

Never underestimate the power of a skip bin

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In recent months, I have been involved in a number of projects and workshops taking a co-design approach to community programs. Co-design involves the valued input and advice of the person or families central to the support on offer. It is exciting and heartening to work alongside government agencies with the genuine desire and good will to want to improve a fragmented system. But in some instances both the sector and the government continue to select the advice or information which fits the current capacity of the system, and not that which actually fits the capacity of the family.

Consumer directed care (CDC) is coming, and the accountability shields that have been used for so long to excuse inaction and siloed practice will not be acceptable to the consumer. Nothing motivates reflective practice and collaboration quite so much as the image of a client taking their funding and walking away from your service.

People accessing support from both government and non-government agencies are usually already past a crisis point when they are actually desperate enough to ask for help. They want an immediate response when they ask for support, rather than a case worker or manager concentrating first on the causes of their problem. Where necessary this can be done in a later follow-up rather than having their circumstances analysed in the initial meeting and measured against what a 'normal family' would have been able to do.

As much as we would like to think that support services are there in the time of crisis, it is usually months or even years of crisis point living and holding the threads of the household together before people finally concede that they need external help. When they finally reach out the system punishes them for doing so. Upon asking for assistance the families are straightaway labeled 'at risk'. While we quickly offer them a suite of assistance, this seldom includes the particular support they really needed in the first place.

Service facilitation, case coordination, network coordination:- these are all catchphrases of a system too complicated for even the workers to navigate, let alone the families. We may have been able to justify the need for this in our thesis-sized funding tenders, but try getting a family to purchase it with their package and you may find out the true value they see in 'coordinating their issues'.

The single most requested item by our clients over the past three years has been a skip bin. They believe that if they had access to the skip they would have been able to sustain the tenancy, resolve neighborhood conflict, get kids to school and avoid debt. Whilst such a resolution is unlikely, surely having the capacity as a worker to provide practical support would have kick started a family's trust in the system? They would know that things actually got done and left the door open for future contact to address deeper, long-term problems.

More often than not, we let people in to the service system and shut the door behind them, forever bound to a system which demands that they increase their family capacity and their 'living skills'. We constantly underestimate the survival qualities possessed and utilised by families living in poverty.

In fact, most families are very skilled in survival, problem solving and yes—budgeting. Just ask some of the parents keeping the families together and fed on \$35 a day! We could all take some advice on how to redirect budgets as frugally to the frontline as some of these families constantly manage to do. Just imagine what they can design for themselves when allocated their own funding package.

I would imagine that they would design a human services system that does not bind them close once they touch it. Rather the temporary authority to resolve an immediate crisis and then let them back away and retain the power of running their own family. Control and choice is handed back and they have the confidence and trust to return if they need support again.

With the move to consumer directed care in both the disability and aged care sectors, organisations will need to change their models to be responsive and innovative in their service delivery. Clients are becoming consumers. Choice in an open market means that we will have a definitive answer from our 'consumers' about what they need from us and how

long they want us involved for. The real question for us is, 'Are we ready to hear what they have to say?'

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