

Grassroots Voices Research Report

A Brief Overview

The Grassroots Voices research focussed on family and whanau experiences of receiving support services from Christian social services and government agencies. The research covered 9 regions throughout the country and 249 people were interviewed. This research highlights the many facets and dimensions of committed, effective social work and innovation in services. It also identifies areas for improvement and change, both in member services and in government family support services and policy.

As a result of this research the New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services is calling for:

- An overarching “Family Support Strategy” that ensures families can access the right support services at the right time, including preventative early intervention as well as crisis and post crisis support.
- More support for people on low incomes (including beneficiaries and low wage workers) such as more access to state and other social housing, higher benefit levels, better emergency income support and a more widely available child support tax credit.
- Community organisations and government agencies to work more closely together across the range of services so that the best, most sustainable and most cost effective results for vulnerable families are achieved.
- Sufficient government resourcing of community agencies so they can provide collaborative services, built on a trust relationship with clients, that create positive change for families and whanau that need support

Participants discussed the circumstances that led to their asking for family support services and what, in their experience, works well and what needs to change. The uppermost issue that created problems for most of these families and whanau was not having enough income for food, power and housing. Families who had achieved more healthy family and community life said that developing trustworthy relationships with their social service workers and being able to access a range of services to address their different needs had been of the greatest help. Being unable to access services within their communities, being treated disrespectfully and not being given full information about the services and supports they were entitled to, caused the greatest blockages for change.

KEY FINDINGS

Effective Practice

Families told us that services were most effective when they were treated respectfully, were invited to participate in decision-making, and when the support agency had the flexibility to respond to their particular circumstances. The provision of services and support was viewed by families as most effective when the professionals involved had both a holistic understanding of their needs (and strengths) and an understanding of the range of support, both from government and community, which could assist them.

The establishment of relationships of trust with agency staff was critical to effective practice. A skilled social services worker who had extensive networks and could advocate for families on their behalf to access a mosaic of support services was identified as the basis for effective social work.

Maori participants said that social services that responded to their cultural needs were very important. Agencies that were effective had developed strategies for responsiveness to Maori at operational and governance levels. These included having governance arrangements that respond to Maori community concerns and HR strategies that resulted in Maori staff being employed and supported, along with providing responsiveness to Maori professional development for Maori and non-Maori staff.

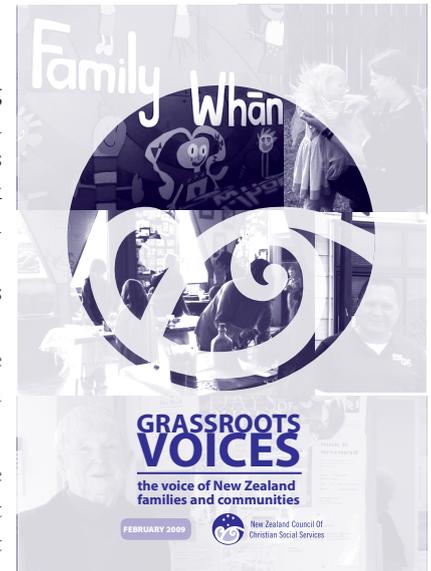
Poverty and Housing

Families who participated in this research described the corrosive effect on their families of not having sufficient income to cover basic costs such as food, clothing and accommodation, medical and schooling expenses. A lack of income affected their ability to participate in cultural and recreational activities leading to a sense of marginalisation. Children were especially vulnerable to the impacts of poverty with parents struggling to pay schools’ optional fees and activity fees, and cover the costs of participating in sport and recreational activities.

Key recommendations arising from the Grassroots Voices research include expanding the stock of New Zealand Housing Corporation houses, maintaining the income related rents policy for low income HNZN tenant families, lifting core benefit levels and changing the In Work Tax Credit to a more broadly available child support tax credit.

Collaboration

The Grassroots Voices research demonstrates the value of interagency collaboration in enabling a mosaic of support services to be wrapped around families. The CYF (Child Youth and Family) Differential Response strategy is currently being rolled out. It provides new opportunities for CYF and community organisations to work together to utilise their strengths and expertise in working with families that have a range of needs, from low risk to high risk. Essential to the success of any strategies are professional working relationships between CYF and community organisations and adequate resourcing of the whole mosaic of



support services. This includes sufficient resourcing for Whanau Agreements and Family Group Conferences as well as sufficient funding for the support services provided by community agencies.

Overarching Family Support Strategy

The stories shared by families in the Grassroots Voices research highlighted the need for an overarching framework, a Family Support Strategy, to better integrate family support services. Grassroots Voices shows there is a real need for cross sector collaboration between the Ministries of Social Development (MSD), Health, Education Housing, Police and Justice to support families and alleviate the worst affects of poverty – particularly poverty for families with children. These government agencies working closely with community organisations in a deliberately supportive way will provide the best results for families in need.

SUMMARY – VOICES OF FAMILIES

What families said they needed:

- Adequate income to provide for themselves and their families, especially the need for quality basic food
- Ability to earn more than \$80 per week before their benefits are abated
- Good quality housing that they could afford – many were on HNZC waiting lists
- Advocacy to navigate complex government systems and access entitlements
- An understanding of their cultural needs and an ability to make them feel comfortable
- Access to a wide range of locally based family support services (from early intervention through to post crisis support)
- A skilled and reliable key agency worker to provide social work support and to enable them to access services
- Gaps in services to be met e.g. affordable counselling
- Suitable employment if they are able to work
- Better system for the transition from benefits to work
- Quality affordable childcare for parents wishing to work
- Respect and support for parents who choose to be at home raising children, especially when the children are young
- Better support systems and activities for teenagers
- Friendship and support to overcome loneliness and isolation.

“Everything I needed to know my social worker knew... just questions on how to behave with my son and areas to go with him...”

What made services effective:

- Being treated with respect and being listened to
- Developing a relationship of trust with the agency and its staff
- Sharing in decision making about what is needed and being kept informed of developments
- Cultural appropriateness
- Advocacy services when dealing with government agencies
- Staff having extensive local networks and good relationships with others (Government agencies and community based organisations)
- Having regular access to the same key person in the agency was important, including access out of office hours for crisis situations
- Getting the help you need - both quick access to emergency support services and longer term support and transition services
- Wraparound support services delivered (where possible) by the same agency.

“I would give up but (my support worker) would drop in or phone, so she wouldn’t let me go”

FOR A COPY OF THE FULL REPORT GO TO:

www.justiceandcompassion.org.nz

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