



# Consumer rights through participation - *the* Peer Education Support Program (PESP)

Developed, implemented and managed by the Homelessness Advocacy Service, the Peer Education Support Program (PESP) commenced as a pilot in 2005. PESP is a small team of people from diverse backgrounds who have experienced homelessness. The PESP team are trained and supported to provide: Sector & Community Education and training, input into policy and practise, peer interviews, surveys & facilitating focus groups, input into continuous quality improvement, Sector and Government consultation, Systemic Advocacy, media interviews and public speaking. The diversity of experiences that PESP bring provides tangible evidence that homeless people are not homogenous and responses to homelessness need to be tailored to individual needs. PESP break down narrow and negative community stereotypes by sharing their individual experiences.

PESP reflects a cultural shift in the homelessness service system towards an increasingly meaningful involvement of people who are directly affected by homelessness. Beyond participation by consumers, now embedded in service delivery, lies the partnership model embodied in PESP where people who have used the system feed their particular expertise back to services, service users and government to continuously improve individual and systemic responses to homelessness.

PESP has the imperative to embody the respect and dignity owed to people using human services while delivering mechanisms capable of resolving the complex tensions around identity and equity.

Participation is a human right and unless people are involved in the decisions that affect them, we don't see them as moral equals or their interests are necessary to accommodate or protect. PESP has grown both in size and influence this year, with our Peer Educators showing extraordinary leadership, tenacity and skill in their work, raising awareness of homelessness, facilitating consumer consultations and training homelessness workers. Consumer participation is still perceived as by many as challenging and potentially tokenistic.

As with other efforts to end homelessness, it's not one size fits all. There is no simple script to guide the process of involving consumers however, there is growing evidence from PESP that meaningful consumer participation is achievable, results in individual empowerment and improved service delivery.

As such it will remain a strong focus of CHP's role in the years to come.

Feedback from services: 'Clients had the opportunity to be open and honest. PESP provided an independent focus and ensured clients' privacy was protected.

"It was a really valuable experience, which allowed us to feed the clients' perspective into the board meeting and will be included in the strategic planning.'

Of the 20 Peer Educators who have completed the PESP 2 year volunteer program, 5 have returned to study, 14 have undertaken further training and 8 have gained employment, most within the area of homelessness.

This is clear evidence of the individual benefits of consumer participation.

In 2010 over fifty assignments were completed by PESP and 34 consumer focus groups and interviews facilitated across Victoria.

Examples of recent PESP collaborations include: State-wide consumer consultation on the *Homelessness 2020 Strategy*, the Opening Doors Implementation Reference Group, CBD Health and Homelessness Steering Group, Moreland, Moonee Valley and Yarra Primary Care Partnership, Melbourne Metropolitan Rooming House Group, City of Melbourne Homelessness Strategy and Research Projects, City of Melbourne Street Count Project and the Housing Minister's Round Table on the Homelessness 2020 Strategy, Wimmera Homelessness Week Forum and Sacred Heart Missions annual service review.

PESP contribute to CHP's Parity Publication to ensure that consumer's have a direct voice in each edition.



