own personal service directories; these are considered more reliably up to date than a shared organisational resource. Although some organisations bring in student placements to gather information and update directories, regularly maintaining shared resource files is nonetheless a major challenge.

"I think it's the nature of the work - [updating the directory] is very time-consuming but very valuable... We have resources from 1960-something in our office!"

- Early Intervention Network member, Sydney Inner West

Table 13: Directories - hard copy, CD-rom, and online

Number of directories named	Number used by <5 people
46	35 (76%)

There is a stronger preference for hard copy directories (often produced by local councils) over online/electronic ones. A small number of workers use CD-rom directories. Participants named 46 directories in total, however three-quarters of these are used by less than 5% of the study population. Council directories showed highest use (16%). Come In Youth Centre's Cyrus database is well liked by its users within the youth field, but was mentioned by very few respondents (12%). Even fewer (3%) listed Datafiction's Lincs, a comprehensive cross-sectoral

database designed along local council boundaries. These figures indicate that participants may not be aware of some important resources.

Internet

Not all agencies or workers have computers or open access to the internet. In these situations, workers often use their own time and resources at home to search for other youth-related services.

Table 14: Internet search engines usage patterns

Internet search engine usage rate	%
Very often	32
Internet search engine usefulness	
Somewhat useful	52
Reliance on number of internet search engine	
Rely on one main search engine	50
The most popular search engine - Google	

Of those using internet search engines, workers reported using Google in greater numbers (71%), than either Yahoo (19%) or nine.msn (9%). Although generally well-liked, the main drawback in using internet search engines is the time required to wade through the multitude of hits. Few participants have been trained in how to efficiently tailor searches to their needs.

Listservers (E-lists, E-groups, listservs)

Although not many participants use listservs (64% use them rarely or never), it appears they can be useful in solving problems; workers use these online forums to share problems or gather information about a specific issue, with other members responding quickly. There is a large number of list-servs relating to the youth field, as well as sector- or issue-specific groups. Participants named 49 separate e-groups, with a general mix of local, state and national membership. YouthGas was the most popular e-group, with 26% of list users. Listservs work best when moderated, which ensures that discussions are focused and constructive.

Findings

Getting the most out of communication methods

Websites

Study participants provided the names of websites they visit frequently, coming up with a combined list of 84 names. With 48% of workers using them 'sometimes' and 50% stating they were 'somewhat useful', websites sometimes fall short of expectations because services often establish homepages, but do not update them. Sites mentioned most often were: Area Health Services (12%), Local Councils (9%), Family & Community Services (7%).

Some workers feel that websites dedicated to bringing together a number of composite resources (forums, links) are more useful than having to seek out information from a number of individual websites. It is acknowledged that maintaining websites takes time and money, and having a site is no guarantee that people will visit it:

"Technology has taken on to the extent where people just assume you put it on a website or you put it on a list somewhere and people will read it. They don't tell anyone it's been put there and you're supposed to know that it exists..."

- Centrelink worker, Wollongong

Electronic databases and clearinghouses

Table 15: Electronic database and clearinghouse usage patterns

Electronic database and clearinghouse usage	%
Rarely or never use	67
Electronic databases and clearinghouse usefulness	
Somewhat useful	55
Not at all useful	21

Not all workers have access to regular journal databases; many only have access because they are concurrently engaged in university studies. Although they see such databases as generally useful, many workers feel daunted by the number of databases and

their different operating formats. Refining searches is often time-consuming, and inconsistencies in abstract presentation contribute to workers' reluctance to use electronic databases for article searches.

The most frequently mentioned database was the Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies / University of Tasmania (8%). The rest are used by extremely small numbers of workers (<5%).

Articles and journals (printed and electronic)

**Table 16: Articles and journals usage patterns
(printed and electronic)**

Article & journal usage rate (printed & electronic)	%
Rarely or never use	67
Sometimes	36
Article & journal usefulness (printed & electronic)	
Somewhat useful	61

Few participants see the relevance of academic journals to their work, and do not use journal articles very often. Scores were similar for both print and electronic (online) versions. A number of agencies and individuals employ students to conduct literature reviews. Participants from four focus groups believe that such work provides the students with useful learning about the sector, and in any case they believe that staff do not have time to research journals or existing services or to investigate previously completed projects.

Respondents reported difficulties in locating appropriate databases and using the search facilities; different search formats are confusing, and many feel that the majority of projects are not written up in academic journals. Investing time in researching for information about other projects (e.g. lessons learned, evidence) or their implementing services is generally viewed as a low priority.

Findings

How organisations support connectedness

Supportive mechanisms within organisations

In most cases, workers show great personal initiative in networking and maintaining connections to other services. In addition to discussing individual behaviours, the group explored the wider work environment: what role do organisations play in inter-agency communication, and in supporting workers to be better connected? Taking an organisational approach ensures that communication does not rely upon an individual worker.

"We've got three youth services officers attending [the interagency] so that if one of us can't go to one meeting, the others can go and keep me in the loop."

- Centrelink worker, Parramatta

The five areas in which study participants believe organisations played a significant role in supporting communication were:

1. Developing comprehensive orientation processes
2. Providing relevant professional development and mentoring
3. Measuring networking as a 'success' indicator
4. Providing access to, and training in computer technology (internet, databases)
5. Providing basic information resources and services

1. Orientation

Participants strongly agree that a comprehensive orientation enables workers to settle into a new job quickly, and is well worth the investment of time. Orientation provides necessary information, identifying relevant links and partners at the outset. Poor induction processes result in workers wasting time trying to hunt down unfamiliar documents and leads, limiting their knowledge of relevant agencies/programs in the area.

One worker described what she would expect when starting a new job:

"Well I would hope that I'd have... a thorough orientation of the area and be given a list of organisations and staff members that I could connect to."

- Youth Resource Centre Worker, Marrickville

In reality, however, workers seldom receive adequate handover or orientation when taking on a new position:

"When I started this position I didn't have a key to the office. There was no person in the position for about eight or nine months. Security unlocked the door and they said 'Go for it!' and that was the first day... There has been nothing since. It comes down to a paper trail and I didn't know this area at all. It really becomes a chase, trying to find names and numbers."

- Youth Interagency member, Leichhardt

"In the first youth centre that I ever worked at, it was the first position I'd ever had... I was seventeen at the time and I was basically the sole worker in this nice new facility which had nothing at all except what the government had provided to set it all up. The management committee said, 'There's the keys to the filing cabinet and keys to the door, this is the alarm code... have a nice day!' I turned around and went... okay...!"

- Youth NGO worker, Penrith

Many note that most assistance has been unstructured:

"When I first started it was a bit easy because there was a handover from one to the other. I was introduced to a couple of key people. Then I knew who those people were but I had to branch out and find out who everyone else is! I had to do a lot of legwork myself."

- Centrelink worker, Liverpool

Participants' main suggestions for a good start to a new job included: allowing at least three to four weeks to get to know local networks (before working directly with clients), having a list of key organisations' contact details and websites as a starting point, being supported by a mentor for the first few weeks of a job, and being personally introduced to services.

Findings

How organisations support connectedness

Ensuring that departing workers leave some form of written handover is also important, so that important information is not lost:

"Handover is important but I don't think you [usually] get that because workers leave before replacements are found."

- Family & Community NGO worker, Campbelltown

2. Professional development

Following the initial orientation process, study participants expressed the view that ongoing professional development would greatly support work skills and performance. Workers mentioned several priority areas: training in literature searches, assistance in writing up projects for publication and learning to use online search engines effectively. One worker described what she thought was needed:

"Some time set aside for learning and development, so that you can research other things you need to know rather than just relying on the one provider or one service."

- Centrelink worker, Redfern

Some organisations encourage sharing between individual workers and teams by holding regular meetings. One Centrelink office described its participation meetings as a place to receive updates from colleagues, as a way of overcoming isolation in its largely specialist teams. Some smaller agencies set up regular visit days where 'guest presenters', or employees from other organisations, are invited to staff meetings.

3. Shared information resources and exchange opportunities

Some larger organisations, such as the Smith Family, have created librarian positions and research units to support their regional staff in developing and evaluating projects. Departmental libraries (e.g. Education, Health, Community Services) likewise provide access to databases, journals and books although workers who do not belong to the appropriate sector or department sometimes face constraints in

using them. Some organisations have moved towards developing intranet systems (e.g. Centrelink's Service Finder): however, participants stated that to be effective, such databases require close consultation with users and regular updating.

Workers feel that even smaller organisations without such technological capacity could support information exchange by keeping internal information registers updated. Resource folders tend to become an individual, rather than organisational responsibility. Information in shared folders often becomes obsolete and so individuals develop their own information bank. Unfortunately, these often accompany the worker to a new position, and so comprehensive resources are often lost in the process.

Table 17: Organisational information resources (hard copy and online)

Access to an organisational resources folder	%
Report having access	89
Resource folder usefulness	
Somewhat useful	58
Access to a list of online resources/websites	
Online resources guide	
Report having access	48
Somewhat useful	51
Very useful	43

Searching for appropriate websites is also considered time-consuming (and often frustrating) yet very few organisations keep lists of useful online sites and none appears to have installed quick links ('Favourites') on employee computers, which would significantly reduce search time.

Resource constraints play a significant role in organisational communication. There are specific pressures associated with sessional employment (e.g. doctors in youth health centres, casual youth workers) where the limited time available is spent in direct service to young clients. In these situations, workers have little time to seek out networks and contacts, and therefore rely heavily on having information 'at hand' and provided by the organisation or colleagues:

Findings

How organisations support connectedness

"Basically the information we get comes from above us. Emails come from team leaders... that's all we really get. I don't know what resources are out there unless they tell us. We deal with clients on a short term basis, you know, 5-10 minutes."

- Youth Interagency member, Leichhardt

"Usually I'm booked out with appointments and sometimes it's difficult to get 10-15 minutes... you'd probably need more than that in the types of jobs we do. You do need more time to be able to research and look things up."

- Centrelink worker, Redfern

Centrelink staff favourably mentioned regular "participation meetings" where team members can come together to share information. This helps to identify areas for collaboration and reduces isolation, particularly for specialist workers. However, there is a strong overall need to improve intra- as well as inter-organisational communication especially within larger agencies, as one respondent explained:

"There are certain departments themselves that don't know what's happening within their own organisation - I think that it's not only government departments [but] also the larger community organisations themselves that perhaps could do with a bit more internal information dissemination."

- Youth Interagency member, Marrickville

Quite often, this affects information distribution systems within larger departments:

"The thing with our department is [that] they produce something... quite often it comes to the school and we're not even aware of it. It gets put on the shelf somewhere or it may go in the library and I don't know why routinely they don't make sure that each DGO (District Guidance Officer) group gets a copy!"

- School counsellor, Western Sydney

"Things are sent to the principal and the principal may sit on it. By the time you get it - or you don't get it at all - and you find out it's in the school, nobody knows where it is..."

- School Counsellor, Western Sydney

This operating context underscores the necessity of organisations having accessible information systems in place - for internal as well as external communication.

4. Networks as a measure of 'success'

Direct service organisations are often under pressure to demonstrate quantifiable outcomes, usually indicated by the number of client visits. In this performance system, networking and communication are difficult to measure or justify.

"If the management doesn't see networking as important as clinical work, well then... clinical will always win out above [networking]."

- Youth Health Service worker, Wyong Region

Several workers find it difficult to keep a balance, juggling heavy client workloads while trying to attend interagencies:

"I think it's about agencies thinking differently about priorities. If they say you have to go to meetings then [they have to] negotiate what you're going to drop."

- Family & Community NGO worker, Campbelltown

One organisation ensures that promoting projects is an annual activity:

"It's written into workplans; programs are [written up] in journals. It's good to let people know what your services are doing."

- Family & Community NGO worker, Campbelltown

Findings

How organisations support connectedness

Networking is regarded as a key strategy by some agencies, as a youth health worker observed in her area:

"One thing that's very interesting is the huge move, huge amount of money that Centrelink actually invested in outreach/youth outreach officers - whose job it is to actually know all the different services. They do talks and have a mobile service and are becoming key people. I was amazed at how much they are investing in [liaison] and how well connected those Centrelink people were outside of [their own agency] to a whole lot of non-government organisations..."

- Youth Health Service worker, Wyong region

In another situation, co-location reduces the isolation between different services. A worker contrasts her previous experience with her current job:

"It's an interesting experience for me. The health service that I worked at before, all services co-located. Whereas here, we tend to work in separate teams and I've found that really difficult to get used to. My experience when I first joined my team was that it meant you were very disconnected from other services. Before, we sort of talked across teams all the time, but here it doesn't happen that much. There are no meetings across teams."

- Early Intervention worker, Wyong Region

Although larger organisations could rotate staff to attend a key interagency, smaller organisations or those with sole specialist workers are more vulnerable to falling out of networks because single workers simply cannot keep up with all the meetings:

"I find it quite difficult because I'm the only Aboriginal health worker that covers both the entire Central Coast and I attend the Aboriginal interagency as well as the youth interagency and how do I manage that? How do I justify it? The Aboriginal interagency goes for three hours as well and six hours once a month.... I can't justify that, when I've got young people needing support."

- Aboriginal Health Service worker, Wyong Region

There are organisational, as well as personal and professional rewards from being connected to other services. From a performance perspective, this requires reframing networking as an important function which improves service, and acknowledging networking as an indicator of success or achievement in workplans.

5. Availability of and access to technology

Within the groups interviewed, a surprising number do not have access to the internet. In some cases this is due to workplace restrictions (allowing access to government or 'approved' sites only) and in others, employees do not have access to a computer, internet or email at all. This was particularly evident in sessional workers (e.g. school counsellors, doctors).

"We don't have internet access. You can put your search in Google and that's as far as it goes - you can't click on the results. So that's something [we] do at home."

- Centrelink worker, Redfern

Participants with access to a computer show varying levels of confidence in using the technology e.g. joining e-lists, using internet databases and search engines. However, organisations often expect that all workers have automatically acquired these skills either on the job or elsewhere. Embracing new technology is not an automatic process; the transition from paper to electronic recording requires both a cultural and technical shift, as one worker explains:

"I'm starting to move towards online because I have so much stuff at my desk so that when it comes time to find something you can't find it! It is a slow shift... people are used to looking at bits of paper all the time. It takes a while."

- Centrelink worker, Penrith

Findings

How organisations support connectedness

Sectoral coordination and support

Many workers explained that a number of different organisations and departments have their own directories, with much repetition. The health, education, and welfare departments often encompass vast and geographically different areas. However, Local Councils are perceived to have distinct advantages in maintaining a local identity, as well as providing a reference point within set geographic boundaries.

Seeking information from many places is often bewildering:

"There's no one central site. I would like to see the [Local] Council take it on board. If you log onto Council you should be able to get what you want to look for."

- Centrelink worker, Liverpool

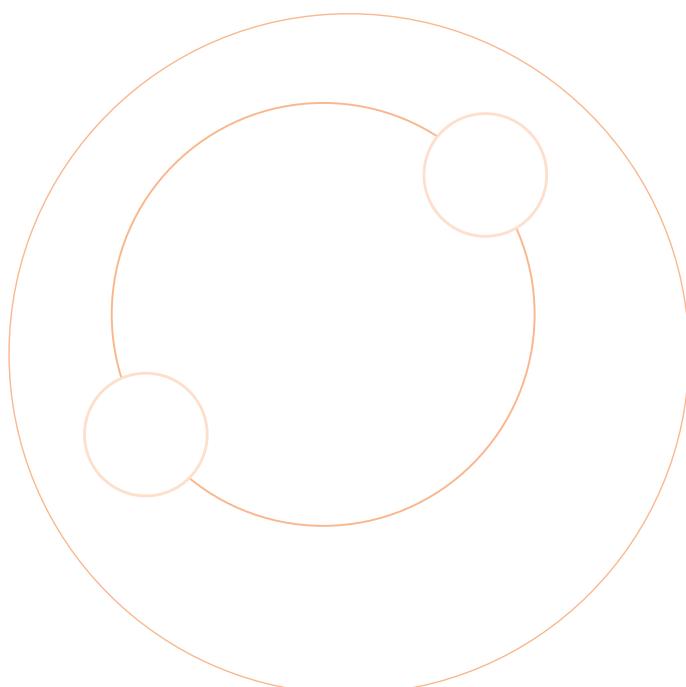
Some Local Councils already contribute to service networking and coordination, providing a focal point for information exchange. Several of the interagencies interviewed for this project are chaired or coordinated by a Council community development or youth worker. With the ability to work cross-sectorally (and with access to the multi-Council LINCS database), Councils are often in a strong position to produce comprehensive youth service directories for their local area, as well as taking a leadership role in facilitating linkages and relationships.

Sustaining efficient networks, however, requires dedication to maintaining the support position over the long term:

"The youth interagency came about because there were several youth workers who helped each other. We had a youth worker in the council and another from one particular organisation who came up with the idea... It was going on strong last year because of the [Council] youth worker... Our meetings were regular and minutes were sent out and there were also projects we looked into.

But that worker had to leave because it wasn't a permanent position for him. So [networks] fold when the worker leaves."

- Centrelink worker, Parramatta



Conclusion

Future Directions

Individual worker level

For those with the responsibility of providing services to young people, being able to access up-to-date details of other agencies and programs is essential for effective referral and networking purposes.

Study participants express the urgent need to have easily accessible contact information for other services, as well as project reports and resources from other organisations which do not appear in major journals. They are also interested in finding ways to use communication methods/channels more effectively (e.g. good practice guidelines) and improve skills in accessing evidence informing new project development (training in literature review skills, databases, project design).

Organisational level

The study shows that although individual workers often take the initiative in developing and maintaining connections with other workers and services, it is in fact organisational systems which play a principal role in facilitating the communication process.

Organisations use notably different communication strategies and systems. Yet while having a significant impact on operations, these are rarely considered a core component of service improvement. This may be because communication is generally not viewed as an 'output' or 'product' but as a means to an end. The researchers identify several potential opportunities for organisational development, such as reviewing and strengthening communication strategies, supported by relevant tools and other capacity building activities.

Improving induction and handover processes will ensure that workers are able to join networks in the early stages of employment, and are thus well supported to deal with the unfamiliarities of settling into a new position. Developing and maintaining collective resources for work teams (e.g. website lists, resource folders) will provide shared access to current information, greatly saving the amount of time and energy put into individual directories. Investing in computer technology (and appropriate skills to use it) will make it easier for workers to keep in the loop and access information outside their immediate area.

It is also worth noting that information exchange is a two-way process of 'finding' and 'promoting'. While workers clearly identify the need to improve their information-seeking skills, the study also suggests that organisations could support wider information-sharing by improving practices in the promotion of programs, services and lessons learned.

Sectoral level

Workers feel that communication and networking is more successful if supported by a lead agency, e.g. a focal point person who could convene meetings, and ensure the taking and distribution of minutes or information. In several cases, the local Council has taken a strong leadership role, resulting in a successful, functional interagency.

"I don't understand why there isn't a statewide database of services. Something with multiple searches."
- Youth Health Service worker, Sydney Inner west

While all focus groups suggest the development of a 'centralised' information hub (for service contact information and 'soft' data), the study also recommends promoting the use of existing resources (directories, websites, databases), many of which appear to have gone largely unnoticed and unused.

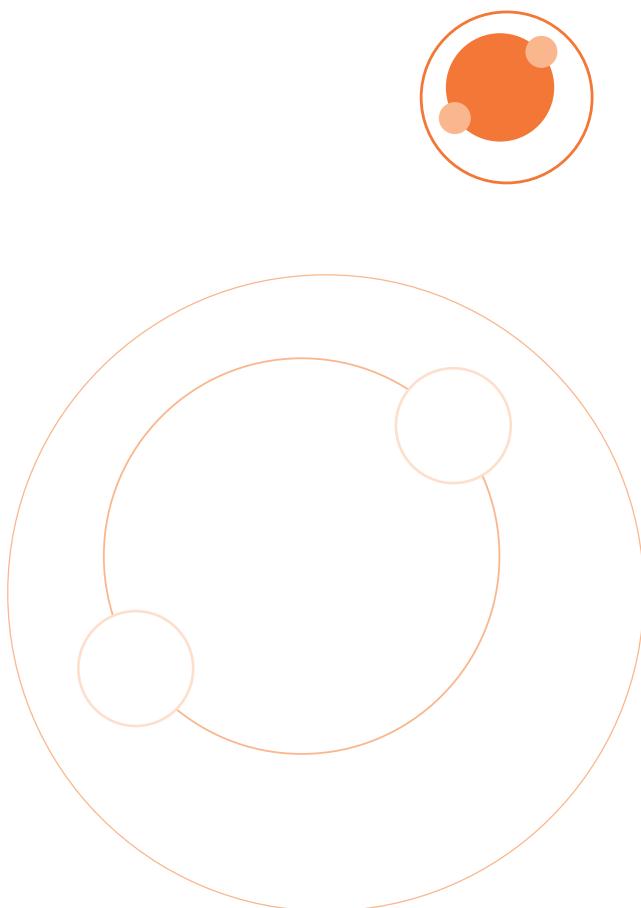
While the research findings support the need for a focal, statewide information exchange point, the development of a clearinghouse will require considerable research and resources if it is to become effective and user-friendly. Workers' previous experiences emphasise that setting up a new clearinghouse requires careful consideration and planning. Such ventures tend to be resource intensive (from both financial and human input perspectives), involving complex design issues and requiring significant, ongoing maintenance.

The study results indicate that, in itself, developing a clearinghouse will not be sufficient to facilitate greater information sharing between services; key factors directly influencing the clearinghouse's success will include intensive consumer consultation/participation in its design, widespread promotion and user training/support.

Future Directions: Spinning the Web

When asked what a support agency such as NSW CAAH might do to improve connectedness between services working with young people, study participants' suggestions include: worker training in literature searches, creating a central information exchange hub, providing tips for running more effective interagencies, and assistance in writing up their own projects.

It is envisaged that further stages of *Spinning the Web - better connections between services working with young people* have the potential to develop associated tools, training and practical guidelines for services involved with youth health and well-being, and to conduct further consultation and research to inform the development of a clearinghouse proposal.



Appendices

Appendix A: List of participating organisations

NSW CAAH would like to thank the following organisations for their involvement:

- Ashfield Council - Ashfield
- Barnardos Australia - Belmore
- Belmore Youth Resource Centre - Belmore
- Budgewoi Public School - Budgewoi
- Burwood Council - Burwood
- Canterbury Community Mental Health - Campsie
- Canterbury Division of General Practice - Belmore
- Catholic Schools Office Diocese of Broken Bay - Waitara
- Cellblock Youth Health Service - Camperdown
- Centacare - Bankstown/Enmore/Glebe Marrickville Metro
- Central Coast Area Health - Wyong, Gosford
- Central Coast Health Alcohol and Other Drug Service - Ourimbah
- Central Coast Health / Health Promotion Unit - Gosford
- Centre for Children and Young People - Lismore
- Centrelink offices/regions - Baulkham Hills, Blacktown, Brookvale, Campbelltown, Dapto, Fairfield, Ingleburn, Leichhardt, Lismore, Liverpool, Maroubra, Marrickville, Mt Druitt, Newtown, Parramatta, Penrith Plaza, Redfern, St Marys, Shellharbour City, Wollongong, Wollongong East
- City of Canada Bay Council - Drummoyne
- Community Connections North Coast - Lismore
- CRC Justice Support- Broadway
- Central Sydney Mental Health Services - Rozelle
- Central Sydney Area Health Service - Rozelle
- Department of Juvenile Justice - Petersham
- Department of Community Services - Lakemba
- Erina Community Health Centre - Erina
- Ethnic Communities Council of NSW - Waterloo
- Gorokan High School - Toukley
- Innerskill - Rozelle
- Junction Youth Health Service - Glenbrook
- Lake Munmorah High School - Lake Munmorah
- LCYA Poem Project - Rozelle
- Leichhardt Council - Leichhardt
- Lismore City Council - Lismore
- Marrickville Child, Adolescent & Family Centre - Marrickville
- Marrickville Council - Petersham
- Marrickville Youth Resource Centre - Marrickville
- Mission Australia - Campbelltown
- Nepean Division of General Practice - Penrith
- Nepean Interyouth - Penrith Plaza
- Northern Rivers Area Health Service - Lismore
- Northern Rivers Division of GP's - Lismore
- Northlakes Public School - San Remo
- NSW Consumer Advisory Group - Mental Health Inc. - Rozelle
- NSW Dept of Education and Training - Ryde, St Peters, Parramatta
- Youth Liaison / NSW Police Force
- NSW Refugee Health Service - Liverpool

Appendices

Appendix A: List of participating organisations

- One 80 Youth - Petersham
- Parramatta High School - Parramatta
- Riverstone High School - Riverstone
- St George Youth Workers Network - Hurstville
- Smith Family - Claymore / Miller / Parramatta
- Sydney Secondary College - Leichhardt
- Ted Noffs Foundation - Randwick; Westmead
- The Hills Sports High School - Seven Hills
- Toongabbie West Public School - Toongabbie
- 2010 - Newtown
- Uniting Care Burnside - Campbelltown; Wyong
- Violence Against Women - Burwood
- Wadalba Community School - Wadalba
- Warehouse Youth Health Centre / FPA Health - Penrith
- Weldon Children's Services - Burwood
- Wesley Dalmar Youth Services - Ashfield
- Wyong Central Community Health Centre - Wyong
- Wyong High School - Wyong
- Youth & Family Mental Health - Lismore
- Youth Health Service - Wyong
- Youth Zone - Hurstville

Appendices

Appendix B: Research framework

Group continuum (agree-disagree) questions

- Young people are more likely to use a service if the referral has come from a trusted source.
- Workers often aren't aware of all the other services available for young people in their area.
- When setting up a new project/program for young people, workers generally use a range of information sources to find out what already exists.
- There are good information sharing systems/networks between all services working with young people in my area.

Group Discussion Hypotheticals

Hypothetical 1 - referral

Congratulations! You've just moved intercity, taking up your new position as Youth Projects Officer with Cloud Bay City Council.

Your job includes:

- intake with young people who drop in for recreational activities,
- implementing community development projects with adolescents.

The young people often come to the service for information and referral to:

- Accommodation issues
- Friendship and peer support, counselling
- Health services (including sexual health, drug and alcohol)
- Employment

As a new worker, how would you get connected to other services, in order to facilitate referral? How does this relate to your own experience?

Hypothetical 2 - developing new programs

The NSW State Government recently funded a new youth development initiative for local councils. As the Youth Projects Officer for Cloud Bay Local Council, you suddenly have seed funding for a "Youth Arts for Better Health Project".

This is the first time you've worked on such a project. So to help you design the new project, you'd like to know who has done something like this before and which resources/materials already exist.

- What would you be looking for?
- How would you look for these things?
- How does this relate to your own experience?

Hypothetical 3 - service promotion

You've developed your Youth Arts for Better Health Project and initial activities are underway. You'd like to promote your Project to other services.

- Describe how you would promote this project.
- How have you promoted your projects in the past in your work?

Appendix B: Research framework

Questionnaire Data Collected

Communication Method used for seeking information about other services and programs	Freq of use (1-4)	Usefulness rating (1-3)	Other
1. From inside the organisation (in person/by phone)	yes	yes	
2. From other organisations - in person / by phone	yes	yes	
3. Email	yes	yes	
4. Networks and interagencies	no	yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of different groups attended on regular basis
5. Flyers and Brochures	yes	yes	
6. Printed Newsletters / E-zines	yes	yes	
7. Online Newsletters / E-zines	yes	yes	
8. Directories	yes	yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of 2 used most often • Format (print, CD, online)
9. Printed journals or articles (hard copy)	yes	yes	
10. Electronic journals or articles (online)	yes	yes	
11. General search engines (google, yahoo, ninemsn)	yes	yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Name those used most often
12. Online databases and clearinghouses	yes	yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Name those used most often
13. Participation in list-servers / e-groups / internet notice boards	yes	yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Name those used most often
14. Specific organisations' websites	yes	yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Name those used most often

Appendices

Appendix B: Research framework

Questionnaire Data Collected

Organisational information sharing systems	Response format
If organisation provides internal resource folder or collection of fliers/notices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes/No • Usefulness (scale 1-3)
If organisation provides recommended list of online resources (links, search engines, journals etc)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes/No • Usefulness (scale 1-3)
How service promotes activities to other organisations	Choose variables: In person / email / interagency / flyer / newsletter / directories / journals / online clearinghouse / listservs / org website / other org website / forums & conferences / media / other (please state)
Incoming Referrals monitored	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes/No • Usefulness (scale 1-3)

Participant Statistics	
Sex	Male / Female
Age	U21 / 22-30 / 31-40 / 41-50 / 51-60 / 61+
Service	Government / NGO / Private
Role	Clinical / Non-clinical / Mixed
Type of Service	Health / Education / Welfare / Cross-sectoral / Other (describe)
Client Base	Rural or rural centre / urban / mixed
Service Target Group	Youth specific / various age groups
Youth clients as % of total client group	<10% / 10-25% / 25-50% / 51-75% / >76%

Spinning the Web - Consent Form

Before participating in a focus group, please:

Read and complete this form

Return it to CAAH on the day.

- All information provided in this form is held in strict confidence and for use in the Spinning the Web project only. It will not be used for any other purpose.
- Participant interviews and feedback will also be confidential. Direct quotes and comments included in the report will be treated anonymously and not contain any identifiable information.

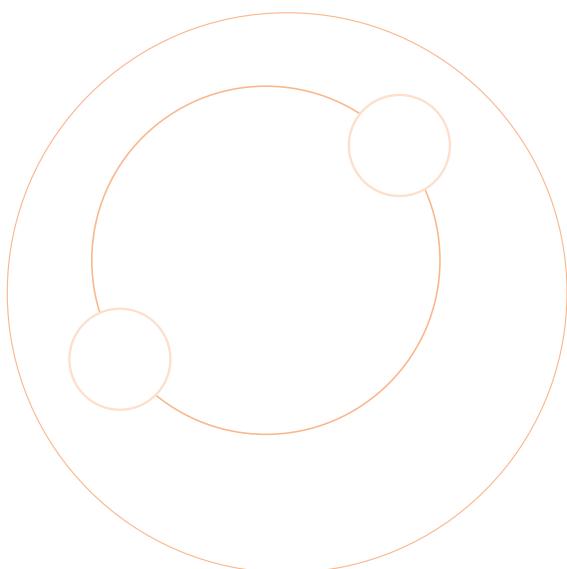
I, _____ (print name)

hereby give my consent to participate in focus group discussions as part of the Spinning the Web project.

I understand that my contact details and the information that I provide during the focus groups will be used only for the purposes of the project (e.g. receiving copies of the report) and will not be used for any other purpose.

Signed: _____

Date: _____



Appendices

Appendix C: References

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