



Pilot Study – Follow-up Interviews

For the CISVic Evaluation Framework

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Introduction

CISVic has developed an Evaluation Framework with the support of the Data Evaluation Working Group (DEWG), which includes representatives from some member agencies and RMIT University.¹ The purpose of the Evaluation Framework is to direct evaluation activities so as to: learn about the outcomes of CISVic services, inform the design and delivery of services, and to effectively advocate for systemic change on behalf of community members. In short, the Evaluation Framework provides coherence and direction for the evaluation of the Community Support Work of CISVic and its member agencies. DEWG provides ongoing support for finetuning and implementing the Evaluation Framework and it will assist with making sense of evaluation findings as they become available.

The Evaluation Framework includes follow-up in depth telephone interviews with a sample of service users to ask them about the service they received and any impact it had on their situation. In the second half of 2019, the methodology for these interviews was piloted, following approval by the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee. A RMIT Social Work student on placement, Brigid Glaisher, carried out the interviews with the support of the CISVic Research, Advocacy and Policy Manager. This report by Brigid documents this pilot, including key themes and insights obtained through analysis of the interviews.

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Methodology

This pilot study comprised follow-up in-depth interviews forming part of the broader CISVic Evaluation Framework. The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule and conducted by the author of this report, an RMIT Social Work student on placement (Brigid Glaisher), under the supervision of Dr. Jennifer Borrell, (Research, Advocacy, & Policy Manager - CISVic). Two of CISVic's member agencies took part in this study, which henceforth will be referred to as *Agency One* and *Agency Two*.

People seeking assistance from both CISVic agencies were asked to consider being contacted by phone to talk about their experience of the service and to help improve it. It was at the discretion of the Community Support Workers at each agency as to who they would ask this (and they would not ask this if they deemed it inappropriate for any reason). A list was sent to Jennifer at CISVic of those who had provided preliminary consent, with the following information: Statistical Linkage Key (code), first name, phone number, and whether permission was granted to leave a message.

As per a process approved by the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee, a sample of this list was contacted by phone, but people were still given the opportunity to decline participation. As can be read in the *Interview Schedule* in the Appendix, it was emphasised that any response to questions would not have any impact on the service they receive from the member agency they had attended. Information was provided verbally over the phone before the interview proceeded. The participant's comprehension of the information was established, and clarification was given as needed. If requested, an information sheet could be sent to the participant after which consent to the interview could be either provided or not provided. No participants requested this option.

The sampling approach had characteristics of purposive/targeted sampling and systematic random sampling². If contact was not made, the interviewer would attempt contact twice more over the space of several days. If contact was made, but the participant declined the interview, the next person on the list would be rung. The same process was carried out for both agencies.

The author carried out the interviews by telephone from CISVic's office, with Jennifer present. The phone call was conducted via speakerphone and was recorded with a digital voice recorder once consent had been given. Jennifer was available to offer direct guidance if the interviewee had become distressed or indicated that they required further support. This, however, was not ultimately necessary. A \$50 supermarket voucher was offered to interviewees in recognition of their time and contribution. The voucher was not offered at the point of recruitment, so that it would not constitute an inducement. Instead, it was offered as part of the preamble to the interview, at which point the participant would have already decided to opt in. Participants would still receive the voucher if they

² Method for Systemic Random Sampling: Identify your sample size, n (number to be interviewed). Divide the total number of items in the population N (those initially assenting to interview), by n. This gives the interval, k. Thus, for a population of 2000 and a sample of 100, $k = 2000/100 = 20$. In this case every 20th person on the list would be contacted for interview.

discontinued the interview after it had started or declined to answer all questions. Contact details for the purpose of sending the supermarket voucher were only obtained after the interview had concluded and the voice recorder had been turned off.

The sample comprised thirteen service users. Four interviews were conducted with participants from Agency One, three of which were male, and one was female. Nine interviews were conducted with participants from Agency Two, three of which were male, and seven were female.

Interviewees were asked about the service they requested and received, whether they had received certain benefits as outlined in the Evaluation Framework, and any suggestions for service improvement or more generally for people in their situation. See the Appendix for the full interview schedule.

Discussion of Themes

Contexts for seeking assistance

The in-depth interviews began with the question: *'Can you tell me a bit about your situation that led you to seek help?'* Starting the interview with an open question allowed the research participants to present a narrative of their identity and circumstances according to what they felt was relevant to the question. Respondents' narratives would inform the author of the context surrounding seeking assistance from CISVic member agencies. Many interviewees positioned their identity in terms of location (suburb), housing/homelessness, employment/unemployment, income, carer/parent status, and disability. Several participants were experiencing homelessness and living in insecure accommodation, such as Transitional Housing or couch-surfing, while other participants lived in public housing. Unemployment was a topic that was discussed often in response to this question, with many interviewees receiving the Newstart payment. Many participants who receive Newstart payments said they were not able to afford food, leading them to seek assistance from agencies. In addition, caring for someone or being a single parent were factors in presenting to member agencies for support. Some interviewees stated that they had a disability, such as chronic back pain or paranoid schizophrenia, resulting in their inability to work and their financial disadvantage.

Some interviewees identified as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse, and would discuss their background, however, due to the open nature of the question, data on cultural background was not systematically collected. One interviewee demonstrated that there are many paths to seeking and receiving assistance; the interviewee reported that his relationship with Agency Two had begun three years ago, when he was a newly arrived refugee and had initially presented to the agency to volunteer his time in the garden. He discussed how he had done this to reduce the social isolation he was feeling in this new country.

Another reason for seeking assistance was the experience of family violence. As will be discussed in a later section (*What would make life easier?*), experiencing family violence in any of its forms is a significant barrier to achieving financial security and personal wellbeing, and was identified by two research participants as a contributing factor in seeking assistance.

Types of assistance sought

The majority of interviewees had sought assistance due to financial hardship. Many had paid for rent and bills, and were left with no money for food, leading them to seek assistance in the form of emergency relief, either for food parcels or supermarket vouchers. One exception to this was a client who presented to Agency Two to seek help with an unusually high power bill she had received, and due to limited English skills required some support in understanding the reasons behind this.

It is important to note that a central purpose of CISVic member agencies is to provide emergency relief in the form of material and food aid, and it is clear from the interviews that its importance cannot be overstated in terms of its value and necessity for many individuals on low income and experiencing financial disadvantage.

Type of assistance received

This pilot study as part of the Evaluation Framework also sought to uncover whether presenting needs were met or unmet. The data from the interviews revealed that for the most part presenting needs were met.

Of the participants who were regulars at Agency Two, most had initially presented for assistance for emergency food relief in the form of food parcels. Many identified that their continued regular presentations were due a weekly Fresh Food distribution table that is available at Agency Two, allowing them to have access to fruit and vegetables weekly, thus saving money for other supermarket items.

From what I save on fruit and veggies, I can put towards other things like milk, bread, and meat, or other necessities.' (Agency Two)

A further reason for repeat presentations was Agency Two's monthly community barbeque day. Many interviewees identified that this type of ongoing assistance is invaluable in terms of countering social isolation, and supporting community and individual wellbeing, a concept that will be explored in greater depth in a later section. Another theme present in the data was the ability of the Community Support Workers to identify needs that had not been explicitly stated during the interviews with service users, and the ability to respond appropriately. Responding to identified need included offering further support, information, or referral. It must be noted that some interviewees did not wish to accept other referrals, which highlights the importance of allowing service users to determine their own inclination and avenues for change. This concept will be explored in the section regarding possible increased capacity to make informed choices.

Better off because of assistance received?

Interviewees were unanimous in their agreement that the assistance they received from CISVic member agencies benefitted them. This finding is significant, indicating crucial work conducted by the Community Support Workers of both member agencies. The relevant question was: *'In general, do you think you are better off because of the support you received from XXX?'* One participant replied to this question instantly: *'without a doubt'*.

Food parcels were identified as incredibly useful for interviewees, with one service user stating: *'I would struggle without it'*. An interviewee from Agency Two spoke of one of the best aspects of the food parcels that he receives is the option of choosing meat, which is new since Agency Two has installed freezers: *'meat is something that pensioners just can't afford anymore'*. This statement illuminates the concerning theme of recipients of Centrelink payments being unable to afford common diet staples. Another interviewee

reported that he was definitely better off because of the service he received, as he would have had to borrow money from friends to be able to eat.

In terms of emergency relief in the form of supermarket vouchers, one respondent spoke of his preference to this over food parcels. He advised that the *'gift card gives us an extended feeling of autonomy, even though we have to go with our hands out'*, highlighting the importance for many service users of dignity, choice and control over what they are able to access in terms of emergency relief. It was also discussed by interviewees that although there were parameters around how often supermarket vouchers could be accessed, it was a welcome and essential support. *'It was only fifty dollars, but it was like a goldmine. When you've got nothing, it makes it seem like a treasure chest'* (Agency One).

Many respondents said that the support received was useful due to the dual nature of immediate practical help and ongoing casework support. One interviewee from Agency Two articulated this well:

Double whammy of immediate help like food relief right on the day when there's nothing in the cupboard to cook and there's three people that need to eat... and ongoing things to improve your own self, your own life... through other referrals.

Everything they offered that I've ever received from them benefits me in different ways, whether it be from food help, food relief which helps instantly to other things that help me control my life a bit better.

These comments point to the assistance provided by both agencies as comprising immediate practical help and giving some feeling of increased control and mastery over the participants' situation.

One participant discussed how support from Agency Two supported him to *'stand up'*, that they were a huge help, and that they enabled him to support his family.

The Community Support Workers helped one interviewee with limited English understand anything that she was unsure of, and she discussed how she will always bring her letters and bills when she presents, which increases her confidence.

The question: *'In general, do you think you are better off because of the support you received from XXX?'* also prompted the interviewee to identify the most beneficial aspect of the service. A recurrent theme of a sense of community was established amongst responses to many questions, however this question elicited the most responses identifying the theme of community. One participant explained that the sense of community was what she valued most at her agency: *'I enjoy the friendly environment, it is a very good community'*. It is also apparent that this sense of community inspires a desire for fairness and reciprocity amongst service users. One interviewee from Agency Two elaborated that when he picks up his free vegetables, he passes on the items he does not like, (like broccoli and spinach) to his friends, *'so I feel like I'm supporting someone else as well'*. The idea of sharing a benefit that one has received from an agency indicates that strengthening a sense of community is both a benefit of the assistance, and a driving force in continuing presentations. This sense of reciprocity and

fairness was articulated by an interviewee who stated '*[Agency Two] is not for one person, this is a community, for everyone... you can't be selfish in the community*'.

One respondent discussed how she enjoys the challenge of creating new dishes with the food she receives:

I get all these things, and I have to think of ways to use them, otherwise it's a waste, and then I feel like I've taken the food out of a needy person's mouth, to go ahead and throw it in the bin, that doesn't sit right with me.

Comments on the quality of the available goods for emergency relief were also common. One interviewee stated that she was surprised to receive a jar of sundried tomatoes as part of her food parcel and commented that she appreciated that she was able to choose good quality food and household items such as toilet paper. Another respondent stated that the fresh fruit and vegetables available at Agency Two were '*beautifully grown*'.

Increased knowledge about services and options

An increased knowledge of alternative services and options is a desired outcome of assistance from CISVic member agencies, with the aim of holistic, wrap-around support for community members. Many service users stated that they had received considerable information about other services and options as a result of presenting to the agencies for assistance. A respondent from Agency One reported that the Community Support Workers had greatly increased his knowledge of other services, particularly places where he could present to receive free meals. He stated that this was very helpful, as he now does not have to solely rely on his Newstart payment and supermarket vouchers to pay for food. Indeed, this proved to be a common theme amongst the data, indicated by comments about the Community Support Workers such as: '*they're very knowledgeable*' and '*they offered a lot of choice*'. It was also especially appreciated by one interviewee that if she presented to her service with something that they could not support her with, they would ensure that she was provided with the means of accessing a service that could.

Of the interviewees who stated that they had not been specifically informed of other services and options, most emphasised that they knew there were many pamphlets about services available to browse. The availability of this literature was apparently of value. One service user from Agency Two stated that she does not like to ask for assistance from workers, and so appreciates the opportunity to increase her service knowledge independently through perusing the pamphlets. Another interviewee stated that he had in fact provided this type of support to his agency; due to already having an extensive knowledge of services he was able to inform the agency of options they were not yet aware of.

One interviewee reported that it was recommended to him that he meet with an Energy Mentor, to see if his utility bills could be lowered. He appreciated this offer, feeling that the Community Support Workers genuinely wished to support his financial wellbeing through increasing his knowledge: '*They're really dedicated workers*'.

Capacity to make informed choices (individual/systemic and any barriers)

Respondents were asked about aspects of the service that they received. One question related to *'improved ability to make choices'*, and it was clarified by interviewees that more options may not be available given their circumstances and what was generally on offer. The responses varied significantly, particularly between service users of the two member agencies studied. From the data it appeared that Agency Two provided more casework to the interviewees (both formal and informal), in addition to more information and referrals. In these cases, it was more likely that respondents would state that an aspect of the service they received included an increased capacity to make informed choices. In one notable example, a refugee initially presented to the agency to volunteer, prior to receiving support services from it. Over time, he was supported to access different services that were able to supply his family with whitegoods and furniture, textbooks, emergency food relief, and access to free dental care. He stated that prior to his assistance from this agency he was not aware of services and options available to him as a newly arrived refugee, and that with this holistic support he was able to overcome barriers to pursue further education. He advised that this support enabled him to become psychologically, emotionally, and physically stable, and thus more able to make informed choices in his life. Another respondent spoke of presenting to the same agency having bought a hot water heater, suspecting that she had been 'conned' by the company, and that the agency had supported her to report them to the Ombudsman. She said that this agency has taught her how to be careful with purchases and big financial decisions in the future, *'how to be mindful when hiring people'*, thus improving her ability to make informed choices. This speaks to the significant capacity building that may be achieved through case work and advocacy. Capacity building was mentioned by another interviewee from Agency Two, who identified that the support that she had received involved *'all sorts of interrelated things that give you power back in your life'*, through improving her immediate situation, and empowering her to engage in *'self-improvement'* into the future.

While some respondents who had received one-off or ongoing casework or advocacy reported increased capacity to make informed choices regarding their situation, the same cannot be said of those respondents who presented to either member agencies solely requesting emergency food relief. This may be due to the fact that by their very nature, supermarket vouchers or food parcels are likely to relieve the burden of financial insecurity for only a short time. A common theme amongst answers to the question about *'improved ability to make choices'* from respondents who had received a supermarket voucher or a food parcel was that an increased capacity to make choices was not likely. Indeed, quite a few interviewees were confused by this question, as it had evidently not occurred to them that they may have more choices because of accessing the service. One respondent identified that a \$50 food voucher does not go far, while another stated that a voucher does not impact his ability to make different choices, other than being able to not borrow money to pay for food. This indicates that while emergency food relief is important and necessary for those experiencing financial hardship, it is unlikely to increase a service user's capacity to make informed choices in any meaningful sense.

It is important to note however, the importance of self determination, and supporting service users to make their own choices, without passing judgement as far as possible. This was demonstrated in the narrative of one interviewee, when he explained how he

does not want to make different choices to the ones he makes currently, including his decisions to smoke cigarettes, drink beer, and gamble on poker machines. He explained that volunteers at Agency Two had discussed this with him, and offered support, in the form of referrals for financial and gambling counselling, but that he had no desire to engage in behaviour or lifestyle change. *'I'm aware of my problems and I refuse to do anything about them, I'm content to live the way I do'*.

Another interviewee who was asked if she had an improved ability to make choices because of the support provided by the Community Support Workers replied: *'I don't really see how they could'*, thus indicating that they would not be able to help with some of her presenting issues. This relates to systemic issues that the interviewee believes are not possible to be addressed by the agency. In this case, the respondent did not share her full situation with the volunteers, due to its sensitive and traumatic nature. While her situation was directly linked to the reasons for presenting to Agency Two for emergency relief assistance, she did not feel it was necessary to inform the workers of the full details. Even if she had disclosed the abuse that she had been experiencing, she believed that the assistance she received would not have improved her capacity to make choices.

Linking with services that could stop problems becoming worse

One question sought to learn about the extent to which interviewees had been linked with services to prevent their situation becoming worse. Three said they had been linked with services that prevented their problems from worsening. One respondent identified that Agency Two was very invested in referring him to services that could stop problems becoming worse. He reported that when he first presented to Agency Two, he was in need of extensive dental work, and had been informed by a dentist that it would cost \$5,000. Community Support Workers of this agency were able to advocate for him and referred him to a dental service which conducted all the required dental work for free. Another respondent discussed how his agency had linked him with services that supported him in capacity building, and prevented some of his presenting issues from worsening. He discussed that as a result of his upbringing, he was never taught how to do his taxes or how to do housework, and that he has had to learn many skills as an adult. He credits the agency he presented to as helping him in being linked with services that *'teach you how to support yourself'*, such as health organisations and a rotary club. This point was supported by another interviewee from Agency Two, who identified that *'the actual referrals and people you speak to about particular things are all empowering'*

Of the respondents who suggested that they had *not* been linked with other services, it was not offered as a criticism; mostly such linking was simply not seen as necessary. One service user from Agency Two stated that she had no time to seek assistance from other services and they were often too far away, so she was content to only receive support from Agency Two. Another interviewee who had presented to Agency One for a supermarket voucher explained that she was already linked with many support services that assisted her in preventing her problems from worsening. A further reason identified for not being linked with other services was a lack of need of additional support. One interviewee stated: *'We don't really have too many problems, we pay our bills and we sometimes go a bit hungry and when we go hungry, [Agency One] has helped us out'*.

Increased ability to deal with problems/increased understanding of financial matters

Interviewees were asked if an aspect of the service they received was *'an increased ability to deal with problems and an increased understanding of financial matters'*. Many answers to this question reported positive experiences with assistance provided to support with dealing with problems, including financial matters. One interviewee stated that the services she received supported her in *'empowerment, taking control, getting control, (and) feeling you're in control'*.

Some respondents wished to discuss their experience or lack of financial counselling that is offered at some of CISVic's member agencies. One respondent from Agency Two spoke highly of his experience of engaging with financial services, since first presenting to the agency for assistance with his tax over six years prior. In the following years, this respondent received financial counselling, which helped him understand his spending habits, and taught him how to use money as a tool, which speaks to the benefits of capacity building in a support service. Another respondent from Agency Two articulated similar sentiments about capacity building: *'once I get help to solve it, I can see the process on how to attend to whatever is causing the problem whether it be financial or otherwise, and once I go through the steps of eliminating the issue or resolving it, then I know how to do it again'*.

Significantly, a common theme that emerged from the interview data related to difficulties associated with financial planning: *'It's hard to budget when you've got no money'*. One respondent reported that her difficulties stem from the low rate of her Newstart payment, which the CISVic member agency cannot change, so it is futile to receive financial counselling. Another respondent also mentioned not requiring financial counselling, but provided a different reason. He explained that financial counselling would be pointless in his case, as he is already skilled at budgetting, citing having little money for a long time as the reason for seeking help: *'If you've only got a set amount of money you gotta be fairly savvy financially in terms of not spending what you don't have... we were offered financial advice... but to make use of that sort of assistance you gotta have money'*.

One notable response detailed how they had been offered referrals and ongoing support for financial assistance (including for gambling counselling). They said they did not want to accept these referrals due to being in denial about their situation, and not wanting things to change: *'I'm in denial, I'm really content with my lifestyle, as poor as it is, I'm happy'*.

Another interviewee made the point that although she did not receive specific assistance for dealing with problems or financial matters, the emergency relief assistance increased her capacity to deal with problems due to relieving some of her financial strain:

If I'm not stressing about, y'know, can I spend this five bucks, am I gonna regret it later if I spend this five bucks on milk and bread right now? If I don't have to think about that, I'm less stressed.

Improved mental wellbeing from sharing burden with others

Interviewees were asked if a benefit of the service was *'a lightening of load after sharing with the worker?'* A common theme amongst the responses was that Community Support Workers displayed empathy throughout the engagement. One respondent from Agency One discussed how the workers treated him with empathy and respect, and that he did not feel like he was treated like a *'dole bludger'*. This presents another theme, that of surprise when a worker did not treat a service user poorly, or that service users have often felt shame when seeking assistance, and they did not feel that way when presenting to either of CISVic's member agencies under study.

...not judgemental, not like they're in a role and you're a client, it's more like they're people. They treat you like a person, with respect, no-one looks down at you. (Agency Two)

It was like [the volunteer] had been in the same situation... sometimes you get embarrassed asking for those kind of handouts... I felt really at ease when I went in there. (Agency One)

The interviewee who was a refugee spoke of how the volunteers care about you, and that through interactions when he is treated with politeness and kindness, and without discrimination, this society begins to feel like his home country. One respondent offered an interesting insight into the effects of empathy, identifying that the respectful and empathetic manner in which the Community Support Workers engage sets a precedent for how service users interact with each other while at the service. This statement illuminates the continued importance of modelling respectful behaviour and unconditional positive regard in service delivery, both for individual wellbeing and cultivating a sense of community.

One respondent detailed that they do not share their burden with the volunteers beyond what is necessary for service delivery, however despite this, *'just having a normal conversation helps, it does lighten the load'*, indicating that a therapeutic intervention is not always necessary for positive impacts of conversation. This concept is supported by another respondent from Agency Two, who stated that talking to the volunteers is *'like talking to a friend'*. A theme was that some service users did not share much of their story with the Community Support Workers, in terms of seeking emotional support, as one respondent articulated: *'I don't like to whinge'*. However, the feeling of a lightening of load did not have to be attributed to talking, as one interviewee identified:

Just someone smiling at you when you walk in the door, you don't realise how much that can make your day. If someone hasn't smiled at you for a while, and then someone does... they make you feel so welcome.

Some respondents identified that although they did not share their story with the volunteers, other aspects of the service did help lighten their load in some way or another. One example of this is one service user from Agency Two, who also volunteers there, stating that she enjoys talking to people while volunteering and has a sense of contributing positively to the community, which lightens her load. In a different vein, some interviewees did not share much with the volunteers of the member agencies, but they

did interact and share their load with other service users. This was particularly the case at Agency Two, which holds a weekly free 'fruit and veggie drive', and a monthly community barbeque, centering on social inclusion, community, and support, which was mentioned many times by respondents as having a significantly positive impact on their wellbeing.

Suggestions to improve the service

A key aim of this pilot study was to seek service users' opinions on how the two CISVic member agencies could improve their service. It is interesting to note that many suggestions were structural, specifically that the member agencies should receive more funding in order to expand their services that already benefit the interviewees. However, some respondents were able to provide concrete suggestions, such as improvements to the space available to wait for the service. One interviewee who had presented to Agency Two discussed how she enjoyed the fact that the service had a community library, where service users could browse the books and take one home, to return at a later date, or leave another in its place. She said this made the service feel welcoming and like being at a friend's house, which was her inspiration for suggesting the addition of comfortable sofas and some light reading material, like magazines to enhance this friendly atmosphere, and provide psychological benefits.

One interviewee raised concerns that there did not seem to be many *young* volunteers at Agency Two, and said she worried that this might put pressure on the current volunteers to work more hours.

On another note, one interviewee said they had witnessed some volunteers being unintentionally disrespectful to service users, particularly around the subjects of experiences of poverty and disadvantage. He emphasised that witnessing this has been an anomaly in his experiences at the member agency, and he has not seen engagements like this recently. Similarly, one respondent discussed occasions when she has felt somewhat hurried in her experiences with volunteers, and that sometimes their language towards her could be '*harsh*'.

One suggestion made by a service user from Agency Two was for a list of available services and referral pathways to be made available in the waiting room or intake rooms. She recounted that a fellow service user had informed her of a service provided by Agency Two, that would have been beneficial for her situation, however she had not been informed of it during her interviews with volunteers, and thus had no knowledge of it. She proposed that a list of services might be useful for those service users who do not feel comfortable telling their full story.

It was also suggested by one interviewee that the space at Agency One could be improved, observing it was run down and old. He wanted to emphasise that this had not negatively impacted on the service he received, but that he could imagine that a more comfortable space would make working and volunteering at Agency One more pleasant.

What would make life easier

Interviewees were asked: *'in general, what would make life easier for you or people in your situation?'*, a question which sought to explore broader and more structural issues that might impinge on the wellbeing of service users. The most notable theme that has been identified amongst the interview data is the significant and crippling inadequacy of Centrelink payments. Most interviewees were in receipt of Newstart, the Disability Support Pension, or the Aged Pension. Almost 80 per cent of interviewees cited the low rate of their Centrelink payments in their discussion of barriers to wellbeing, with one stating: *'It's a struggle... how people can survive on that I don't know.'* One respondent noted that recent public debate on raising the rate of Newstart makes him think that if politicians can afford to give themselves pay rises, then they could increase Centrelink payments. *'They give themselves pay rises at the expense of everyone else'*.

It is important to note that many respondents who receive Newstart emphasised that they had desire to gain employment but identified certain barriers to achieving this. This was no more evident than in the interview with one service user from Agency One who spoke of experiencing difficulties with her job service provider, an agency which she is obligated to work with as part of Newstart's mutual obligations. She stated that she frequently needs to prompt the job service provider to support her, as they have in the past not followed through with their promises of booking in her white card (construction induction training) and first aid course. Despite the barriers that she experiences from this service, she identified that she has strong goals and a plan on how to achieve them, and through this she is determined to get a job. This speaks to the resilience, perseverance, and energy that is demanded of people who must subsist on Newstart payments.

Another point raised by several respondents was the difficulty of access to services without a car. This highlights the compounding stressors of financial insecurity: in not being able to afford and maintain a car, access to services is limited. In addition, as was articulated by one service user, needing to use public transport after accessing the service limits the amount of emergency food relief one can take, particularly if there are additional barriers, such as mobility issues.

Structural barriers relating to gender inequality and gendered violence in the context of family violence were discussed by two interviewees. Both interviewees were victim survivors of family violence and spoke of the historical abuse and its long-term effects as being significant barriers to achieving financial security and personal wellbeing. It is not surprising that when these service users responded to the question *'what would make life easier'*, they stated to have never experienced family violence. The actions of their former partners had caused numerous and long-term problems for them, including dental issues, poverty, identity theft, and homelessness.

A comment by a service user from Agency Two:

Radically overhauled mental health system, radically overhauled social welfare programs that increase the benefits of all welfare recipients ...so we can actually have a living wage. Housing and legal access for anyone on social security. A happy functioning democratic society relies on all people, whether they be the sick, the old, the poor, feeling like they are a part of the wider system and not demonised, punished, and withheld help. When of course most people do want to help themselves, like me, and are perfectly capable of helping myself but... it just goes round in circles because the money we receive for our benefit is just so small, so we're always trapped in a cycle of poverty. The success of a society is measured on its treatment of the poor, the sick, the disenfranchised... the success of a society is not based on how three people have billions of dollars in their bank account and businesses, (and) their business's profits are booming...

Conclusion

This pilot study of follow-up in-depth interviews formed part of CISVic's Evaluation Framework and sought to understand service users' experiences of two of CISVic member agencies to learn about the service they received and any impact it had on their situation, if any. A significant finding was that service users unanimously stated that they were better off because of the support they received from the two CISVic member agencies. In addition, a high number of interviewees said that one of the best aspects of the service they received was that assistance provided was dual in nature: immediate practical help and ongoing casework support, thus providing some feeling of increased control and mastery over their situation. Almost 80 percent of interviewees mentioned the low rate of Centrelink payments (Newstart, Disability Support Pension, and Aged Pension) as contributing to the situation that led them to seek assistance and represented a significant barrier to their wellbeing.

The importance of empathic and respectful engagement was a common view amongst interviewees, which highlights the continued need for focus on relational work with service users, through modelling respectful behaviour and unconditional positive regard. This was emphasised when one respondent identified that the kind manner in which the Community Support Workers engaged with service users set a precedent for interactions between service users. As one interviewee said: *'Just someone smiling at you when you walk through the door, you don't realise how much that can make your day'*.

A strong sense of community was a recurring theme in the interviews and was indicated to inspire a desire for fairness and reciprocity amongst many service users. In addition, this strengthening of a sense of community was identified as being both a benefit of the assistance and a driving force in repeat presentations. The social aspect of presenting to the member agencies was emphasised, with some service users placing social inclusion and experiencing a sense of community as the most important aspects of the service. A strong community and social inclusion are fundamental to personal and societal wellbeing, highlighting the necessity of these spaces and the support that occurs within them. *'It's all about the dignity'*.

The data gathered from these interviews will be used to inform the ongoing design and delivery of services provided by all CISVic member agencies. In addition, the data will also assist in building theory about what modes of service work for whom under what circumstances.

Learnings from the implementation of this pilot study (both challenges and positives) will inform follow-up interviewing of service users as an integral part of CISVic's Evaluation Framework.

Finally, findings from this pilot study will assist in providing evidence required for funding bodies and to support policy submissions and CISVic's advocacy work, with the aim of affecting positive and meaningful systemic change.

Appendix

Semi-structured interview schedule

Introduction:

Hello, my name is Brigid, I'm calling from Community Information and Support Victoria, the peak body of XXX. Am I speaking with XXX? I'm a Social Work student with RMIT and on placement at CISVic. I am helping with some research to improve the service provided by XXX.

I understand you went to XXX for assistance recently. Would you mind if I ask you a few questions about the service you received and your current situation? It would take roughly from 15 to 30 minutes, depending on how much you wish to talk. A supermarket voucher worth \$50 will be provided as a thank-you for your time if you want to participate in an interview.

Would you mind if I recorded this interview?

I will now turn the recorder on and ask for your consent again, so we have a record of it.

I have now turned on the recorder.

I do not have your full name and your name will certainly not be recorded with anything you say. All efforts will be made to make sure you are not identifiable in any reporting.

Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you can decline to answer any question or discontinue the interview at any time. This will have no effect on any service you receive from XXX. I will also mention that my supervisor is also present in the room currently, and this phone call is on speakerphone.

Would you still like to continue?

.....

1. I understand you went to XXX recently.
 - a) Can you tell me a bit about your situation that led you to seek help? (*prompt for main issue/s as well as key characteristics of their situation*)
2. Can you describe the service you have received from XXX?
3. What type of assistance were you seeking? (*only ask if they haven't already given this information*)
4. Did you receive this assistance? yes/no (*ask to elaborate*)
5. In general, do you think you are better off because of the support you received from XXX?
 - a) If no, can you tell me why? (*probe for both individual and systemic barriers as well as possible service limitations e.g. no funds*)
 - b) If yes, what was most beneficial/useful? (*probe what was beneficial/useful toward what end/s*)

I am now going to ask you about some aspects of the service you received.

6. Can you tell me if you received any of the following benefits from the service at XXX?:

(Prompt for the following, while acknowledging if already touched on)

- a) Increased knowledge about services and options
 - b) Improved ability to make choices *(with awareness that more options may not be available)*
 - c) Linking with services that could stop problems becoming worse
 - d) Increased ability to deal with problems/ Increased understanding of financial matters (if relevant)
 - e) Lightening of load after sharing with worker
7. Can you make any suggestions to improve the service at XXX?
8. In general, what would make life easier for you or people in your situation?
9. Is there anything you would like to add?

Would you like to be kept informed of any findings from this research on the service?

You will receive a supermarket voucher worth \$50 will be provided as a thank you, could I take your contact details in order to mail it to you? I will turn off the recording now so your personal information will not be recorded with your interview responses.