Handout 3 Formal and Informal Networks

Formal Networks
Formal Networks include our professional relationships with colleagues, within our agency or our inter-agency network. It also includes relationships with representatives from other organisations who are stakeholders in the work of our service agency. These include government bureaucrats, referring agencies and other professionals that we meet at inter-agency and other meetings.

Informal Networks
Informal Networks are those relationships which are formed through our work contacts but do not have a direct relationship to our work. The people in this network might include former colleagues, people we have become friends through our work, and other people whose views and advice we value. The meetings with such people do not occur in a formal situation but rather in a social context. Such settings could include a chat over the phone, email messages, drinks after work, or coffee on weekends. Informal networks can be invaluable for our work practice. Examples are the isolated worker who can gain great support from a friend who is an experienced community service worker or the worker moving into new areas of community service work who can gain a lot from talking with a friend who has worked in that area for years.

Of course formal and informal networks can overlap as people who work together become friends and make contact after work. These relationships are sustained even after people move to other positions in different agencies. Often workers who are helping colleagues to find external supervisors or nominating people for positions on management committees will recommend friends who they have worked with and who they trust and respect.