

Child & Family Workforce Skills Strategy – Working group for workforce position descriptions

Background

The health care and social assistance sector has more than doubled in size over the past 20 years, and now employs more than 2 million people. Employment in the sector is projected to grow by 15.8 per cent over the next five years.¹ However, there is a lack of guidance in the literature about the skillset that workers require.

Child and family agencies across NSW were asked to provide their position descriptions and other documents relating to the recruitment and onboarding for roles working with children, young people, and families. The range of documents received spanned urban and regional settings and included Aboriginal organisations. The variation of position descriptions and requirements across organisations providing similar services was noted. There is also significant variation between the process and protocols for orienting new workers. However, there was a common set of skills required for most roles.

Common elements in position descriptions across government and non-governmental agencies

NSW organisations delivering the PSP, ITC and TEI programs were invited to submit their position descriptions and recruitment criteria, to identify areas of commonality and difference. Materials were received from NSW Government and 12 non-governmental organisations (of which one is an Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisation).

Sector focus groups were organised with agency representatives for an in-depth exploration of their current and future workforce training requirements. Ten consultations with mainstream organisations were held between September and October 2022, with 65 people registering their interest. Consultations were held with Aboriginal organisations, and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse organisations.

These common skills and capabilities identified across workforce consultations and recent evidence reviews emphasised the need for practitioners with the ability to apply therapeutic approaches when working with children and families. Using systemic family therapy approaches, including supporting families to disrupt negative behavioural patterns and encourage prosocial behaviours. Another valuable practice skill identified in the evidence review is helping parents to identify their strengths and develop new strategies of managing challenging situations.^{2 3}

Key working group action areas:

- Develop a sector-wide framework for professional skills and competencies.
- Adopt standard role definitions and core competencies for key roles and positions across the sector.
- Use the evidence review to articulate the practice skills considered most relevant to various roles.
- Adopt a consistent range of capabilities to for inclusion in position descriptions across member organisations.
- Prepare standardised position descriptions for common roles, that reflect core tasks and responsibilities.
- Identify personal attributes needed for roles such as: active listening, empathy, respectful communications, and cultural competence.
- Provide pathways for people from Aboriginal or culturally diverse backgrounds to enter the workforce and be supported to gain professional qualifications.
- Facilitate consistent recruitment practices across agencies for a more fair and open process.

Common skills and capabilities

The most commonly identified skills required in position descriptions and sector consultations were:

- active listening and respectful communication skills, with colleagues and families
- relationship-building and negotiation in order to build rapport with parents and their incentive to strengthen their relationship with their children
- assessment and management of child safety and risk
- case documentation and report writing.⁴

The sector consultations found that proficiency in challenging conversations was rated as the most necessary skill (n=22) as well as a skill in which more training was needed (n=11). Overall, the most significant gaps in knowledge and skills were identified as working with culturally diverse groups, in terms of awareness of family relationships within diverse cultural contexts (n=29) and cultural awareness around identity, language and religion (n=18). Staff also needed an understanding of the legal, policy and regulatory environment pertaining to practice.

The adoption of common position descriptions for core roles across Permanency Support Planning (PSP), Targeted Early Intervention (TEI), and Intensive Therapeutic Care (ITC) programs roles could streamline and provide consistency for workforce planning as well as promote greater awareness of vacancies. The sector consultations raised that there is already significant workforce mobility across agencies and roles. A shared approach to recruitment may facilitate job mobility opportunities, either at level or in higher rank positions that aligns with career goals and business needs.

The initial onboarding period can provide a valuable opportunity to impart the values of the organisation and prepare new recruits for their role, including advising staff about the support programs available, and opportunities for professional development to equip them for practice. A well-defined induction program can position agencies to stand out in the market and provide an opportunity for assessing the capabilities of new staff, identifying their professional development needs, and establishing a personalised plan for their progression. This may be one of the strategies agencies can offer to attract and retain their workforce.

Overall, workforce consultation participants stressed that attempts to upskill staff through offering training opportunities were challenging in the child and family sector where workers carry high caseloads, have many competing priorities and limited time to perform all demands of the job. Participants suggested that organisations should implement strategies to ensure staff have the capacity to attend and meaningfully engage in training, such as employing relief staff and reducing workloads.

Working Group Members

Lead:

- FAMS

Working Group Members:

- DCJ
- ACWA
- Peaks
- NGOs
- Australian Services Union (ASU)

The process of upskilling workers across the tiers of tertiary, secondary and primary services is complex. It requires thinking and planning about practitioner roles, as well as what is required from the tertiary and vocational education sector, to meet workforce demand and prepare workers for child and family roles across the three tiers of the service system.⁵

“Admin and the organisation skills, which if you're in an industry that is crisis-driven, time management is a really massive skill and organisation skills are [important] and it's actually not something that is taught very often in out-of-home care.”

Child & Family Services Manager, sector focus group.

Previous experience most sought by employers

- in the child and family sector, and/or disability sector
- with families from culturally diverse backgrounds
- using case management with families with complex issues
- team leadership.

Position titles and responsibilities

A number of structural issues need to be addressed before an efficient and effective workforce skills training solution can be developed. There is considerable variation across sector job descriptions, competencies and entry level qualifications, even within providers using the same contracted service model.

To inform the NSW Child & Family Workforce Skills Strategy, a review of position statements, job roles, minimum qualifications and the skills/competencies required was undertaken across eight agencies. Amongst these, there are a diversity of position titles and differences in minimum qualifications. The review also found a lack of consistency and clarity in “relevance or equivalence” — i.e., how different courses of study and professional experience are compared. It was noted that DCJ provides statements of equivalence, however, these are not always applicable, or adopted, by the private sector. This has the effect of creating a dual system for NSW child protection services, across government and non-government agencies.

The lack of alignment between government and non-government approaches to workforce recruitment poses a structural barrier to an integrated workforce strategy. An integrated and tiered training model is recommended that incorporates different levels of child protection training as matched to the essential criteria/competencies for different job functions and minimum entry qualifications.

Exceptions can be made for employees from particular backgrounds, such as Aboriginal, culturally diverse or with relevant experience, provided that on-the-job training and supervision is provided to support skill and competency development.

Feedback from Child & Family Services focus groups:

“We have to have people skilled to understand why people are using substances, which is kind of broader than having a trauma-informed lens. We need people with trauma-specific skills to help families develop alternative coping mechanisms and skills.”

“How to have difficult conversations [is most important] cause our work is around difficult conversations every day and going back to the qualifications and new grads and all of those types of things, even younger staff, without as much life experience, I think it's so difficult for them to feel uncomfortable in conversation...And I think part of that is acknowledging how uncomfortable that feels and how to do it in a really clear and kind way, but also having some emotional intelligence around how that's delivered.”

Recommendations

- Ensure cross-sector consistency across position titles and responsibilities within the whole of the NSW child protection sector.
- Develop a tiered and integrated training model.
- Design an accredited pathway for entry into the child protection sector.
- Identify the skills and capabilities required for specific roles.
- Create a framework for support workers to obtain the necessary professional skills and competencies.
- Promote standards in post-qualifying and on-the-job training and support.
- Create pathways for post-graduate qualification.

For more information

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