

Social Workers in General Practice Pilot Program



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The Issue

In 2019-20, 52.3% of ACT adults reported having a long-term health condition.

Capital Health Network's (CHNs) 2021-2024 Needs Assessment identified the social determinants of health as a significant barrier in accessing health services, in particular the lack of support for people with complex social and health needs, in accessing, and navigating between appropriate services.

Key objectives

- To align with the Primary Healthcare 10-year Plan 2022-2032 and the Quadruple Aim.
- To increase the efficiency and effectiveness of services providing care to people at risk of poor health outcomes.
 - To improve coordination of care to ensure patients receive the right care in the right place at the right time.

Aim: To embed and integrate social workers in the general practice setting.

Outcomes so far...

Practice data July – December 2022

Number of social worker sites	4
Number of referrals received	195
Number of referrals seen by social workers	184

- Examples of social worker activities in general practice:
- Working with clinic staff on social workers' scope of practice
 - Educating patients during consultations
 - Gaining knowledge about services available, eligibility and barriers, and sharing this information with GPs
 - Involvement in practice quality improvement
 - Completing psychosocial reports for NDIS and other applications
 - Work activity tracking - administration, clinical, professional development, multi-disciplinary liaison

Significance

As there is limited literature published in the Australian context of embedding social workers into general practice, the independent evaluation of this pilot program will add to the evidence-base within a local context in the ACT as well as at an individual, health care professional and system level.

The Solution

Stakeholder consultations and extensive scoping of the literature supported the establishment of the Social Workers in General Practice Pilot Program. CHN has funded four general practices across the ACT to recruit and embed social workers into general practice.

The pilot program is envisaged to run for an estimated 18-month period allowing time for social workers to be fully integrated into the practices.

The Approach

Following an Expressions of Interest process four successful general practices employed a social worker for a minimum of 19 hours per week.

CHN engaged a social worker subject matter expert to provide monthly clinical supervision to all social workers, a forum for reflection, learning and interactive dialogue.

Community of Practice meetings held monthly assisted in establishing a network for social workers as well as facilitation of discussion on a variety of topics and streamlining of referrals.

Challenges reported by practices

- Recruitment and retention of social workers
- Patients' uptake due to anxiety about enrolling in a new service
- Coordination of patient referral and follow-up

Opportunities and achievements reported by practices

Having the social worker onsite has:

- Improved referral processes and communication across teams
- Spread the workload across the teams, contributing to more time for provision of clinical care
- Enabled development of stronger partnerships with social and community organisations
- Helped support patients while waiting for mental health care
- Improved continuity of care and reduced non-attendance at appointments

Feedback from patients

- Facilitated access to services and advocacy for patients, particularly for those at risk
- Education about services
- Early health interventions to avoid unnecessary hospitalisation

Acknowledgement

University of Canberra will independently evaluate the pilot program.

