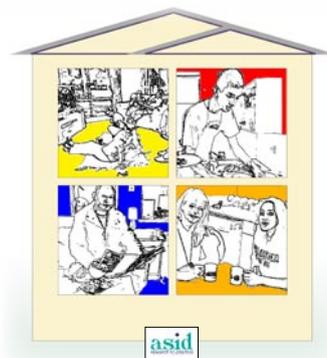


Is there such a thing as a Good Group Home?

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*Report on workshop by Professor Chris Bigby
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This workshop about “what makes a good group home” provided both information and the opportunity for discussion about research that is helping to quantify what is involved in providing quality services for people with disabilities. Professor Bigby’s focus is on the quality of life outcomes for people in group homes, and how this correlates with the quality of the service provided, especially the level of engagement and use of active support principles. Much of this information is applicable and transferable to day services for people with intellectual disability. Workshop attendees were given access to useful resources including research articles, videos and online training packages.

There are approximately 17,000 people living in group homes, most of whom have an intellectual disability. The roll-out of the NDIS across Australia will put greater pressure on service providers to demonstrate that they are providing quality services.

Professor Bigby has found that two factors reliably predict quality of life outcomes for people in group homes: firstly, peoples’ levels of adaptive behaviour and secondly, staff practice. Even in relatively good group homes the rate of engagement is consistently lower for people with more severe disability – on average these people spend 63% of the time doing nothing, while people with less severe disability spend 32% of the time doing nothing. The picture is bleak for people with little or no speech – only 6% of those people had communication strategies/aids that appeared to be effective. Research indicates that even the relatively good group homes score poorly on interpersonal relationships and personal development.

We know that person-centred active support correlates with increases in people’s engagement and skill development, and results in more choice and control, and less challenging behaviours (Mansell & Beadle-Brown, 2012). These all lead to better outcomes across the quality of life domains. Professor

Bigby’s research suggests that it is quite difficult to establish and maintain consistent implementation of active support practices. She outlines five components that determine how well this happens, the two most important being staff and management practices, and a culture that is coherent, enabling, motivating and respectful. Consistent implementation of active support does not need to cost more, rather the available resources need to be used more efficiently.

“Culture” in services for people with intellectual disability is something that is often discussed but not always well understood. Professor Bigby’s research has broken “culture” into a range of elements that help to quantify whether the overarching values of an organization are being reflected in what actually happens. A PhD student is currently working on the “Development of Group Home Culture Scale”, which will measure the factors associated with better outcomes and provide a useful diagnostic tool and framework for facilitating positive changes. There are currently a number of “buzz-words” that are well-known and frequently used by managers and staff (eg. “active support”, “person-centred”, “community participation”, “choice and control”), but do staff really know what these things look like as concrete realities? For example, “community participation” is not just taking a group of people to a park or café, unless they are having real interactions with people in those situations. This is where front-line practice leadership is important. Regular one to one supervision, coaching and mentoring of staff, a strong focus in team meetings on increasing engagement and on furthering quality of life outcomes are all important in the explicit translation of organisational values into staff practice. These values also need to be reflected in broader organisational characteristics and processes. For example, staff and managers are often required to complete mandatory paperwork, which is not clearly tied to improving the engage-

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ment of clients. This means that staff often have reduced direct engagement time, and managers are tied to their desk rather than spending time with staff, coaching them to provide good support.

Work done by Professor Bigby and others in the field suggest that many elements of organisational structure and staff practice need to come together to create better outcomes for people with disabilities, and that good practice is quite a fragile thing and can fall apart quite quickly. We know that staff train-

ing in person-centred active support is important, but that training alone achieves very little change. Capacity building of such organisations and services is a long-term proposition. ●

Reference:

Mansell, J., & Beadle-Brown, J. (2012). *Active support: Enabling and empowering people with intellectual disabilities*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers