

Tips for Service Providers

The HCSCC encourages service providers to discuss complaints openly with consumers. This gives providers and consumers an opportunity to resolve the complaint at an early stage. The tips below will assist service providers in the complaints management process.

Preparing the organisation

An effective system to resolve and manage complaints should involve:

- procedures to enable consumers and their families, carers or nominees making complaints;
- an organised way to respond to complaints;
- recording and reporting;
- using complaints to improve the safety and quality of services;
- guidance for staff about how to resolve complaints.

As a service provider, you may wish to consider the following tips for effectively managing complaints:

- implement a complaints management policy / procedure
- ensure that staff and volunteers are trained so they understand and feel confident about handling complaints
- include reminders about policy / procedure updates in regular communications
- think about developing a dedicated complaints resolution team
- utilise support networks within professional associations, clinical networks or peer groups
- identify insurance requirements – as many practitioners are required to consult with their insurer when they receive a complaint
- contact your insurer – they may be able to help
- review and familiarise the organisation with relevant legislation and accreditation requirements
- consider making it easier for consumers to make a complaint
- develop a complaint database to capture complaint information, to identify trends and monitor service improvements
- keep in contact with external agencies such as the HCSCC, which may be able to provide help with complaints
- keep in contact with consumers – be available to discuss any concerns

Respond promptly

Complaints do add to your already hectic workload but delays in dealing with them can add to tension and generate further resentment. Give a factual, clear, succinct and complete picture of the essential circumstances, answering all questions fully. Be willing to apologise. If you can't respond quickly, let the consumer know as soon as possible. Provide all relevant documents when requested. Aim to make progress towards resolving the complaint within 30 days of receipt.

Ask questions

Be clear about the consumer's concerns and objectives. The reason for the complaint may not be clear at first. Ask questions and make sure you are on the right track. Check about the need for interpreter services and see if the consumer would like a friend or relative to support them. Give due consideration to points of view put forward by the complainant.

Tips for Service Providers

Gather all the relevant information

Make sure you have all the necessary records, reports and other relevant information.

Keep clear and accurate records

Separate the consumer's complaint records from their service records. This ensures that the matter is properly documented, protects everyone's privacy and minimises difficulties where other practitioners provide services to your consumer.

Emphasise confidentiality and privacy

A complaint should be treated confidentially. Minimise the number of staff who are aware of, or involved in, handling the complaint to protect both your own and the consumer's privacy.

Plan meetings and stay calm

It is preferable to meet on neutral territory where everyone feels comfortable. Also try to ensure interruptions or disruptions are minimised.

Keep your promises

Make sure that you set realistic time frames about promises, offers or agreed actions – and then keep them. If unexpected events arise which make it difficult to keep previous arrangements, personally notify the consumer as soon as possible. Consider if complaints expose inadequacy in policy or procedure that need to be fixed promptly to avoid repeat complaints.

Seek advice and assistance if you are unsure about how to proceed

There may be times when it is unrealistic or not appropriate for you to deal with a complaint personally, for example complaints involving extremely distressed or aggressive people, complex situations involving multiple service providers or allegations of assault or sexual misconduct, are all situations where seeking advice is recommended.

Advice can be obtained from a respected colleague, your employer, a professional association, an indemnity / insurance body or from the HCSCC.

Other points to remember

- Complaints can be positive and lead to service improvements.
- It is perfectly natural to experience some initial defensiveness when a complaint is received.
- Take the time to consider the complaint and compose yourself before dealing with the consumer.
- Try to remain calm, open-minded and listen.
- Complainants may still choose to speak with the HCSCC.
- A well-managed complaint could avoid further escalation and also provide valuable feedback.
- Inform a complainant about how and when you intend to respond.

For more information about the HCSCC, visit our website – www.hcsc.sa.gov.au.