

Getting started: involving consumers on health service committees

This resource is specifically designed to assist health service organisations to include consumers on their advisory and other committees. Additional information about consumer participation is available [on our website](#).

About Health Issues Centre

Since 1983, we have been an informed and credible consumer voice in health in Victoria and fostered meaningful partnerships between health consumers and the Victorian health sector. Through training and support, we encourage consumers to use their unique knowledge and experience to participate in their own health care as well as contributing to a better health system with improved outcomes and experiences for everyone.

We have made a significant contribution to the acceptance of consumer participation as an effective approach within health care. We increasingly collaborate with health providers to improve the breadth and effectiveness of their consumer participation strategies through:

- supporting Victorian Community Advisory Committees
- assisting organisations to plan, review and evaluate their participation activities
- offering learning and development programs (training) to health staff and consumers in effective participation approaches
- offering an extensive wealth of resources and information to support community engagement and consumer participation via our website

Who are your consumers?

Health consumers are defined as users or potential users of health services. This also includes family members/carers, and broader members of the community. When planning participation, we recommend that the consumers you engage reflect your service users and come from relevant diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Consumer participation

Consumer participation occurs when consumers are meaningfully involved in decision-making about their care and treatment, or providing input on decision making about service delivery, health policy and planning, or about the broader wellbeing of themselves and the community (Department of Human Services, 2006).

Consumer participation happens in many ways, formally and informally. It can also happen on a number of levels:

- Individual level – on decisions about own care, self-management
- Unit or Program level – feedback for service improvement or new developments
- Organisational level – policy, new services, access
- Broader community level – advocacy in consumer and community groups, participation in state-wide organisations, government department processes.

Engaging consumers:

- Gives you critical information about how your services are perceived and received as well as the impact of your services
- Improves the quality of your services, programs and projects
- Builds relationships with your community and the people who use your services
- Improves health outcomes for your clients.

A number of government policies, reporting and legislative requirements as well as accreditation standards mandate or guide the health sector to formally involve consumers in areas such as service planning, delivery and evaluation, workforce training and health information development.

Planning to involve consumers on your committees

Many health service committees are dominated by health professionals. Involving consumers on committees in your health service will bring new views—from critical stakeholders—to the table, and assist in developing ongoing partnership between consumers and your health service.

A committee structure provides an opportunity to move beyond one-off consumer feedback to a more interactive approach, and allows consumers to have direct input into decision-making processes.

Involving consumers on committees should not be your sole participation activity. To truly involve consumers effectively right across your organisation a range of methods should be used.

The role of a consumer on a committee

The role of the consumer on a committee is to provide a consumer perspective on the issues being discussed and recommendations being made. The committee should ensure that the impact on service users is always a central part of its considerations.

It is important that all members of the committee understand the consumer's role and treat the consumer as a peer.

A consumer on a committee will sometimes be appointed as a 'representative'. This term is used when the person has a constituency or organisation to which they are accountable. More commonly, a consumer is appointed as a 'consumer member' because she/he can bring a different perspective to the decision making process; they bring views based on their experience of a condition or care or their knowledge of a particular population group. In this case, rather than being a representative of a particular group, they are simply members who act as individuals.

Recruiting consumers

The process for engaging consumers for your committee is somewhat similar to recruiting staff, and should follow a similar process. Prior to recruiting a consumer to a committee you will need:

- a position description for the consumer role
- a recruitment process (application and/or interview)
- an orientation process
- an identified support person
- a process for feedback and debriefing
- strategies to provide further training or professional development
- a process for payment of sitting fees and/or reimbursement of expenses

Supporting Consumers

Consumers on committees require ongoing support and resourcing in order to maximize their effectiveness. Processes such as orientation, feedback, training and mentoring should be included in your strategies to involve consumers.

We assist health services to advertise for consumer representatives via our Consumers Step Up program. Check our website for more information.