



Disability Justice Project

Service User Consultations

'It is good to be able to open up about the service- this is the first time in 3 years I've had the chance to say what I think.'

Participants

The consultation involved 10 people with cognitive disability who have been involved with the criminal justice system. Some had involvement in the system as victims and some as defendants. All participants are currently or have been users of disability services.

The participants were 3 women and 7 men who were aged between 20 and 50.

Group consultation

A group consultation was conducted with 4 participants with justice system experience and past experience with a range of disability services including, Australian Disability Enterprises, Ageing Disability and Home Care, day programs, case management and mental health services. The group participants all live in the community. They have minimal current disability service contact at present.

Individual consultations

Individual interviews were conducted with 6 service users currently engaged with disability service provider. Each interviewee uses some form of supported accommodation and each person has a history of contact with the criminal justice system. Almost all of the individual interviewees had spent time in prison.

Ben Garcia-Lee, Team Leader Education and Group Programs at Intellectual Disability Rights Service conducted the interviews and facilitated the group consultation. The paper aims to deliver real responses to important questions!



Method:

Semi structured interviews were used focusing on 5 questions?

1. What makes a good disability support worker? (skills and qualities)
2. What makes a bad disability support worker? (skills and qualities)
3. What makes a good disability service? (practices and qualities)
4. What makes a bad disability service? (practices and qualities)
5. What advice can you offer about what helps to stay out of trouble with the justice system?

Following is a summary of the key themes plus specific points and quotes from participants in response to these 5 questions.

What makes a good disability support worker?

Themes:

Know and treat people as individuals

- 'That's what a lot of people need to see, that there is a worker there who actually cares and if they don't see that then the person thinks that they are worthless and no good and then they can end up doing silly things, going out and breaking the law or slashing up'
- Good workers 'sit down and get to know each resident, instead of judging a book by its cover.'
- 'Workers should have a sit down with the people to find out what is going on for them, like you are doing now and see if there are any things to fix up.'
- 'Important to spend time with us, getting to know us, not just in the office with the paperwork all of the time'
- 'Understanding that behaviours are sometimes to manage stress, not just acting out...so things could be even worse if I didn't run away for example'



- ‘Good workers understand that we have got issues’
- ‘Services need to understand that doing a weekly planner doesn’t work for everybody, I rather wake up on the day and say this is what I want to do.’

Earn and value trust

- Good workers earn trust. They don’t take it for granted. It’s not easy to trust people.
- ‘We need to have trust- sure there might be some things that staff need to tell others if they think it is in our best interests but other things about your personal life shouldn’t just be blabbed about the whole place.’

Understand the hardship people have been through (especially trauma histories)

- It helps ‘When they have been through what I have been through or worse so that they can understand what I am going through or when they have had a lot of training about the way to work with us’

Find the balance between personal relationship and being a support worker. Manage boundaries sensitively

- ‘I am not here to be your friend. If you are, it’s not happening with me. You are here to support me and get me out of here or whatever.’
- ‘Someone who hangs out with you’
- ‘Someone you can have a friendship with’
- Provide support in difficult times
- Go the extra mile when you are going through stressful experiences
- ‘A good worker comes up with ideas about how to have fun and how to sort your bills out’
- ‘Someone who I can tell my secrets and it doesn’t end up in the paperwork’

What makes a good disability support worker?

Specifics

A good disability support worker is someone

- you don't feel you have to bow down to
- who can help guide you to make good decisions in your life
- who sticks to what they say, doesn't let you down
- who supports you to make your own mistakes
- who supports you to know your options so you can make your choices
- you can talk to and they listen
- who apologises for their mistakes
- who is good at explaining things
- who talks to you directly
- who is honest with you
- who is interested in you
- who tries to bond with you
- who does activities with you
- you can have a joke with
- you can trust
- you can trust and respect- develop a good trusting bond with
- who is a good listener
- who has motivation and passion
- who helps you to work around barriers when you hit them
- who understands everybody's disability is different and has different effects
- who understands we have issues

What makes a bad disability support worker?

Themes:

Don't act like an authority figure/like a boss

- 'Someone who comes in in a suit or uniform or acts like an authority figure, because that will scare a lot of people who have been inmates'
- 'If you come across as an authority figure, the person will clamp up and shut down'
- 'When they egg you on to get you angry and that does not make for a good worker'
- I don't like workers who just tell you what to do, 'do this, do that'
- Workers need to learn that 'regardless of the situation you should not force people to do things'

Being a disability support worker is not just another job – we need to know workers care, attitudes matter – choose the right staff!

- I don't like it when they are on their computers and phones too much and don't listen - 'not everything they get out of their computer is going to be right for everybody.'
- 'It is not good when workers heads are not in the job, they might be thinking about their own bills or their own issues and it is hard to even get an idea out of them...that makes me depressed and I tell them that they may as well go home'
- 'Some staff don't care about their job, their heart is not in it.'
- 'If they are going to sit all day in my place doing nothing, then they can go and just sit in their own house all day'
- 'I don't like it when workers complain about having to come to work'
- 'A lot of workers are just looking at it as a job, as a job that pays their bills and that is the wrong attitude to have.'
- 'Go get another job if you just want a week's pay'

- 'I know some workers can have it hard with some clients because of their illness but that is where their heart has got to come into it'
- 'I think that sometimes workers are forgetting the role of the job- how to be caring and supportive and not to be frightened, we are all human beings'
- 'after this training they might employ staff that know what we want and that understand what we are here for'
- 'workers are here to do their job, get paid and go home but we have to live here it's their workplace but it's our home'

Communication and listening

- Not listening is a big thing (repeated theme)
- Some staff have negative body language to you
- They don't talk to you individually
- People who won't keep what you tell them private, tell the other workers
- They talk about you behind your back
- 'If you apply for the job, be motivated and throw yourself into it. You have to be patient and understanding and don't be scared to talk to the person and find out what that person is about and what their needs are'
- I don't like it 'When workers don't explain why they say we can't do something, we take it really personally, like it is because there is something wrong with us.'

Respect

'I get ticked off when I don't feel respected'

I don't like it when workers

- are rude
- treat you differently because you have a disability

- 'get in your face'
- think they know everything
- accuse you of things
- have bad body language
- Push me to the point where I snap

Some other things I don't like

'Probably their attitude sometimes, when I am getting worked up and workers start getting worked up too'

'If a client is going off, stay calm and think I will get them to apologise later but do not react and add fuel to the fire yelling and telling them that they are wrong.'

I've got to ask them about the rules here and there, because I forget half the time what the rules are ...I've never obeyed rules, I've always been the one that makes my own rules, my way or the highway, that kind of stuff, so for me to follow rules it's really hard for me. Because I've never had rules, I mean I've grown up on the streets from the age of nine, so I've always had me own way'

'some workers with people are controlling and manipulate you because who is going to believe a 'retard'...if they get upset then the workers kick back and say see...but really they caused the problem, it really riles me up because it is just not fair. It is abuse.'

What makes a bad disability support worker?

Specifics

A bad disability worker for me is someone

- who types on their computer when they are talking to you
- who takes other calls when you have an appointment

- someone who comes across as an authority figure
- who speaks for you and doesn't let you speak for yourself
- who is rude
- who treats you differently because you have a disability
- who 'gets in your face'
- who doesn't listen to you
- who talks about you behind your back
- who thinks they know everything
- who accuses you of things
- who thinks they know all about you and they don't ask you

What makes a good service?

Themes:

A good service treats you with respect

A good service provides individual services that are right for each person.

A good service listens deeply to service users and doesn't presume to know what they think, need or want

A good service creates a safe and welcoming environment

A good service explains to people why certain things are done

What makes a good disability Service?

Specifics

A good service is one that

- takes you to do activities
- listens to you and hears what you have to say



- has nice surroundings and good access
- makes you feel welcome (everyone is polite)
- offers support when needed
- understands your individual support needs
- comes through with what they promise
- helps out with transport to court
- allows you to cook and watch films in shared living spaces
- is flexible- 'like allowing you to feel safe in the staff common area when other residents are going off'
- doesn't try to control you all the time
- will help you out when you need to move
- help you out when you get in trouble with the law, writing support letters and reports and stuff
- lets you do more things on your own as trust grows between you...' Like CJP people being able to go away unsupervised for the weekend
- that explain policies to people and why things happen, especially the transport and car policies so that we understand the reasons you can and can't do different things otherwise people think it is a lack of care

What Makes a Bad Service?

Themes

Too much change of staff is difficult

When the service doesn't ask or doesn't listen

Things I don't like about some disability services

Specifics

- when they keep changing your key worker
- when they don't treat you like a human

- when they don't listen to what your needs are (like trying to place you in jobs that don't suit you)
- when they treat you like you are stupid because you have a disability; 'we didn't explain it because we didn't think you would understand.'
- when you have to wait around for ages for appointments and no-one tells you why
- when they try and force people to quit smoking- 'The more times you get on our back the less we will do it.'
- when you give ideas or suggestions to the service and don't ever get any answer
- suddenly they call us 'customers;' 'I find it a bit offensive, like a bit disrespectful. Makes it feel like a hotel not a home. Hotels call you customers.'
- when you have good staff and they don't stay and workers keep changing
- 'like the last service I was in they just didn't give a shit, they just want to make their own rules and then don't keep to it and don't care what we have got to say'
- if a worker calls in sick, my activities are cancelled, it happens a lot
- when they don't listen to what we want or what we need
- when staff don't pass the message on to other staff straight away, so then they have to work out who said what, when and they don't know what's going on

What do you need from a service to help you stay out of trouble?

Themes

Provide support and opportunities for us to meet new social networks

Begin support work before service users are released from prison

Have one key worker who you can develop a trusting relationship with

What do you need from a service to help you stay out of trouble?

Specifics

- have support people to take you to court
- have support people to stay with you all day at court
- I get in trouble with bad mates
- keep to yourself to stay out of trouble and don't meet the wrong people because then you do dumb shit
- just don't be a f'wit, that is all that I can say
- don't hang around with the wrong people, those people who just hang around the streets getting in trouble
- it used to be fun getting arrested and all until you turned 18. Then it is not funny anymore. Going to big jail and being someone's bitch is no fun at all'
- 'that's a hard one- they can't, I mean I could go out and get in a fight and they can't say don't do that, they are not responsible for that'
- when someone is thinking about getting in trouble, do something with them, take them out, go for a walk, go to the park...I don't know
- when people first get out(of prison) they want to party and spend some money. Let them have that party day and then you can start to work together on what they want to achieve but they need to be able to have that day of freedom

- you have to start working with people about other ideas for how they can have fun beyond just getting wasted- don't tell them don't take drugs, coach them about other choices they have
- support workers should start working with inmates well before their sentence is over through lots of visits so they start to get to know each other. Because then you can already trust someone when you get out
- you need to talk to people about all the positive doors that can open for them on the outside
- think of a set of scales and explain what can happen on the outside compared to being on the inside
- thinking positively is such an important message to get across to every inmate in the system

Ideas about staff training

- 'If a person is going off, stay calm and think, get them to apologise later, but don't react and add fuel to the fire by yelling and telling them that they are wrong.'
- training should involve contact and feedback from the people that the workers will be supporting
- workers' training should include stories that are the stories of real people
- good services are the ones that give their staff good training
'They should have a training week where they organise for a couple of service users to come in and sit down with all the workers and then say well look- and then get them to spend a day together and observe the way that workers work and engage with them'
'Workers should receive longer training and not just the same stuff it should be...and more training'
- '**Managers** should be updating their knowledge and learning from the case managers who are really working with the people face to face every



day. Then work can be personal for each person and be right for where they are today not 3 weeks ago' (presumably referring to frontline staff having to go to others for solutions to problems and it all takes too long')

'You should get feedback from the people they work with after the training to see if the workers have improved'