

“Empowerment”

One of the key factors to quality of life care and support

What is ‘empowerment’ in employment - especially in disability support services? All levels of management and staff need to know exactly what is officially expected of them by the person above them. They need to feel empowered and supported to execute their defined duties.

All support service management and staff in disability support services need to be empowered and supported. Yet they are frequently not! They are especially not in most government direct care and support services for people with disabilities.

Direct care support staff need to be empowered so they are able to promote, support and provide good quality of life care and support without the fear of intimidation from those who just want to do little more than basic minder care. Minder care was a traditional institution culture.

Empowerment comes from above, to those below - a top-down driving force where each level is empowered from the one above. It is especially needed within public service direct care services, where there is a traditional public service entrenched culture of responsibility avoidance - often as a direct result of the lack of empowerment.

The down side of having little or no empowerment, the current situation in many public service areas, is that all levels of management and staff seek to avoid as much as possible for fear of being scrutinised... Avoid involvement – take the pay and look the other way.

The failure of public service management to provide empowerment is both the fear of potential repercussions, and the fear of potential loss of personal power”. This leaves most department group home residents reliant on the integrity of staff, rather than the direction of management. There is, therefore, significant quality swing between group homes – with residents saying we are lucky to be in a good place.

There is a fear of making decisions and directions, as the person above is unlikely to provide support if there a problem – they go to ground. Traditionally, all levels of management and staff feel safer being involved in as little as possible.

Many direct care staff, especially those who have recently completed a college training course, are motivated to do quality of life care but find there is little or no empowerment to do so at the care facility. The culture is often, “We don’t do that here!” These motivated staff soon get disillusioned, and resort to joining the traditional minder-care status quo.

House supervisors of DHS group homes are the catch 22 victims of the traditional public service avoidance culture, where management at all levels seek to avoid taking decisions, making directives and providing support for fear of repercussions.

In practical terms, many house supervisors say, *If only the manager above them would come to a house meeting and tell them, in front of the staff, that they expect to see this and that improved.* The house supervisor would then be empowered to make directives with management support. These supervisors are often destroyed by staff undermining their authority - looking for avenues to discredit house supervisors who dare to attempt to set, monitor and maintain staff work value expectations with little or no support from management.

The avoidance culture will never be broken whilst top level management fail to set service level and quality expectations in accordance with the direction, intention and spirit of the department's extensive and comprehensive care policies, standards and values. And, all levels of management consistently reflecting and maintaining these expectations to all direct care staff.

Effective empowerment would not only provide house supervisors with the confidence to properly, consistently and proactively set, monitor and maintain staff work value expectations to provide their residents with the quality of life care and support which is well-defined within their personal care plans, but would help ensure job satisfaction for all management and direct care staff.

Initial outcome expectations and empowerment should be levelled on senior department management by the funding body – the government. Yet successive government ministers fail to do so! They avoid the responsibility of governance, resulting in the Department of Human Services, Victoria, being a taxpayer funded law unto itself.

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