

# **Code of Professional Standards for the NSW Mental Health Consumer Workforce**

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**NSW Mental Health Consumer Workforce**  
Draft Version – for endorsement by the Mental Health Program Council  
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# Code of Professional Standards for the NSW Mental Health Consumer Workforce

## *Introduction*

The following *draft Code of Professional Standards* (the **Code**) is intended to act as a guideline for consumer workers in NSW as they carry out work in line with their professional practice. It is encouraged that all consumer workers are mindful of the **Code** and demonstrate an understanding of the values, ethics and responsibilities of the **Code** and act in accordance with its contents.

The **Code** sets out the basic values, ethical responsibilities, professional responsibilities and guidelines for forming professional relationships for the mental health consumer workforce. The principles outlined throughout the **Code** will help to promote:

- The professional practice of consumer workers in NSW;
- Minimum expectations and requirements for the consumer workforce; and,
- A minimum standard for ethical behaviour.

The contents of the *draft Code* has been formed through consultations with and input by current and former NSW consumer workers. The *draft Code* is pending final consultation with the NSW consumer workforce and relevant stakeholders, and endorsement from the NSW Mental Health Program Council.

## ***The NSW Mental Health Consumer Workforce***

Mental health consumer workers are people with the lived experience of mental illness, employed in roles designated for people with the experience of mental illness (consumers) within public mental health services in various capacities including providing peer support, representing the consumer voice within mental health services and in the community, and providing individual and systemic advocacy for mental health consumers.

The mental health consumer workforce in NSW was founded on the recognised need for increased consumer participation, support, advocacy, rights and protection within mental health services. The NSW Mental Health State Plan, *NSW: A new direction for mental health*, outlines that the NSW mental health consumer workforce has become a significant element in a broader mental health participation strategy (NSW Department of Health, 2006).

Consumer workers have historically been employed by mental health services to use the skills they have acquired from having the **lived experience** of mental illness and their personal experiences of accessing mental health services. Over time, the roles and responsibilities of the consumer worker have expanded to include various tasks and duties, such as participation in service evaluation, advocacy, research activities, service delivery and input into education and training programs.

This **Code** sets out the following:

- Consumer Workforce Values;
- Ethical Responsibilities;
- Professional Responsibilities; and,
- Relationships.

The **Code** should be used to assist consumer workers in identifying the ideals and purpose of the consumer workforce profession, identify the professional obligations of consumer workers, and identify what constitutes ethical behaviour for consumer workers.

## ***Consumer Workforce Values***

Through the provision of quality mental health services to consumers in NSW, consumer workers operate under five key values. These are:

**Human Values**  
**Consumer Focus**  
**Integrity and Honesty**  
**Rights and Needs of Others**  
**Recovery Framework**

In performing the key range of tasks and duties in line with the work expected from the consumer workforce, these values underpin the approach taken by consumer workers as they provide essential services to mental health consumers in NSW. Each value is governed by a series of principles that provides guidance and structure to the work performed by consumer workers. The adoption of these values provides an ethical framework for the consumer workforce profession.

### **Human Values**

Consumer workers should be respectful of **Human Values**, ensuring that everyone is treated equally, with dignity, respect and understanding at all times.

Consumer workers should work to ensure that they:

- Are respectful of all consumers within the service and in the wider community
- Treat all people equally
- Are understanding of all people, and value the rights of each consumer
- Provide compassion, hope and consideration to all consumers
- Trust in the consumer and provide dignity of risk
- Set boundaries for confidentiality with consumers and act within this at all times
- Value and validate the consumer voice
- Promote social inclusion and all opportunities for consumers to participate in their treatment, within the service and as valued members of the community

### **Consumer Focus**

Each consumer worker should provide a **Consumer Focus** in their work that they do. Consumer workers are, at times, able to relate to consumers on a level that other service staff may not due to their lived experience of mental illness. This consumer focus allows consumer workers to provide the consumer

perspective into committees they may sit on, within team meetings and in education they provide for service staff, consumers and the community.

In ensuring that the consumer workforce remains empathic to the mental health consumer, consumer workers need to ensure that they:

- Are able to relate to consumers on all levels through appropriate empathy
- Provide a non-prejudicial environment for consumers so that they feel safe to talk with the consumer worker and to express emotions, thoughts and feelings
- Speak appropriately with the consumer and in terms that they are able to understand
- Develop and demonstrate sound active listening skills so that the consumer feels listened to and respected
- Are a good role model for all consumers and lead others by example

Consumer workers will work to represent the:

- Individual: this will be achieved through:
  - Reflecting the consumer's perspective, view and wishes to others
  - Truly representing the consumer's voice in all settings
- Community: this will be achieved through:
  - Truly representing the voice of all consumers in all settings
  - Remaining in constant contact with consumers through developing appropriate relationships with consumers within the inpatient setting, in community mental health services and in the wider community
  - Remain in constant contact with other consumer workers to ensure that they are aware of issues that may need to be represented to the mental health service, the government and other stakeholders within the community

## **Integrity and Honesty**

Every consumer worker should ensure **Integrity and Honesty** in their work at all times.

In order to demonstrate this consumer workers should:

- Ensure their own integrity at all times
- Be honest at all times with themselves, with the service and with the consumer
- Provide a non-judgemental environment for the consumer and for other consumer workers
- Be respectful of other mental health staff of the mental health service
- Be respectful to other consumer workers within their profession, valuing their opinions and practice
- Behave at all times with dignity and respect for their profession

- Promote and demonstrate clear understanding of the values of the consumer workforce
- Aim to provide an impartial service for consumers, without imposing their own views and opinions
- Provide the consumer privacy at all times where appropriate

## **Rights and Needs of Others**

In dealing with consumers, other mental health service staff and other consumer workers, each individual should ensure that they uphold the **Rights and Needs of Others**.

In order to demonstrate this consumer workers should:

- Provide a high level of commitment to the work that they perform
- Ensure that they have a cultural awareness
- Promote advocacy, social justice and fairness for consumers within the mental health service and in the wider community
- Advocate for consumers on their behalf or through encouraging consumers to advocate for themselves for improved conditions
- Ensure that they are, at all times, truly representative of the consumers who they are working with and representing
- Acknowledging the right for consumers to experience inclusion and participation in: the community; political and public life; cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport; and, the least restrictive environment

## **Recovery Framework**

Recovery for people living with a mental illness is often described as a journey that is unique for each individual. It involves living a meaningful life, having hope for the future, managing the illness, fostering self determination, being able to participate in the community and sustain meaningful relationships (Andreson, Oades & Caputi, 2003). Recovery in this sense is not necessarily about cure of symptoms; rather it is about people living meaningful lives in the presence or absence of symptoms.

For consumer workers, working with mental health consumers on a daily basis, it is important for them to work within a **Recovery Framework**. This involves providing services that seek to maximise consumers' control over their treatment and care preferences and goals for the future at every opportunity, irrespective of where a person may be in their journey. To work within a recovery framework, consumer workers need to listen to the consumer's views, and help them identify and work towards their aspirations.

Consumer workers should ensure that they:

- Acknowledge and demonstrate that recovery is a process

- See beyond a person's illness to see the whole person, their interests and broader context of their life
- View a person's life situation holistically for a deeper understanding of the consumer
- Focus on the consumer's strengths rather than their deficits
- Encourage that consumers maintain any relationships with family and social networks
- Understand that it is human to have faults, and that relapse may occur. Consumer workers need to recognise that relapse of mental illness is not always a failure of care, treatment or service provision. Relapse can be seen as an opportunity to develop resilience and insight. Relapse into symptoms does not mean that a person is no longer on their recovery journey
- Convey the importance to the consumer, to mental health service staff and within the community that it is possible for the consumer to live a meaningful life in the community



## ***Professional Responsibilities***

During employment as a consumer worker, there are minimum expectations that should be fulfilled at all times when carrying out the professional responsibilities of the consumer workforce. The following responsibilities and minimum expectations are based on the five core values for the workforce.

### **Human Value**

Consumer workers will:

- Ensure that they demonstrate good active listening skills when communicating with consumers
- Develop sound social skills when engaging with consumers, providing an environment that is open and safe for consumers
- Be mindful of a person's gender, age, culture, ethnicity, religious beliefs and sexual orientation
- Ensure a positive attitude is held towards consumers, encouraging their growth and promoting recovery

### **Consumer Focus**

Consumer workers will:

- Ensure that they remain in communication with consumers on the ground level to remain a true representative of the mental health consumer
- Ensure that their own beliefs, views and opinions do not interfere with their representational duties
- Work on being able to relate with consumers through communicating in a simple and clear manner; work without prejudice or stigma; and convey a true emphatic relationship with consumers
- Have a basic knowledge of mental illness and disorders
- Work alongside mental health service staff and other consumer workers to ensure they are abreast on all issues relating to consumers within their service and Local Health Network
- Provide an equal representation of all consumers within their mental health service and Local Health Network

### **Integrity and Honesty**

Consumer workers will:

- Strive to be consistent and reliable in their role at all times
- Demonstrate a strong work ethic
- Demonstrate a sound knowledge of the mental health system and other systems as they relate to mental health (including legal and social)

- Develop a working knowledge on the Mental Health Act and the Mental Health Standards
- Continue to operate in a professional manner at all times
- Engage in regular training and supervision to ensure integrity and honesty is maintained during employment
- Engage in their work, refraining from any behaviour that may damage the reputation of the consumer workforce profession
- Not engage in any task or duty without ensuring that they have the appropriate education and training to perform the task

## **Rights and Needs of Others**

Consumer workers will:

- Work with a high level of commitment to the consumer workforce profession
- Ensure that they do not let a person's gender, age, culture, ethnicity, religious beliefs and sexual orientation affect their work, and will see to prevent and eliminate negative discrimination
- Work to advocate for the rights of consumers, and where appropriate, will empower consumers to advocate for themselves
- Inform mental health services and service staff about issues relevant to consumers to contribute to better conditions and mental health service environments
- Strive to ensure that consumers are informed on all relevant issues (including, but not limited to, rights and responsibilities; the Mental Health Act; community mental health services; and, peer support services)

## **Recovery Framework**

Consumer Workers will:

- Work with their supervisors to ensure that they have a comprehensive understanding and knowledge of the recovery philosophy
- Work within a recovery framework when performing their tasks and duties within the mental health service
- Actively encourage consumer engagement in:
  - Making decisions about treatment, care and services
  - Taking responsibility for recovery
  - Being at the centre of planning processes around treatment and care
  - Creating and maintaining care and recovery plans
  - Identifying and documenting early warning signs
  - Identifying and documenting strategies for staying well
  - Creating and maintaining crisis and relapse prevention plans
  - Working towards self management of illness
  - Involving carers and family

- Moving towards their identified goals
- Connecting with peer groups and support networks
- Evaluating and providing feedback about the service
- Improving the service

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## ***Ethical Responsibilities***

Each consumer worker has the expectation to adhere to a certain standard of ethical behaviour during their employment. When carrying out their roles and responsibilities, consumer workers are responsible at all times to the:

1. Consumer
2. Workplace
3. Wider Community
4. Profession, and
5. Themselves

The ethical responsibilities that consumer workers operate under aim to provide the profession with a minimum standard for work conduct, and assist in guiding the work conducted by members of the workforce. These ethical responsibilities should be used during supervision sessions to ensure that consumer workers are operating at the minimum standard, providing a benchmark for the assessment of professional behaviour.

### **1. Consumer**

The consumer worker should ensure that they:

- Do not talk about a consumer outside of work or to others where they may be breaching confidentiality and the consumer's trust
- Do not bring up subject matter that may be difficult for a consumer to cope with – if a consumer worker feels that a consumer may be having difficulty then the consumer worker should ensure that appropriate action is taken (referral to appropriate mental health service staff member)
- Are fair in all dealings with the consumer
- Do not make promises to a consumer – this is particularly so when a promise is made that cannot be met
- Work within a recovery framework with the consumer
- Are non-judgemental at all times and work without prejudice
- Do no harm
- Empower the consumer to self advocate
- Empower the consumer during their recovery journey
- Provide appropriate support to the consumer
- Are non-discriminative and foster an environment that discourages stigmatising attitudes
- Are accountable to the consumer – this includes ensuring that it is the consumer's views that are represented not the consumer worker's
- Take appropriate action in referring consumers to a relevant staff member if required
- Are aware of local networks and support groups that the consumer may find useful

- Are aware of what constitutes a healthy boundary in their relationship with mental health consumers

## **2. Workplace**

The consumer worker should ensure that they:

- Work alongside multi-disciplinary teams where relevant when performing their roles and responsibilities
- Demonstrate respect for other mental health staff
- Are representatives of the mental health service they are employed by
- Are consistent at all times during their employment

A consumer worker may become unwell and temporarily may not be able to perform their roles and responsibilities during their employment. The consumer worker should ensure that appropriate policy and procedural guidelines with their supervisor are established in the event that they become unwell during their employment. This may require the consumer worker to prepare a prevention and wellness plan, so that the service and relevant staff know what to do if the worker becomes unwell.

## **3. Wider Community**

The consumer worker should ensure that they:

- Are committed to social justice and dignity
- Are true representatives of the consumer voice
- Act in a professional manner when representing the mental health service and the consumer perspective

## **4. Profession**

The consumer worker should ensure that they:

- Are professional at all times
- Are conscientious and diligent
- Are reliable
- Respect other consumer workers and the differing views and opinions that they may hold
- Carry out the work of the consumer worker to the best of their abilities at all times

## **5. Themself**

The consumer worker should ensure that they:

- Are respectful of themselves
- Are aware of their limitations and work to their strengths – this may involve acknowledging any limitations they have in supervision

- Develop a wellness plan where appropriate – this would involve acknowledging times when they may be unwell and providing details and early warning signs so that the negative impact on the position is minimised
- Are aware of their own feelings, thoughts, opinions and views so that these do not impact in any way on their dealings with consumers or when representing the consumer
- Have an understanding of what details about their experience of living with mental illness they are willing to share within their position

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## ***Relationships***

It is important that the relationships consumer workers form with other people during their employment do not cross any boundaries and ensure the integrity of the workforce. Certain guidelines need to be put into place that can assist consumer workers in ensuring appropriate relationships with:

1. Consumers
2. Colleagues
  - Other consumer workers
  - Other mental health service staff
3. The wider community
4. Themselves, and
5. NSW Consumer Advisory Group – Mental Health Inc. (NSW CAG)

When forming relationships with people, consumer workers need to ensure that ethical boundaries around the relationship are defined, and that appropriate time is allowed to develop the relationship. Relationships need to be founded on trust and mutual respect, with the consumer worker aware of what compromises a beneficial relationship in a recovery-oriented environment.

### **1. Consumers**

When dealing with consumers, the consumer worker should ensure that they define their relationship at the outset of any communications that they have with the consumer. The consumer worker needs to ensure that they develop a good working relationship with consumers, whilst also developing healthy boundaries between themselves and the consumers who they work with.

Consumer workers should also ensure that they are aware of how their relationship may hinder recovery in their relationship with consumers.

Consumer workers should always:

- Be tolerant
- Be supportive of the consumer
- Be a good role model
- Be encouraging
- Build a good rapport with the consumers they come into contact with
- Be polite at all times
- Be courteous
- Be friendly
- Be approachable
- Act professionally
- Be appropriate in the way that they deal with consumers

Appropriate guidelines need to be maintained to ensure that consumer workers avoid dual relationships and respect a healthy boundary between themselves and the consumer. Consumer workers should:

- Avoid any kind of personal relationship with a consumer who is seeking treatment from a service
- Not engage in personal relationships with a consumer until at least two years have passed since the professional relationship between the consumer worker and consumer ends
- Not receive gratuities or other remuneration from a consumer
- Not lend money to a consumer
- Alert their direct manager and relevant staff members of the wider team if the consumer worker has had a past personal relationship with the consumer – where practical have another consumer worker engage with the consumer

## **2. Colleagues**

### **a. Other consumer workers**

Consumer workers should ensure that they work to develop good working relationships with other consumer workers. In developing healthy co-worker relationships, networking opportunities should be put in place to allow opportunities for consumer workers to communicate with each other to provide peer support. These relationships should be based on respect, respect for difference and working towards a common goal.

### **b. Other mental health service staff**

Consumer workers will work to ensure that healthy relationships are formed with other mental health service staff within the service that they are employed by. In their dealings with other mental health service staff, consumer workers will act professionally at all times and work to develop appropriate boundaries between themselves and other mental health service staff. These relationships should be based on respect, respect for difference and working towards a common goal.

Appropriate guidelines need to be maintained to ensure respectful relationships are formed between consumer workers and their colleagues. Consumer workers should:

- Report on any discriminatory or stigmatising behaviour they may experience from other mental health service staff or other consumer workers
- Recognise and respect different views and opinions that are held by other service staff and other consumer workers
- Alert their direct supervisor and relevant staff members when a consumer worker is working alongside a staff member they have received treatment from in the past



### **3. Wider Community**

Consumer workers should ensure that they develop relationships with linkages in the community. This contributes to a greater knowledge of services that exist outside the mental health environment that consumer workers can link consumers to. Consumer workers should also work to ensure that they remain professional at all times when representing the service or providing the consumer perspective.

Consumer workers should also ensure that they have an understanding and knowledge of the Community Managed Organisations (CMOs or Non-Government Organisations) within the Local Health Network and surrounds. This would involve developing close working relationships with these CMOs.

### **4. The Consumer Worker**

The consumer worker will ensure that they develop a healthy relationship with themselves. Consumer workers can achieve this through:

- Not letting negative aspects of their illness affect their job
- Taking care of themselves
- Respecting themselves and the work that they perform
- Having self awareness
- Having a healthy appearance

### **5. NSW CAG**

Through working as advocates for mental health consumers, consumer workers will develop a working relationship with NSW CAG. This will involve: developing professional working relationships between the service and NSW CAG; having an understanding of the work conducted by NSW CAG; feeding any statewide and systemic advocacy issues into NSW CAG (this will assist NSW CAG in staying informed of any systemic advocacy issues); and, encouraging mental health consumers to input into NSW CAG and have their say on the mental health system.