

Social Workers in General Practice Pilot Program

CHN

The Issue

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

Capital Health Network's (CHN) 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 Australia's Primary Health Care 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.

The Approach

Following an Expressions of Interest process, CHN funded four general practices to recruit and embed Social Workers 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.

Preliminary results

Examples of Social Worker activities in general practice

- Working with clinic staff on Social Worker's scope of practice
- Educating patients and completing psychosocial reports during consultations
- Gaining knowledge about services available, eligibility and barriers, and sharing this information with GPs.

Practice data 2022-23

Activities	July - Dec. 2022	Jan. - June 2023
Number of referrals to the Social Workers	195	278
Number of patients seen by Social Worker	184	309
Number of care plans to which the Social Worker contributed	27	50

Learnings

Challenges reported by practices:

- Recruitment and retention of Social Workers
- Patients' uptake due to anxiety about enrolling in a new service.

Opportunities and achievements reported by general practices

Having the Social Worker onsite has:

- Improved referral processes, cross-team communication and spread of workload for GPs
- 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
- Improved continuity of care and reduced non-attendance at appointments.

Discussions with general practices:

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

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.

Acknowledgement

We acknowledge the contribution and participation of the general practice teams in this pilot program. The University of Canberra will independently evaluate this pilot program.