



A case study in the sustainability of an Aboriginal primary mental health care partnership

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Partnership between Aboriginal and mainstream primary health care organisations are promoted as a means to improve the responsiveness and capacity of health services, however there is little research attention given to what can develop and sustain such partnerships. The RAISE Well-being Program out of Port Augusta in rural South Australia is a four-organisation partnership to improve Aboriginal primary mental health care.

Aim

To describe the factors critical to the establishment and sustainability of the program.

Methods

An action research case study involving a stakeholder review committee, data from a literature search, 23 key informant interviews and a four-organisation staff focus group of critical pathway vignettes.

Principal findings

Program drivers were:

- the historical moves in Aboriginal human servicing
- current policy towards mainstreaming with regional delegation
- regional services demand where Aboriginal issues are profoundly visible.

The partnership made considerable progress in creating linkages and these were first founded on committed and productive personal relationships between managers. Opportunities for grass roots workers to develop a sense of collective efficacy across the organisations have taken longer to establish as have formalised information sharing processes. Early problems with staffing fluctuations (now stabilised), a crisis operational mode caused by the immediate needs of a vulnerable community and uncertain funding have all posed a threat to sustainability. In addition to these local threats, the program exists in a wider planning context that lacks readily available data for decision making and limited availability of culturally appropriate mental health tools and processes.

Conclusion

RAISE Well-being has survived because of close local relationships, relatively small leverages funds and regional commitment. Sustainability now requires practice development through appropriate care management tools and staff training, which are not likely to come solely from within the region's resources.

Implications for policy and practice

An Aboriginal mental health partnership program can be developed at the local level but requires assistance to increase staff skills in Aboriginal mental health and adapt culturally relevant care management tools. These resources need expert development and promulgation.