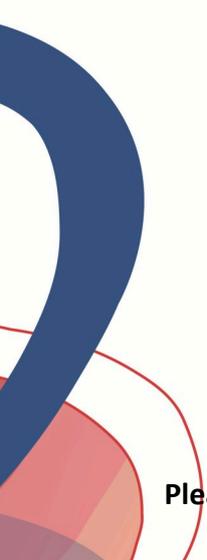


Week 5: Consumer Representation at the Network





Consumer Representation at the Network

Objective:

To explore and learn about the Consumer representation Program and how to nominate for committees. To identify how lived experience can be of value on a committee.

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References and Further Reading:

<https://www.actmhcn.org.au/bulletins/>

<https://chf.org.au/sites/default/files/role-of-reps-health-decision-making-2015.pdf>

Consumer Representative Program (CRP)

What is it?

The Consumer Representative Program (CRP) is the foundation activity of the Network in undertaking systemic advocacy.

The CRP is a volunteer program. Consumers provide their expertise in a range of government and community settings to improve Mental Health services and programs throughout the ACT on a voluntary basis.

CRP Policies

The Network has specific policies covering the CRP. These policies are intended to ensure that the CRP is well organised.

Commitment to Quality

The Network is committed to responsive, informed and accountable consumer engagement.

To achieve this goal, the CRP:

- Identifies people with appropriate skills and experience, of various ages and diverse backgrounds
- Matches the right person to the position
- Provides them with ongoing high quality training
- Provides them with ongoing support

You go into these roles with the agenda that you're talking on the behalf of the whole mental health community... what we're doing is trying to make things better for everyone in our community.



- Monitors the effectiveness of its activities for all stakeholders
- Is reliable, responsive and flexible

Accountability

Accountability is an important part of representative work. Accountability to consumers is a key strength of consumer representation on any committee, and is one of the characteristics that makes consumer input so valuable to committees.

For the Network's Consumer Representatives, accountability includes:

- Reporting back to the Network using the feedback process
- Consulting with other consumers
- Loyalty to the convictions and views of other consumers.

This may mean that Consumer Representatives are not always free to present their personal views, however this is also a safeguard for individual representatives.



Privacy and Confidentiality

The Network is committed to protecting the privacy of its members and has a separate policy on privacy and confidentiality which for the CRP requires all information supplied by applicants for Consumer Representative positions to be stored in a locked cabinet.

Any information (written, verbal or other form) obtained during the performance of Consumer Representative duties, including at Consumer Representative Forums, must remain confidential. This includes all information about members, families, employees and other stakeholders, as well as any other information otherwise marked or known to be confidential.

Consumer Representatives must sign confidentiality agreements with both ACT Health and the Network.

For more information, see
CRP Confidentiality Form

Grievances and Complaints

Effective consumer representation is very important to the Network. Therefore, the Network is committed to ensuring its representatives are adequately supported in their role/s.

Consumer Representatives are encouraged to speak with the Network if they feel they are not receiving adequate advice or support, either from the committee or from the Network itself. The Network's Grievance Policy sets out procedures to resolve Consumer Representatives' concerns with the Network if these cannot be resolved directly.

For more information, the Network has specific policies covering the CRP, e.g.:

- CRP Recruitment Policy*
- CRP Orientation Policy*
- CRP Reimbursement Policy*
- CRP Mentoring Policy*

Reimbursement

Consumer Representatives are reimbursed for their reasonable out-of-pocket expenses in accordance with Network and relevant external policy, such as ACT Health's Reimbursement Policy and Procedures for Consumer Representatives.

Training

The Network will promote appropriate training and provide flexible supports to Consumer Representatives on mental health related committees so that they can effectively represent the views of consumers.

- The Network provides compulsory training in consumer representation through the Self-Advocacy and Consumer Representation training and ongoing CRP Masterclasses.
- Consumer Representatives are encouraged to participate in a Consumer Representation workshop every few years to enhance, refresh and share their skills.
- The Network will inform Consumer Representatives about additional training and information opportunities, such as conferences and public information sessions, in accordance with the Opportunities Policy.

Becoming a Consumer Rep—the Process

What is the Process?

Step 1—Request for a Consumer Representative

When the Network receives a request, we work with the requesting organisation to ensure that all available information about the position has been received to assist a Consumer Representative to transition into the role smoothly. e.g.

- Terms of Reference for the Committee
- Frequency of meetings, and time and date of first meeting
- any specific skills or and expertise required by the consumer representative



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Step 2—Position is advertised

The position is then advertised through an e-Bulletin distributed via email to give trained representatives the opportunity to nominate for the position. The recruitment round remains open for a minimum of two weeks to allow maximum opportunity for interested individuals to apply. The Network may directly appoint a consumer representative to an opportunity as required.

Applications from eligible consumers are then referred to the Consumer Representative Program (CRP) Steering Committee for discussion and selection endorsement.

Step 3—CRP Steering Committee meets for endorsement

All nominations are considered by the **Consumer Representative Program Steering Committee** which is made up of a member of the Board, the CEO, a consumer representative and the CRP Coordinator. Once endorsed by the **Steering Committee**, the Network provides formal notification of a Consumer Representative's placement to the Consumer Representative and the requesting organisation.

Step 4—Consumer Representative is informed, and assigned a mentor

The Consumer Representative receives an appointment letter, as well as a pack welcoming them to the position which includes the required confidentiality and reimbursement forms, Terms of Reference for the committee as well as the names and contact details of relevant parties to the position, such as the committee secretariat.

Every first-time representative is provided with a mentor. Your mentor will be assigned to you at the time of your appointment for a minimum time of three meetings.

Tip:

Don't lose heart if you are not successful at your first attempt – sometimes positions require certain skills that other members may have that you don't, and vice versa.

Appointments

All appointments are made for a **period of two years**, unless the appointment is for a committee that has a specific lifetime (i.e., only meets for the year, focussed on specific policy, members are appointed to the committee for a period longer than two years).

A person may be appointed as a Consumer Representative on a **maximum of six (6) standard weight committees** (or equivalent) at any one time, except:

- a consumer representative who is commencing representative duties for the first time can only hold one position until their mentoring period is complete
- a consumer representative may be appointed to one additional committee if exceptional circumstances exist.

A committee that is scheduled to meet on **one occasion each month is considered a 'standard' position** and is therefore considered to be of standard weight with respect to workload.

Some committees meet more or less frequently than a standard committee and these positions therefore have a different workload. For example, a committee that meets:

- **Weekly** is equivalent to four (4) standard committees
- **Fortnightly** is equivalent to two (2) standard committees
- **Bi-monthly** is equivalent to half (0.5) of a standard committee
- **Quarterly** is equivalent to one third (0.3) of a standard committee

Members are expected to consider their capacity to manage their workload when deciding whether or not to nominate for a particular position.

Eligibility to be a Consumer Representative

A Consumer Representative must:

- Be a *current primary member* of the Network, **AND**
- Have completed the *Network's Self-Advocacy and Consumer Representation Training*, **OR**
- Have provided documentation that they have undertaken *equivalent training* or have substantial relevant experience, including, but not limited to, the Health Care Consumers Association training. This will be considered by the CEO and coordination team who will determine whether the training/experience is appropriate.

To **stay eligible** as a consumer representative you must attend and provide feedback for your committee meetings, attend CRP Forums, and participate in CRP Masterclasses.



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Your First Appointment

The CRP Coordinator will advise you by telephone and email advising you that you have been appointed, and this will be followed up by a formal letter from the CEO. The letter will include a pack with numerous forms that you will be required to sign, and these differ depending on what type of Committee you have been appointed to.

Pre-meeting with Chair

All new representatives should have the opportunity to meet with the Chair prior to the first meeting. This 'meet and greet' can occur either right before the meeting, or on a separate occasion. Your mentor can accompany you for this meeting if you prefer.

Mentor Program

The Network has a Mentor Program in place. A mentor is an experienced consumer representative with more than one years' experience.

Every first-time representative is provided with a mentor. Your mentor will be assigned to you at the time of your appointment for a minimum time of three meetings.

If there is an organisational representative (that is, a member of the network staff) that sits on the Committee you have been appointed, then they will be your mentor.

The mentor will help you prepare for your meetings, support you during them and debrief with you afterwards.

When you are first starting out as a rep, a mentor can really help you organize your thoughts and plan what and how you are going to raise issues in meetings. They can also prompt you in the meeting if you aren't quite sure when to speak up.



A mentor is someone who sees more talent and ability within you, than you see in yourself, and helps bring it out of you.”

- Bob Proctor

Where a member is appointed as a Consumer Representative after a long break, then they will be provided the opportunity to have a mentor.

Your First Meeting and Introducing Yourself

Introducing yourself to the Committee members can be a daunting task. It is recommended that you write a short introduction for yourself that you can read if you become anxious. The following introduction is an example:



“Hi, my name is [first name, last name] and I am a consumer representative appointed by the ACT Mental Health Consumer Network to attend this meeting.”

Tips:

Introductions are

- Simple
- Succinct
- Professional

Committees are NOT counselling sessions.

Please note you are not representing the ACT Mental Health Consumer Network. You are appointed by the Network to represent other consumers with lived mental health experience.

A tip to help remember other people’s names is to draw a table with you, the Chair and anyone else you know on it, and then fill it in as people go around the table introducing themselves. If the Committee/Working Group has a stable attendance, people may not introduce themselves at every meeting so take advantage of your first meeting. Never be afraid to ask a new person what their name is and who they are representing.

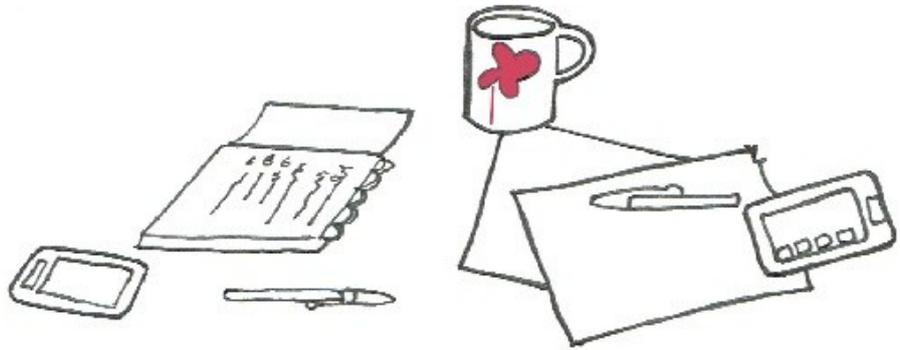
Remember you are an expert as a result of your lived experience.

Feedback and Reporting

On the Committee:

Your role on the Committee is to bring the lived mental illness expertise to the committee in relation to policy and program development.

Of most importance is that you provide comment on behalf of Consumers, and not your own private thoughts and beliefs. For example, there may be discussion about a new policy that whilst you are against it, will benefit majority of consumers.



To the Network:

Your feedback to the Network is essential as without it knowledge regarding what is happening in your Committee is lost.

Feedback can be provided to the CRP Coordinator in a variety of ways including **handwritten, electronic or verbal feedback** mechanisms. For example, your feedback can be completed on the **CRP Feedback Form**, or as an **email** covering the information asked on the form. Or by telephoning the Coordinator and discussing the committee.

Feedback is then provided to other Consumer Representatives at the **CRP Forum** to help inform their representative work, as well as being used to inform the Network's policy program.

For more information about see:
CRP feedback form

Tip:

One week after the meeting, the CRP Coordinator will send you an email/letter reminding you to complete a Feedback Form and return it to the Network.

Consumer Representation Skills

Reading

- Meeting papers
- Prioritising
- Committee language

Writing

- Note taking
- Reporting/Feedback

Communication

- Be succinct
- Speaking in meetings
- Listening
- Reflection
- Questioning
- Networking
- Providing feedback
- Negotiation

Representative of Collective Views

- Separate individual from collective view—Be capable of reflecting the viewpoints and concerns of consumers or carers
- Represent views you may not agree with
- Ability to work as part of a team and also maintain good working relationships (e.g. attend CRP Forums and ongoing training)
- Understanding of the diversity of the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of our community, and the impact this has on consumers and their families' experiences of mental illness.

Personal skills

- Self-Awareness of limitations and asking for help when necessary
- Know why you are a rep
- Deal with emotions
- Patience
- Persistence
- Self-care
- Separate fellow committee members from the problem
- Being solution focused



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What other skills can
you think of?!

Tips for Committees

Some things to think about....

Confidentiality

- Why is this important?
- When/how would it apply?
- Who CAN you discuss things with?

Use of Lived Experience:

- How can we use the expertise of lived experience in this setting?
- What is/isn't appropriate?

Responsibilities/expectations:

- To whom/what?



Image courtesy of
Stuart Miles at FreeDigitalPhotos.net

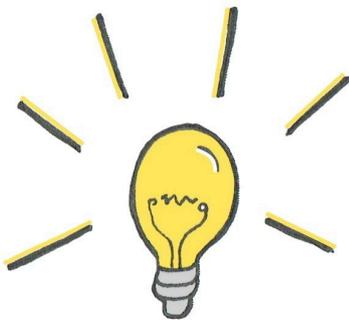
Dos:

Avoid:

Video Notes: Being a Consumer Representative

In this video, consumer representatives discuss what helps them in representation.

Watch to the video take note of strategies and tips you find helpful for participating on committees:



CRP Video: *Being a Consumer Representative*

What people think about Being a Consumer Representative

You've got a responsibility to.... offer the best input, the best support you think you can offer though that committee process.

Doing your pre-reading is really important. Especially in some of the higher professional meetings with Health, is that you need to read all the documentation sent out to you.

"Consumer input isn't just about providing anecdotal evidence – consumer representatives base their positions on the best available research, consultations with consumers and their expert knowledge of community values and preferences."

Christine Walker, CHF
Consumer Representative

I make sure I've read all the paperwork, I'll also do a bit of my own reading around it.

I found out that if I extend understanding, understanding is extended back to me.

What I think:

A consumer representative forum... is a great place for all representatives to come together discuss what they've been doing and even share ideas with each other. It could be the one place where two different areas realise that they're doing the same work. That's really important.

Boundaries When Sharing Your Experience

Recounting the details of what happened can be tough.

- Consider what detail is appropriate for your audience and your purpose.
- Respect your own and others sense of privacy – it's OK to be selective about what you share.
- It's impossible to retract something once it's been said, so only share details you're comfortable having other people know

The 'Traffic Light' method

- **“Red Information”** is the least safe, most private information. Caution and good judgment should be used when sharing your story with others who are not trusted professionals, friends, or family.
- **“Orange Information”** is not as safe as green and should be used only when talking to friends or trusted acquaintances.
- **“Green Information”** is generally safe and can be used when talking to anyone from strangers to close friends or family.



Handling questions:

- You do not owe anyone disclosure. Consider your boundaries around what questions you are answering.
- Prepare ahead of time— what are some phrases that you can keep in your pocket in case you get asked inappropriate or uncomfortable questions?

Photo by [Jim Romero](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Activity: Your Lived Experience

Sharing your personal story can seem like a good way to provide an example of where something has worked or hasn't worked from the consumer perspective, such as a new policy.

If you wish to tell your personal story, remember that it should:

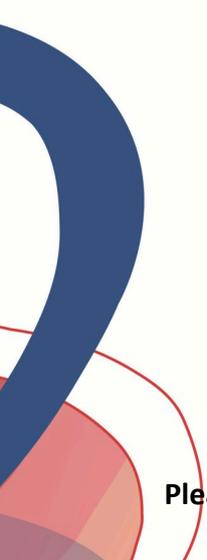
- **Be relevant** (to do with the policy you are meeting about, not one that involves completely different area of expertise).
- **Do no harm** (to yourself or others – both attendees and non-attendees to the meeting).
- **Be brief** (perhaps you can practice telling your story at home to ensure it only includes the relevant, safe parts. Writing down dot points can help you stay on track during the meeting).
- **Increase the knowledge of the Committee** (what you are telling them should be something that they may not already know).



By thinking ahead about which parts of lived experience to share, you are looking after your self-care, as well as ensuring that your story contributes positively to the point you want to make at the committee meeting.

Tip: Consider what aspects of your experience could relate to/demonstrate issues from the list of rights described in the **ACT Charter of Rights** for people who experience Mental Health Issues.

Topic	My Lived Experience
Respect	
Safety	



Topic	Lived Experience
Communication	
Access	
Participation	

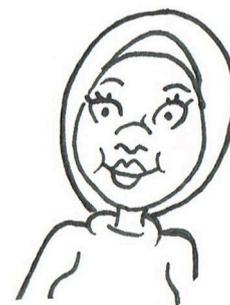
Topic	Lived Experience
Privacy	
Giving Feedback	

When sharing personal experiences consider:

- Is it relevant to the topic being discussed at the meeting?
- Why am I sharing this? What point am I trying to make?
- How can it contribute to the discussion in a positive way?
- Is what I'm sharing my personal story, or am I inadvertently infringing on another person's privacy?
- How can I share this experience in a way that is safe for me and others?

It can be really useful to use your personal experience, but there are some limits to the way that it should be done.

Because you need to sort of think about it in terms of: 'Is this something that is important to consumers?' rather than just 'This my story, and I just want to tell people my story and what it is', because that is a different thing to actually representing consumers generally.



Consumer Representation Program—Give it a go!

Think about what you learned about Committee Skills and how committees work. What are your preferences for the types of committees you are interested in?

What do you want to apply once you start consumer representation on committees?

My preferences for the type of committee I would like to be a representative on (e.g. frequency, level, formality, topics):

Something I want to take away from this module:



