

“Reaching For The Stars”- A social work development and leadership program

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Background: How do we develop leaders in social work? In 2012 managers from the Health Social Work Directors' Group (HSWDG) in Victoria posed this question following anecdotal reports of difficulty recruiting to senior positions. Identifying talent and offering learning opportunities to develop leadership skills amongst experienced health social workers were the key challenges.

Method: Members of the HSWDG examined opportunities to promote leadership development amongst social workers. The first step was to disseminate an electronic survey to grade 2 and 3 Victorian metropolitan hospital social workers, eliciting views on existing leadership opportunities, preparation for career advancement, and transitioning to senior positions.

Results: Respondents identified access to suitable leadership programs as an issue. Interest in a HSWDG run leadership program was high as was cross-sharing of learning resources and rotational on-site learning opportunities.

Discussion: An ambitious leadership program, based on a St Vincent's Hospital model was trialled in 2014. Successful applicants from seven metropolitan health services took part in cross-hospital seminars, self-directed and strategically aligned project work, observation, reflection, mentoring and coaching. Participant reports have been positive and a formal evaluation has been completed. Longitudinal follow-up of participants is also being conducted to determine effect on continued development and career trajectory.

The principles and structures underpinning this program offer exciting opportunities. Possible applications include 1) smaller groupings of campuses conducting this program, to increase social workers' connectedness with peers and address common constraints and opportunities, 2) utilising Allied Health involvement across one campus to share resources, enrich knowledge base and gain strategic traction via joint projects.