Handout 1: An Overview Of Policy

What is Policy? Policy can mean different things to different people. It can mean the rules or guidelines of an organisation; the principles and values and standards of a community service; the procedures that need to be followed in order to complete the tasks of an organisation. Regardless of the definition, policy plays a pivotal role in the shape of our world and the conduct of the community service industry.

The community service worker must adhere to the standards set in public policy and the policies of their organisations.

Public policy (that is government policy) is reflected in how organisations function and in turn how we as individuals respond. Examples of Government policy include: NSW Disability Services Act 1993; Commonwealth Home and Community Care Act 1985 (HACC).

Some government policies provide the guidelines for the delivery of government services. The NSW Disability Act 1993 is an example of this. However there are other government policies such as HACC where the government funds services to provide the services. In these instance service are adhere to the standards set by government policy.

Public policy is reflected in the service offered to clients, the type of programs offered, how they are offered and the way the organisation operates.

Effective Policy

An Effective Policy Consists of:

- A structure to allow for action
- A decision
- A legitimate document
- A written document
- The input from numbers of people
- An ongoing process
- A framework which allows the organisation to operate.

What Do Policies Look Like?

Firstly a policy is a written document but from then on policy can take many forms. The size of policies depends on the size of the organisation. Government departments have hundreds of policies, while a small community based organisation with less than 5 staff might just have one document, which incorporates a number of policies. (If you want to see a policy document used in a community service look at the policy manual of the Carmen Poldis Community Centre (CPCC) You will find these in the filing cabinet in the office).

Everybody has a stake in policy. From the clients who use services and have to fit in with the organisation’s policies, to the staff who design the policy in response to
client and staff feedback or government direction and government itself who develops policy in response to public opinion, the interests of private enterprise or a mixture of both.

Good policy is one where:

- It will be useful for the people whose needs it was intended to meet. i.e does it meet the needs of service users, staff and the management committee of CPCC?
- It includes:
  - those things that are required to meet the standards of the funding bodies
  - the requirements of legislation (eg occupational health and safety, mandatory notification of child abuse and neglect)
  - and for accreditation.
- It improves the quality of the service.

Making good policy also depends on good processes as its foundation.

**HINT go to the tearoom for further information about good processes**

Policy making is a complex process and can be long and frustrating, but there is a suggested framework that assists in the decision making process.

Even when policy has to be developed hurriedly in response to an event and there is not the luxury of careful and reflective thought processes, it is still important to follow a sequential framework for effective policy.

Policy is about achieving objectives and in this way, developing policy is a decision to take action to achieve certain results. A new policy needs to fit into the wider picture of an organisation’s activities so the policy objectives need to be stated honestly and clearly. When the intentions of the policy developer are unclear or contradictory then the policy is bound to fail.

Therefore setting the objective of the policy is the first step in a long process. It is also the most important step since the objective is the whole point of the policy’s existence.

Sometimes the objectives are overtaken by other unintended events that only become evident after the policy is implemented and erodes the policy’s effect and creates whole new problems. For example a policy to offer flexible and shared work place arrangements might result in client dissatisfaction about the lack of staff available. A scheme by government to screen staff working with children can create a costly and time-consuming process for agencies.

In an effort to keep policy development on track and focussed on its objectives policy makers need to constantly ask:

- What is the purpose of this policy
- How will it affect
- Clients
- Staff
- The organisation
- Relationship with funding bodies

- How will the method of implementing the policy fit with the objectives of the policy?
- How will this policy relate to other organisational and funding objectives?
- Will the policy make the difference in the way it was envisaged?

**Eight Step Policy Cycle**

The eight step policy cycle suggested by Bridgman and Davis Bridgeman P Davis G Australian Policy Handbook (1998) Allen and Unwin usually takes the following cyclical form.

When the cycle has gone through the eight stages of policy development ending with evaluation then it starts again. Any good piece of policy needs refining and be relevant to changing circumstances so this means identifying the issues from the evaluation and so on.
In handout 2 this cycle is related to a hypothetical case study at Carmen Poldis Community Centre.

The design of a piece of policy is political in its nature. The issues facing a community agency that demands its attention will shape the action the agency takes and as a flow on then has implications in other arenas.