



Involving consumers in the COVID-19 response

It has never been more important than now, during the COVID-19 crisis, to include consumers in strategic and operational decisions.

This document is intended to support health services and policy makers to work with consumers and carers using the principles of human-centred design to ensure strategies and operational plans that respond to COVID-19 meet consumer needs and encourage maximum consumer-buy-in.

HOW TO INVOLVE CONSUMERS

- **Involve consumers in key strategic and operational COVID-19 decisions** - Consumers understand the community impact of those decisions.
- **Involve consumers in developing communication materials** - Consumers know how to speak to consumers
- **Involve consumers in identifying policy and operational gaps** - Diverse representation ensures no one is left behind
- **Involve consumers to anticipate unintended consequences** - Consumers can foresee perverse outcomes because they will impact their lives
- **Use established networks to find consumers quickly** - Contact the Health Issues Centre to help you recruit and/or facilitate. (info@hic.org.au)

WHEN TO INVOLVE CONSUMERS

It's not enough to engage with consumers after decisions have been made. Consumers need to participate at all stages of the planning and implementation cycle. A few of the strategic areas that will benefit from consumer participation include:

- outpatient/ED/elective surgery demand management
- development and oversight of ethical decision-making frameworks
- workforce training
- advice regarding those vulnerable cohorts who are at heightened risk of infection
- identification of information gaps

Early engagement is best. Outcomes are better when all stakeholders participate in human centred design.

WHO TO INVOLVE

The needs of all Victorians must be considered in COVID-19 planning, with a particular focus on those who are most vulnerable, those who are most marginalised and those who have least access to services and information.

Consider the particular needs and insights to be gained from:

- older people
- people living with pre-existing medical conditions/multiple chronic conditions such as high blood pressure, heart disease, respiratory conditions or diabetes,
- people who live in remote Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities
- culturally and linguistically diverse populations
- people living with disability
- in-patients
- people living in regional, rural and remote areas
- parents of immunosuppressed children and/or with chronic conditions
- survivors of COVID-19
- consumers experienced at partnering with the health system such as Advisory Council members

HOW DO I FIND CONSUMERS QUICKLY?

Developing partnerships with consumers is normally long-term relationship-building work. However, in times of crisis, relationships can develop faster than normal, and in an urgent situation it is appropriate to look directly to established groups to source suitable consumers.

- Contact your organisation's consumer engagement team or staff member. Health Issues Centre can help connect you with already established consumer groups/networks including condition specific groups.
- Look to established consumer groups within your organisation. Some of those consumers may be suitable, and already have a relationship with your organisation.
- A COVID-19 consumer group may already be established in your organisation.
- You may already partner with consumers on a group or steering committee. Ask them to join you.

HOW DO I ENGAGE WITH CONSUMERS WHEN WE ARE MINIMISING FACE-TO-FACE CONTACT?

You are most likely already using on-line virtual meeting applications (eg Zoom, Teams). But ask your consumer engagement team or the consumers themselves what methods they prefer.

KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

Keep the consumers you are working with informed. This can be as simple and quick as 3 dot points at the beginning of your next email to outline what has happened since you last communicated and what next steps are planned. Provide an open channel of communication so health consumers can contact you and provide information and feedback in real-time from the community.

KEY PRINCIPLES FOR CREATING STRONG PARTNERSHIPS

Following these basic principles will ensure your partnership with consumers is authentic and productive.

Partnership:

Working together to shape service delivery to better meet consumer and community needs.

Respect and dignity:

Consumers will know more than you about their personal situation, and that of their community. Be open to that, and value that contribution.

Inclusive:

If people are affected by a decision they deserve to be included in that decision. Include as many voices as possible, especially those from at-risk communities and those at high risk due to pre-existing conditions. HIC can provide you with practical strategies to reach the vulnerable and the seldom heard.

Improvement:

Use the consumers' contribution to make the COVID-19 response as good as it can be.

REMUNERATION

Health Issues Centre recommends consumers are paid for their contribution, although every Health Service has its own policy. See Health Issues Centre guidelines for information <http://healthissuescentre.org.au>

Your consumer partnerships are likely to involve a series of short communications. If this is the case:

- Estimate that time at the end of the month, and make one payment to cover the total, or
- Ask consumers to keep a tally of their time and send you their hours at the end of the month.
- Talk to consumers about these options before you start so it's clear what you will cover.

MYTHS

MYTH: I can't involve consumers in difficult decisions, because the information is too confidential, they will get too upset, or won't understand

Making difficult decisions is exactly when you need to include consumers. Working through an ethically challenging situation with the consumers who will be affected by the decision will show you what is important and give you some viable options you may not have considered. Consumers can also guide how you communicate the decisions to the public. Testing ideas with consumers reduces the risk of getting it wrong.

MYTH: It's too hard to involve consumer representatives in decisions now that we are limiting the number of people in our facilities day-to-day

Consumers don't need to be involved in planning face-to-face. You can use simple options such as video conferencing (such as Zoom, Teams), emails or phone. Ask your consumer engagement team or the consumers themselves what methods they prefer.

MYTH: I am overwhelmed by work right now; I just don't have time to involve consumers as well.

Involving consumers in your COVID-19 work will help lighten your load by giving you the assurance that you are making the right decisions. Your efforts will have more impact by being "road tested" by the right people before going out into the public. Many consumers are highly skilled, and all are very passionate about contributing quickly and meaningfully to this rapidly changing situation.

MYTH: I have never done this before! How am I supposed to learn this with everything else going on?

Your consumer partnerships do not need to be perfect; the most important thing is that you try. Consumers are keen to make a contribution to the COVID-19 situation as they are living this along with you. Consumers want to help you and have a strong interest in making sure better decisions are made as they are likely to be most impacted. Being inclusive and welcoming and speaking openly and honestly is very helpful.

For assistance and enquiries contact info@hic.org.au or call 03 86769050