

Interview with Extended Families

PART 4

In this final instalment of my interview with Julie Langdon from Extended Families, I asked what advice she would give to other disability services on how to engage more effectively with CALD communities. Julie felt, above all, that it was important to promote an organisational culture that embraces and values cultural diversity. It needs to “pervade the whole organisation...you might have a great worker who might be able to do great work but it also has to be supported within an organisational culture that values this.” This should include staff training and development and an openness to working in different ways and learning from different approaches. For Julie, there needs to be “a culture of acceptance and flexibility about how you work with people, valuing diversity, learning from diversity...”

This organisational culture, in turn, influences how services are delivered and, ultimately, is reflected in how communities perceive the service. Julie says, “our support coordination service is so well regarded...the conversations at the school gates that means that people are coming to us.”

I asked Julie how Extended Families have found the transition to the NDIS and whether it has had an impact on their work with CALD communities? According to Julie, the transition and the loss of DHHS funding has had a significant impact. The agency no longer have dedicated marketing and human resource positions, have a lot more casual staff and require a new website, more administration and financial support and new infrastructure to deal with the new system. “We used to have three service agreements and now we have hundreds.”

Extended Families also have less resources and time to seek new funding for project work. The lack of resources has also meant that Extended Families have not been able to keep up with the need for translations. Julie said that “there’s so much translation work we need to do...especially for families that don’t know us.” Recently their Vietnamese worker visited a Cambodian family and the mother refused to sign any paperwork “because she thought ‘who is this man?’, she couldn’t understand the information which was in English.”

The loss of resources and funding has also meant that Extended Families no longer has as much flexibility to work in innovative and responsive ways with CALD communities. The agency used to have a lot more flexibility in how their bilingual workers engaged with clients - they were able to provide a range of different supports based on need. However, “that’s going to be harder under the NDIS...being able to be creative but you still have to resource that.”

Another significant issue has been the inability to consistently access good quality interpreters or to request a specific interpreter. In cases where families build good rapport and trust with an interpreter and where sensitive issues are being discussed, they are likely to want to work with the same interpreter for all subsequent meetings. However, “you have to fill out a whole form to argue why you have to have that interpreter.”

Despite all of the challenges with the transition to the NDIS, Julie said she was determined to continue their community engagement work and to be positive about the future. “We need to find ways to survive as I think the work with the Vietnamese community is so important. If we were to merge with another organisation, it wouldn’t be the same, it would be lost.”

Julie stressed that, in this changing environment, it was even more important for service and program development to take into account the needs of vulnerable groups such as CALD communities. Organisations also need to provide more translated information such as service brochures and to utilise a range of communication modes to broaden their reach. This could include audio-visual materials on their websites in other languages and the use of ethnic media. To do all of this, organisations require adequate resourcing that will facilitate greater flexibility and more innovative approaches. A challenging task when, “we have the people resources and the knowledge but no time or funding.”

Extended Families can be contacted on 9355 8848 or go to website <https://www.extendedfamilies.org.au>