Dr Ken Michael, ACSWA Ambassador for Ageing

2012 Excellence in Care Awards

Visiting Alzheimer's Pakistan

Culture and communication at work
Social innovation grant promotes cultural awareness

The challenges of recruiting and retaining staff in the aged care sector have never been more apparent, and our workforce is becoming more and more diverse.

With the help of some special State Government funding, Uniting Church Homes and Brightwater are working in partnership to embrace and nurture the cultural diversity of their organisations.

Brightwater Care Group CEO Dr Penny Flett said the organisations were the grateful recipients of a Social Innovations Grant and have been busy working together on a Culture, Communications and Relationships at Work training program.

“Our most recent concern has been about how to best support our already amazing staff, given that among the 2,000 of them, there are more than 60 ethnic backgrounds – only 11 with English as their first language,” Dr Flett said.

“On completion of this project, the training materials, strategies and tools will be made available for all in the aged, disability and community service sectors.”

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Brightwater General Manager Laurie Burns said two to three years ago, at the height of the resources boom, labour shortages ravaged the aged care and disability sectors.

“As a result, organisations increasingly turned to overseas workers; including recent migrants and refugees, to fill what was an increasing number of vacancies in our facilities and services,” Mr Burns said.

“There have always been challenges with having a culturally diverse workforce and we haven’t necessarily addressed them well in the past, however during the resources boom an increased number of problems were experienced and it raised new issues that we weren’t familiar with.

“Although there are many benefits from having a diverse cultural workforce; at industry forums, it was clear that many of the issues that were being experienced were around communication, relationships and the literacy levels of workers.”

These difficulties have the potential to undermine the quality of care and lead to negative impacts such as misunderstandings, increased stress levels, staff conflicts and poor morale.

The grand-funded project will include the development of a Resource Kit including a 12 x 1.5 hour set of training modules targeted at two levels: support workers and supervisors/managers.
The aims are to increase cross cultural communication skills, increase skills in managing relationships between workers, and between workers and supervisors, when cross-cultural issues arise and reduce impediments to communication posed by language and literacy deficiencies.

The Resource Kit will also include references to existing training and support resources and recommendations for practices that will better enable organisations to support a culturally diverse workforce.

Project work has commenced with the formation of a Reference Group with representatives from organisations that have a wide influence in the aged, disability and community sector.

Other tasks have included a literature review, survey, interviews, focus groups, and the development of a website to store results.

The results of these initial investigations will inform the content and provide real scenarios for the training program.

The training will be delivered over six months to approximately 120 support staff and 60 supervisors/managers at three pilot sites.

Mr Burns said the investigations have provided a strong foundation for the project and revealed a high level of engagement and interest amongst executive and staff.

“We expected about 200 responses to our survey but we had nearly 600 returned,” he said.

“This clearly indicates that people see this as relevant to them personally and reinforces there is a need to be addressed in this area.

“There has been a high level of interest and support from many areas from other organisations within our sector and also from other sectors, which reinforces that we are all facing the same challenges related to a culturally diverse work force”

The Social Innovation Grant Program is being managed by the Department for Communities on behalf of the Government of Western Australia.

The Culture, Communications and Relationships at Work training program was successful in the first round of funding, and the grant will continue to October 2013.