

Papers - Concerns For Service Providers:

When Assisting Transgender Clients

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Service providers coming in contact with transgender clients can feel that they are floundering in an unknown area, or worry that they lack the knowledge to deal sensitively or appropriately with transgender clients. They may feel that they do not know which questions are appropriate, which language is appropriate, and whether or not there is generally used language that may offend transgender clients. They may worry about their lack of knowledge and have no idea of where to go or who to ask in dealing with transgender clients.

Lack of general / community knowledge of gender issues. Lack of other service providers who can provide help / information in dealing with gender issues.

Gender issues are not widely discussed within Australia. Service providers coming in contact with transgender clients can feel that they are floundering in an unknown area, or worry that they lack the knowledge to deal sensitively or appropriately with transgender clients. They may feel that they do not know which questions are appropriate, which language is appropriate, and whether or not there is generally used language that may offend transgender clients. They may worry about their lack of knowledge and have no idea of where to go or who to ask in dealing with transgender clients.

There is a notable lack of services who can provide help / information to other service providers in dealing with clients with gender issues. The Gender Centre is attempting to network with a wider variety of health and welfare services throughout Australia. The Gender Centre staff are more than willing to discuss issues in dealing with transgender clients with other service providers should they require any assistance or information.

Dealing with special issues within a "Bureaucracy" and attendant difficulties.

There can be special issues involved in dealing with transgender clients, and these issues can challenge workers' own perceptions of sex and gender. Bureaucracies are not set up to deal well with issues that are not obvious; they tend to work with cultural norms that are generally taken for granted. It can be difficult for service providers to work with clients who do not fit into "obvious" categories. Even the most basic forms demand that the client fit into the standard cultural definitions of "male" and "female".

Issues of "special expectations" and "special treatment".

Because there can be special issues involved in dealing with transgender clients, workers may have to deal with other clients / staff members' perceptions that these clients are receiving "special treatment". It can be necessary for agencies to think quite hard about where and how transgender clients "fit in" and to have to put quite a lot of thought into accommodating this client group. This had been an issue for many marginalised groups, and can create unnecessary resentments and misunderstandings in the workplace.

Another issue is that marginalised groups who experience discrimination regularly may expect to be treated with a great deal of sensitivity or may take offence very easily at language or procedures that workers take for granted. This is understandable, but it may seem to workers that they are being expected to show "favouritism" towards a client by working with and upholding the client's sensitivities and preferences.

Worry about clients' possibly unrealistic expectations.

People who work in health / welfare agencies know that there are clients who really do have unrealistic expectations of services. There is really only so much any given service can actually do; however, many clients seeking help from agencies are hoping to find somebody to take responsibility from them or for them and can create trouble when this does not happen. This is a common worry that can apply to clients from many different groups. It is important to explain exactly what the agency can and cannot offer. If another agency is better suited to the client's needs, an explanation and referral is appropriate.

Dealing with reactions of other clients / staff members to clients with gender issues.

Service providers may feel uncomfortable or embarrassed by the attitudes / actions of other staff members or clients towards people with gender issues. However, they may feel that they cannot do anything about staff attitudes because it is not "their place" to do that or they worry

about causing friction in the workplace. They may also feel that dealing with the attitudes of other clients may be seen as showing favouritism or advocating "special treatment".

If a person in higher authority than the service provider has a negative attitude towards transgender clients, the service provider may be placed in an especially difficult position, with a duty to uphold the rights of the client mixed with concern for keeping their job or for harmony in the workplace. The Gender Centre can provide training if necessary.

Dealing with multiple complex issues.

People with transgender issues may present to agencies with a complex range of issues to deal with. In addition to gender issues, there may be difficulties such as homelessness, criminality, ill-health, poverty, social isolation, drug - alcohol abuse, depression and / or others. Workers who are inexperienced in some of these areas may feel inadequate or feel that their service must be lacking.

However, services in the health and welfare sectors are becoming increasingly specialised and consequently workers need to have an up-to-date list of resources and referrals, rather than feeling that they should be able to sort out all issues on their own. All agencies deal with a limited range of issues, even though they recognise that where a range of issues exist each issue needs to be addressed. Many health and welfare agencies are over-accessed and under-resourced and thus there are time constraints that apply to clients.

Having to say, "I can't deal with this".

There still tends to be a perception in health / welfare services that staff should be able to deal with "anything". This is an unfortunate attitude that does not guarantee that the client gets what is best for them. Workers, like clients, are people with histories and private lives that impact on their working lives (perhaps especially in welfare), and this tends to be forgotten. Workers in any occupation need to be able to define their own boundaries in relation to what they can and cannot deal with.

For some workers, there will be issues or people that they just cannot deal with. Everyone has "buttons" that can be pushed; everyone will find that there are people with whom their personalities will clash. In this case, it is certainly better to acknowledge that a particular client "pushes their buttons" and organise another worker to deal with the client, than to deal less well with the client.

(This is differentiated from workers who simply refuse to work with certain clients or client groups because of prejudice).

Legal issues, particularly in relation to new legislation.

The 1996 amendments to the New South Wales Anti-Discrimination Act, which specifically add transgenders to the list of people covered by anti-discrimination legislation, have the potential to affect not only health and welfare services but all employers and general service.