



Illawarra Forum Inc

PO Box 53 Jamberoo NSW 2533

Tel 02 4236 1333 www.illawarraforum.org.au

The regional peak organisation for community services in Shellharbour, Kiama, Shoalhaven, Wingecarribee and Wollongong Local Government Areas, incorporating the Community Management Support Unit, & the SE Regional Tenant Resource Service.

Survey Why do we have interagencies?

On the subject of interagencies community workers have a vast range of responses ranging from dissatisfaction or 'burn-out' to optimistic expectations of collective lobbying.

In May 2005 the Illawarra Forum Inc circulated an email survey¹ 'Why do we have interagencies?'. It was sent to the 'illawarra newsgroup' (a yahoo group of 80 approx. members). Twenty seven people responded.² Twenty respondents stated that they were employed by a community organisation; four by a government department; and three by local government.

The survey questions were:

1. Why do you go to interagency meetings?
2. What stops you going to interagency meetings?
3. In your experience why do interagencies fail to be useful and effective?
4. Should interagencies be used for advocacy and lobbying?
5. If you answered Yes to the previous question, why should interagencies be used for advocacy and lobbying? And how should interagencies be used for advocacy and lobbying?
6. What can we do to make interagencies useful and effective?

Comments

Respondents were unanimous in expecting that interagencies should have a role in advocacy and lobbying. Ideas for how interagencies could be made more effective included:

- Having a designated (paid) worker to resource or coordinate the interagency
- Organising planning and evaluation activities to identify goals and purpose
- Providing opportunities for leadership and for mentoring
- Using Yahoo groups
- Having fewer interagencies generally.

We note that respondents did not explore these issues:

- If interagencies are led and resourced by a government agency is their role in advocacy and lobbying compromised?
- Interagencies could save resources by using electronic groups such as in the new Human Services Network www.hsnet.nsw.gov.au to publish agendas, minutes, documents and to use an online discussion forum.

¹ The Illawarra Forum Inc used a free user-friendly version of SurveyMonkey.

² Twenty people responded within a day which demonstrates the efficacy of email communication.

To **question 1** (multiple answer) *Why do you go to interagency meetings?*

- Almost 89% responded 'to meet other workers in the community sector'.
- 96% responded 'for information sharing'
- 85% responded 'to share experience and expertise'
- 59% responded 'to get peer support'
- Under 'Other' 12 respondents mostly focussed on collective action, collaborative projects and lobbying.

To **question 2** (open ended) *What stops you going to interagency meetings?*

most responses were:

- Lack of time (cited by 18 people).
- Interagency meetings not being useful.

To **question 3** (multiple answer) *In your experience why do interagencies fail to be useful and effective?*

- 63% responded 'because of a lack of direction'
- 44% responded 'because of a lack of resources for convening meetings, (eg telephone calls, mailing out minutes, up to date contact lists)'
- 52% responded 'because of a lack of time to follow up business between meetings'
- 66% responded 'because of irregular attendance by members'.
- Under 'Other' all 27 respondents contributed these issues:
 - Ineffective chairing; repetitive agendas; the same people doing the work each month; meetings dominated by a few; lack of leadership; lack of commitment; lack of defined goals; lack of continuity in members attending meetings.
- Other points of view were:
 - "I find the Interagency works best as an information sharing group. If it tries to be more than that it can be difficult because it is not a cohesive group and different people attend each time."
 - "I believe interagencies wax and wane depending on what is happening in the sector. They are often at their strongest when the participants are needing to "fight" some change."

To **question 5** (open ended) *If you answered Yes to the previous question, why should interagencies be used for advocacy and lobbying? And how should interagencies be used for advocacy and lobbying?* 25 respondents gave detailed answers, all of which supported the advocacy/lobbying role of interagencies.

In summary the respondents said that interagencies

- are representative ie give the sector a voice on common issues
- demonstrate wide support from the sector and are thus perceived to be authentic and legitimate
- use collective experience and expertise
- can identify gaps, issues and common problems
- can comment on key issues
- protect and support a single agency in cases of controversy
- advocate in cases when a single agency cannot
- advocate to funding bodies and/or politicians
- give input on policy issues to government
- articulate a collective voice that has more power than the individual.
 - "Because collective action requires confidence in the integrity and commitment of others, and interagencies provide sufficient "history" for independent workers/organisations to gain such confidence in each other, interagencies are best placed to provide a platform for collective advocacy and lobbying. In an environment of censure and anxiety about security of funding for organisations that criticise government policy, interagencies may be the only avenue for government funded organisations to exert pressure on government. How? Interagencies need to develop a strong sense of cohesion, or at least identify the

areas where cohesion between members is achievable, identify some achievable lobbying/advocacy strategies (that meet the goals and philosophies of member organisations), and develop a plan or timeline to facilitate those strategies. It is best if the work involved can be completed at the interagency meetings. However, yahoo group type facilities may assist interagencies to 'get the work done'."

To **question 6** (open ended) *What can we do to make interagencies useful and effective?* the 23 responses are listed verbatim.

1. Employ a worker to coordinate; maybe have as working lunches.
2. Give interagency a purpose. Ensure members know what they can hope to get out of interagency. Ensure interagency is an environment where workers can learn and be supported.
3. Reduce the number, consolidate. Have clear objectives/terms of reference
Have clearly defined roles to manage the business
4. Interagencies should be tools for communication. Many smaller organisations and community groups may often feel "out of the loop" and those of us in larger organisations may forget they are not as well informed about issues, forums and meetings as they are. The interagency should be an opportunity to keep them in the loop. It may also work as a support mechanism, so that workers in small organisations should be given access to other workers for support, advice or mentoring.
5. Be open minded to everyone's differences and ways of working, and accept that not everyone can turn up to all meetings. When interagencies work on a shared project everyone gains something. Let the media know about them. Understand that interagencies undergo group patterns of "forming, storming, etc.... Ask each interagency to report on their main issues on a regular (6 monthly?) basis, then pass this information on to peak bodies.
6. Provide secretariat support promote generic guidelines for 'keeping on track'
Encourage organisations to factor time for staff to attend as they are in fact a very cost and time effective way of getting information
7. Have less interagencies so more people attend. And there is reduced repetition. Be more structured
8. Identify some goals Promote interagencies as places for action as well as discussion Investigate ways to incorporate new technologies into meetings. eg use a laptop at the meeting to write the letters; use yahoo group type facilities to continue the discussion/work and gain additional input/support for ideas and actions. Promote more positive meetings-"what can we do" rather "than woe is me" or "the system is stuffed"
9. The Forum could facilitate a planning session to clarify direction, whether it be a decision to be an info share network or more than that.
10. Instigate a planning day and a membership drive. If the interagency has clear direction, objectives and goals, agencies are more likely to participate since they are more likely to see the interagency as an action based working group and not a talk fest.
11. Reduce the number of similar interagencies, find resources for interagency operations and activities, have agendas and planning processes and monitor actions against etc.
12. Be a little more structured, they have a have purpose to meet not just a sociable get together chat. Perhaps goal setting at the beginning of each year to get the group focused.
13. Personally invite people, especially new workers. Make sure minutes can go to people that don't have the time to attend if they need them. Make sure everybody has a chance to participate.
14. Ensure the members are informed of issues and have opportunities to participate. Ensure that the convening and administrative tasks are covered by an 'independent' group and aim to genuinely facilitate.

15. Diverse representation Participation and commitment from middle managers
Achieve outcomes One agency to take role of leadership and co ordination
Provide professional development opportunities for members
16. While workers attend interagency and share their information, interagency will always be useful, however, the effectiveness comes from having a good understanding of what the interagency's role is and constantly maintaining that role.
17. By also providing a learning format, refresh those that have been in the business for an extensive period, new ideas and effective methods of change etc. Invite prominent guest speakers to attend the meetings. Organise with in the group dynamics as to the availability of members to provide a supportive role or mentorship. Become more proactive in approaching the need for change and development within the community.
18. Have participants attend regularly, be able to access key government players who can listen to the views of others etc. Government bodies to take note of the issues as these are ongoing issues that have not been properly addressed and keep dragging on.
19. Have people in attendance who are able to commit to attending all meetings, have set agendas that are negotiated prior to the meetings. Have clear goals etc
20. Co-ordination needs to be more streamlined and consistent; Less focus on information sharing, getting to know each other, etc because this should/could happen in other ways eg agency visits, emails, flyers, newsletters, etc; Perhaps having a clear philosophy / guidelines around what these meetings are for so people don't come with additional agendas
21. Make sure everyone is aware of meeting times and what the interagency is. People new to the community sector may not understand what it is all about. Make sure it is not just an "in" group. Advertise it in the paper and make sure minutes are distributed and contact lists are up to date.
22. Have people who are interested, motivated and committed to working in the sector. Having people who are up to date with curent issues and cn provide information and educate others in being proactive and making a difference as a group.
23. Strengthen them by giving them access to resources like funding and staff.