

SKILLS SHORTAGES NOTES

LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND SERVICES ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA

INTRODUCTION

Human and community development services are impacted by the same workforce issues as the rest of the local government, including:

- demographic change, the ageing of the population and the shrinking workforce.
- increasing competition for employees across a range of areas
- skill shortages in a number of occupations required by local government to serve the community
- increased employee expectations for flexible working arrangements
- changes in the community's demand for particular services
- economic and social conditions.

Human and community development services are particularly impacted by the ageing of the population. With the dependency ratio, which measures the proportion of the population that is either under 15 or over 63, expected to rise from its current level of 20-30% to at least 50% by 2050, the demand for health, aged care, social support, library, leisure and other health promotion and wellbeing services will increase significantly.

It is important to mention that the impact on local government human services will vary in each state as not all states have a significant direct service provision role compared to Victoria, for instance. Therefore, assessment of work force issues and work force planning needs to be and is being specifically undertaken in each state involving the local government sector as a whole, in partnership with state and federal governments, training institutions and professional and state associations.

Individual councils also need to undertake their own work force assessment and planning as they differ in the way they provide human services, and demographic changes and locational issues have varying impacts in local government areas. Frameworks for this planning work will assist councils and professional associations and federal and state

governments could play a role here.

Local government has broader responsibilities in community planning for wellbeing and as a sector and tier of government, has a range of roles and responsibilities including social planning, community development, service planning, direct service provision, coordination and facilitation and advocacy.

As such, local government, as a sector and as individual councils, must engage with the broader human services field in work force assessment and planning as current and future skills shortages express themselves as gaps in services and demand pressures on local government as skilled experienced personnel are critical to quality, safe service provision, management and planning.

WHAT ARE THE CURRENT SKILLS SHORTAGES?

Specific work is being done in each state to determine what the skills shortages are because of the diversity in service provision structures.

In Victoria, the MAV has produced a discussion paper which identifies that there are particular skills shortages in the maternal and child health service, child care and environmental health areas. Anecdotally, there is also evidence that local governments are experiencing recruitment difficulties in the aged care, pre-school and allied health areas.

Across the range of local government human services involvement, personnel are skewed towards the over 45s, including senior managers and community development and planning staff who will be retiring in the next 10 years. These skills shortages are more acute in remote and regional areas.

The Productivity Commission predicts a reduction in the work force participation rate from the current level of 63.5% to 55.4% by 2044. This has consequences for the provision of human services.

Like other services in local government, there will be increasing competition for a shrinking pool of skilled personnel. This will be at a time of significant increase in the requirement for human services for a growing older population and if we have an increase in fertility and

migration rates which the government is promoting, demand for early childhood services is likely to grow.

Currently, local government has a high level of volunteers providing direct services. The MAV identified that the number of volunteers in local government has been steadily increasing over time, particularly in rural and remote areas. However, demographic change is currently impacting negatively and is likely to continue impacting on volunteer supply.

It will be important for local government to assess its use of volunteers as part of its work force planning process.

WHAT WE DO ABOUT THE SKILLS SHORTAGES

So what do we do about work force assessment and planning issues? Firstly, it is important to undertake detailed research and analysis about the current age of the work force, how many are expected to retire in the next 10 years and what skills will be required now and in the future to continue to meet service demand. The identification of current skills shortages, strategies to attract and retain X and Y generations and the baby boomers in the work force, and what needs to be implemented in terms of recruitment and workforce development, are important aspects of this analysis.

A number of papers talk about the need to explore local government's selling points in order to be the employer of choice.

On this point, the nature of the work in the human services and community development field is likely to be attractive to Generations X and Y and to retaining more experienced baby boomers. There are indications that Generation Y is community focused and more globally aware and attracted to community values. Human services offers interesting community connected work and opportunities to work in a range of service areas, i.e. aged care, early childhood services, leisure, library services, arts and culture, youth services, and so on.

In addition, there is an opportunity to undertake a range of roles in service planning, community development, management, direct service provision, social and cultural planning. The above and opportunities to

work cross-functionally enables skills development and skills transfer from the more experienced staff to younger new entrants to local government, and vice versa. Of course, access to ongoing training and development, including in leadership and team development and systems of support and recognition is important. The professional associations have enormous roles here.

Already in local government there is increasing labour force flexibility, including flexible work arrangements such as working from home, ability to purchase leave, carers' leave, part time work, rostered days off and study leave. These are attractive to personnel in human services who, at this time, are predominantly women with caring responsibilities for children and often older parents. These conditions are attractive to Generations X and Y who are more interested in balancing work and home life, having experienced their parents working to excess at the risk of their health and family arrangements.

Flexible working conditions are also essential to baby boomers who are now interested in work/life balance and working less, as part of a phased retirement.

The promotion of inter-generational understanding and relationships in the work place will be critical to attracting younger generations and retaining baby boomers. In the human services field, the use of more experienced workers as mentors and preceptors is common and has always been part of the training and development of professional workers.

For mature aged workers, the development of a cross-sectoral pool to undertake locums and project and planning work could be considered. This would allow mature aged workers to use and transfer their knowledge and skills and to move in and out of retirement. Ongoing learning opportunities and networks of support are essential to operating successful staff pools.

Where there are particular skill shortages in the human services field such as maternal and child health, pre-school teachers and child care workers, there has been a great deal of consideration about the issues. By way of example, the Department of Human Services, in partnership with the Municipal Association of Victoria, has undertaken a maternal and child health nursing work force assessment to determine the current and future requirements for the service. A number of key strategies were identified

from the work force assessment to improve recruitment, retention and re-entry to the local government maternal and child health service – a cornerstone service for the implementation of early years policy.

The work force assessment itself analysed work force supply and demand for 2001-2002 with annual projections to 2012 – 2013. Qualitative information was derived from nurse focus groups conducted during the project period.

Recruitment strategies included the development of scholarship programs, re-entry courses, university, open day programs and marketing programs aimed at stimulating interest in maternal and child health nursing.

Retention strategies included improved reflective practice and the development of preceptor roles and models to manage competing work demands.

The labour market strategies included a review of the range and extent of services performed by nurses in local government maternal and child health services, career path development and provision of adequate education places.

Service provision strategies included implementing aspects of the state government's *Children First* policy.

There has also been an analysis of the pre-school area in terms of attracting and retaining teachers, which has resulted in the development of cluster service models that provide professional support and career paths to replace single service models and better pay and conditions to compete with primary schools that also seek to attract teachers in the younger age range.

To conclude, it is important for local government human services professionals to take leadership in addressing work force issues to ensure that it continues to deliver services to meet current and future demand.

I am sure the sector can be the employer of choice. The work is fascinating, varied and challenging and it offers plenty of scope for a real community connection and individual commitment. Flexible working conditions will offer work/life balance, an attractor to all generations.

The LGCDSA looks forward to working with the LGMA, the ALGA, federal and state governments, unions, universities and other professional bodies to ensure work force planning is a strategic priority.