Australian Government

Strengths-based approaches to service delivery
Australian Social Inclusion Board

In 2010, the Australian Social Inclusion Board (the Board) conducted research into entrenched disadvantage, and ways in which cycles of disadvantage could be broken. A report provided to Government in early 2011, *Breaking Cycles of Disadvantage,* outlined a number of key findings and recommendations, including:

The way you treat people matters

1   **The importance of the relationship between professional service delivery staff and clients needs to be recognised and actively supported, and service systems should be strengths-based.**

2   **The Australian Government should undertake a program to improve the culture of service delivery to be more people-centred and respectful, and should include greater training that addresses human rights, cultural awareness, and mental health literacy.**

3   **Governments should commit to delivering high quality intensive case coordination services for those with complex needs, and ensure that appropriate levels of resources are committed.**

4   **The Centrelink case coordination model should reflect:**

   ▶   **The importance of the continuity of staff-client relationships;**

   ▶   **The importance of hiring skilled staff;**

   ▶   **The benefit of a strengths-based approach; and**

   ▶   **A model which enables case managers to holistically address a client's needs[1].**

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[1] Australian Social Inclusion Board (2010) *Breaking Cycles of Disadvantage* at www.socialinclusion.gov.au

Work to-date
***Community innovation through Collaboration* Budget Measure**
In the recent Budget, a commitment was made by the Government to pilot place-based initiatives in 10 locations around Australia ,to address entrenched disadvantage. Case coordination is being introduced in these ten locations as part of this measure, as well as in 34 other locations around the country over the next four years. The place-based case coordination measure partially addresses Recommendation 3.

Strengths-based approaches
Strengths-based approaches are an organising principle for theories and strategies which focus on the untapped gifts, positive attributes and underdeveloped capabilities of people who have been in some way compromised in their abilities or are seeking help for problems. They are an alternative to problem- or deficit-based approaches, which are characterised by negative labelling, a focus on what is 'wrong' with a person and practitioner-driven interventions. Strengths-based approaches actively find, direct and amplify a client's capabilities and potential for positive functioning.

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The approach taken is directly related to the subsequent expectations and attitudes formed by both the client and service providers. For example, accentuating the negative attributes or issues of clients creates pessimistic and lowered expectations and predictions about the outcomes that clients can achieve[2]. There are a number of different strengths-based models, but generally they follow similar principles. Principles of strengths-based approaches include:

▶ An empowering orientation, which builds on a client's strengths and abilities to do things for themselves;

▶ Cultural and diversity competence;

▶ A relationship-based approach which aims to build and sustain supportive relationships between program staff and clients;

▶ A family-centred approach, focusing on the whole family where appropriate and not just on an individual in isolation, and encouraging strong relationships within families;

▶ Community orientation, including alertness to a community's issues and its history, and knowledge of community-based providers;

▶ Goal orientation, to help clients and providers identify and progress both immediate and long-term goals; and

▶ Individualised services[3].

Strengths-based service delivery often starts with an assessment process to prompt the client and program staff to identify capabilities and assets which the client can mobilise.

The next step is goal identification, and the development of a flexible and tailored plan to achieve these goals. Program staff generally need to use an assessment process which is personal and individualised, rather than one which simply ticks boxes. This allows the client to tell their own stories, which in turn reveal their assets and strengths.

Staff should also focus on promoting the use of informal helping networks in the community as well as formal services.

Some guidelines for assessment suggest that a strengths-based assessor should:

▶ Give pre-eminence to the client's understanding of the facts;

▶ Believe the client;

▶ Explore the client's aspirations and discover what they want;

▶ Move the assessment towards personal and environmental strengths rather than obstacles;

▶ Use multidimensional assessment processes;

▶ Work to discover the uniqueness of the client;

▶ Use language the client can understand;

▶ Make the assessment a joint activity between the client and assessor;

▶ Reach a mutual agreement about the assessment;

▶ Avoid blaming;

▶ Avoid cause-and-effect thinking; and

▶ Assess rather than diagnose, as diagnosis is based on pathologising factors[4].

These principles may assist service delivery agencies and organisations to focus their services to enhance the capabilities of vulnerable clients.

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[2] Nissen, L (2006) Bringing Strength-Based Philosophy to Life in Juvenile Justice in *Reclaiming Children and Youth* vol 15, no 1
[3] Green, BL, McAllister, CL and Tarte, JM (2004) The Strengths Based Practices Inventory in *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*

[4] Cowger, C (1994) Assessing Client Strengths: Clinical Assessment for Client Empowerment in *Social Work* vol 39, Issue 3