



Centrelink Community Officer Demonstration Project

**A Collaborative Project undertaken by
Hanover Welfare Services and
Windsor Centrelink Customer Service Centre**

July 2002

Prepared for Centrelink from funding derived from the National Homelessness Strategy, Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services.

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Acknowledgements

This demonstration project involved the collaboration and contribution from many people through out the eight-week period of the trial. We would particularly like to express our gratitude to Centrelink for obtaining the necessary funding through the National Homelessness Strategy in order to undertake the trial. We are especially grateful to the clients who participated and provided valuable feedback, and to all of Hanover's management and staff for their commitment to making the trial possible within a short timeframe.

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List of Acronyms

AWT - Australians Working Together

CCU – Centrelink Community Unit

CCO – Centrelink Community Officers

CCSO – Centrelink Customer Service Officer

CCSC – Centrelink Customer Service Centre

IA – Intensive Assistance

JSCI – Job Seeker Classification Instrument

NHS – National Homelessness Strategy

PCOs – Project Community Officers

PSP – Personal Support Programme

SAAP – Supported Accommodation Assistance Program

THM – Transitional Housing Management

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Executive Summary

Hanover Welfare Services, based in Melbourne, is a major provider of crisis and supported accommodation, social policy research and advocacy for those experiencing homelessness. At the beginning of 2002, Hanover completed a research project for the Department of Family and Community Services to determine the effectiveness of the Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI) for a sample of job seekers experiencing homelessness. The report concluded that the interview procedures are failing to engage this group of disadvantaged job seekers in a way that will facilitate full disclosure of relevant circumstances to enable an informed assessment of their 'job readiness' and capacity to participate in employment assistance programs.

Following the dissemination of research findings within Centrelink and FaCS, a demonstration project was initiated to trial a collaborative approach between Hanover Welfare Services and Windsor Centrelink Customer Service Centre. Three Hanover social workers were seconded and trained as Project Community Officers to deliver a Centrelink out posted service for a two-month period over May and June this year. The trial period incorporated training of the PCOs and an integration strategy to establish referral pathways within the four participating services. The PCOs spent two to three days within Hanover's services and the remaining time at Windsor Centrelink Customer Service Centre.

A key emphasis of the current demonstration project was to trial an engagement strategy within a homeless service setting that would improve disclosure of JSCI factors to enable a review of the current circumstances of those experiencing homelessness. A referral process following initial service intake and assessment and also through ongoing case management practice was established within each service to provide an integrated response and increase opportunity to generate voluntary referrals. The engagement process was tested and refined through the use of a participatory action research methodology that enabled ongoing critical reflection of the practices utilised within the project team and to determine the broader service impact.

As undertaking a complete review of homeless service client's JSCI was a central focus of the project, the trial targeted Newstart and Youth Allowance recipients. A total of 53 clients accessed the PCOs, of whom, 38 (72%) had their JSCI reviewed. The majority of reviews (58%) were undertaken for clients residing within Hanover Southbank, followed by Hanover Housing (26%), Young Adults (11%) and Families Service (5%). Supporting Hanover's previous research, the participant profile was characterised by long-term unemployment, multiple employment barriers and multiple cycling between different activities and programs.

The engagement strategy adopted by the PCOs appeared to be successful in increasing customer preparedness to disclose personal issues to Centrelink without the need to enforce penalties for non-attendance and demonstrated that more accurate assessment of circumstances was able to occur within the homeless service setting. In particular, before and after comparisons of participant JSCI records indicated a marked increase in many of the identified employment factors following contact with the PCOs. Specifically, recording of "instability of residence" increased by 63 per cent. Further notable increases included "other personal factors" (29% ↑), disability/ medical condition (23% ↑),

ex-offender status as juvenile/adult in last five to ten years (21% ↑), and family status living alone (21% ↑).

Engagement of clients within the homeless service setting provides direct evidence of their homelessness and provides immense opportunity for improved understanding of their circumstances that will ultimately lead to improved long-term outcomes through appropriate participation in employment assistance programs. In addition to updating participants JSCI and resolving income related issues, there were a number of immediate outcomes. In particular, the referral process for supplementary assessment and engagement with Specialist Centrelink Officers was enhanced through increasing the capacity for follow up and directly linking the client to the appropriate Centrelink Officer at the point of crisis. In some cases being able to resolve participant's circumstances more rapidly by being able to verify their situation prevented loss of housing for those with pending evictions in the private market.

Generally, from the perspective of trial participants, feedback about the engagement process was extremely positive, with all participants reporting a preference for accessing Centrelink services via the homeless service where they were seeking housing or accommodation assistance. From the service provider perspective, a significant outcome of the demonstration project has been increased awareness of Centrelink procedures and their role in referring for employment assistance through the use of the JSCI. This has contributed to enhance working relationships and dialogue between service providers and Centrelink, enabling support workers to advocate for clients from an informed position. Improved communication between service providers and Centrelink through the PCO positions enabled shared discussion of client circumstances and with the participant's consent increased capacity for follow up.

Following the current trial period, the Windsor CCU has extended services to Hanover Southbank. This has been a significant outcome from the project, ensuring that working relationships that have been fostered can be maintained. The groundwork undertaken through the integration strategy has provided a framework for working effectively within the existing service structure and will assist with maintaining momentum for a collaborative response between Centrelink and Hanover support workers.

Whilst the PCOs have returned to Hanover with greater knowledge of Centrelink procedures, which will assist with client advocacy, a number of learnings have emerged through the action research process to inform future practice to ensure that responses for jobseekers experiencing homelessness are sustainable. Strengthening the capacity for future co-location initiatives through further development of the Centrelink Community Officer Program, improved referral pathways and development of a co-ordinated and ongoing training program for both the homeless service system and Centrelink are among the key needs for developing an effective response for homeless job seekers.

The successful exchange of knowledge between Hanover and Centrelink that has been generated from the trial has demonstrated the benefits from ongoing working relationships between the sectors. To ensure continued gains in the development of effective collaborative relationships the following recommendations have been formulated based on the themes of co-location, improving referral pathways and training.

Service Co-location

In enhancing future service co-location responses it is recommended that:

- There be increased commitment to the Centrelink Community Officer Program within Family and Community Services, Housing Support Branch through the provision of recurrent program funding as a specialist Centrelink homelessness response.
- The CCO program be integrated within a range of service models within the homeless service system including SAAP crisis, medium term, and transitional housing services to provide a continuum of service response according to different stages of homelessness.

Based on the learnings of what “worked well” and what did not, the following points illustrate some of the key aspects that need to be linked to future co-location responses:

- Outline the purpose of the exchange/co-location process clearly, including objectives, what the expectations will be for those participating
- Make an agreement of what each party i.e. SAAP and Centrelink is to gain from the exchange/co-location and who will be responsible for co-ordination at both service sites
- Develop a good understanding of the service structure and culture in order to enhance referral processes. Recognising that each service has unique service models will mean the need to adopt service specific strategies.
- Ensure sufficient time to allow all staff to be familiar with the purpose of the exchange/co-location before direct service delivery component commences
- Have a specific person within SAAP/ Centrelink that acts as a “buddy” or key contact person
- Whilst maintaining separateness of SAAP and Centrelink functions, ensure integrated response for the client through the development of clear referral pathways/protocols and mechanisms for shared communication between workers, including obtaining client consent.
- Include component of attending staff meetings regularly to ensure that working relationships are able to be maintained
- Be able to share facilities

Improving Referral Pathways

To ensure improved referral pathways into appropriate employment assistance it is recommended that:

- A targeted review process be introduced within the homeless service setting through the Centrelink Community Officer Program that incorporates past activity history, medical certificates, address history, and other document notes in order to make informed JSCI referrals.
- There be processes implemented to prevent repeat referrals for Intensive Assistance without follow up of previous outcomes and reassessment for eligibility to other employment assistance programs including specialist Intensive Assistance providers and Personal Support Programme.
- A formal referral protocol be established for the immediate review of breaches in the instances where the breach is affecting the client's capacity to enter into or maintain independent and stable housing.
- A formal referral protocol be developed between local homeless services and Centrelink Customer Service Centres to enable a more direct pathway for a supplementary assessment by Centrelink social workers for the Personal Support Programme.

Further Training

To ensure the development of an ongoing training program it is recommended that:

- Centrelink and the Housing Support Branch, through the National Homelessness Strategy work in partnership to develop a training program for Centrelink and the homeless service system.
- Local Centrelink Customer Service Centres and Homeless Services undertake training exchange programs that incorporate service delivery issues relevant to local communities.

SAAP Training Requirements

In the context of being able to make informed referrals and advocate for those experiencing homelessness, the following training requirements are suggested for SAAP and THM providers:

- Centrelink information book for caseworkers
- Case workers to be given Centrelink Community Unit direct phone number/mobile phone numbers

- Phone numbers of all Centrelink Customer Service Centres, including social workers and other Specialist Centrelink officers
- Basic training on all benefits – DSP, NSA, YA – eligibility, amount, independent youth allowance
- Specific training on loans, advance payments, crisis payments, breaches and reviews
- Overview of mutual obligation activities
- JSCI factors and scores
- Overview of specialist job network providers
- Clients rights
- Specific homeless services provided by Centrelink
- Advice to give clients – i.e. 14 days to disclose, 100 points, proof of birth, clean slating

Centrelink Training Requirements

Through out the trial the following training needs were identified for Centrelink:

- Understanding of homelessness - dispelling some of the myths about homelessness.
- What are the local issues and service system in the area?
- Training in conflict resolution and basic welfare training in terms of engaging with customers in a non-judgemental or inflammatory manner.
- Increasing skill in eliciting and integrating existing records particularly for reviews as a means of improving disclosure for JSCI record.

Specifically in enhancing the Centrelink Community Officer role, the following training needs are suggested:

- Development of a specific training tool that is tailored to the Centrelink Community Officer role, which includes training on homelessness in terms of broad policy and local issues and understanding of homelessness service system within the area that they will be located.
- CCOs fully trained in undertaking review of the JSCI, including awareness of the importance of being able to integrate all records before determining a score.
- Review of JSCI should be incorporated into the job description of the CCO and training i.e. be able to undertake review of customers who circumstances and looking at past activity history- IA, incapacity, cycling.

- Undertaking a review of the JSCI of those experiencing homelessness involves a specific set of engagement skills particularly for those who have had negative experiences with Centrelink. CCOs need to have well-developed interpersonal skills, particularly in conflict resolution for potentially difficult clients.
- Need to have background or at least some understanding of welfare related issues.

1. Introduction

During the beginning of 2002, Hanover completed a research project for the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, funded through the National Homelessness Strategy *entitled Homelessness and Employment Assistance; A research report examining the effectiveness of assessment and job referral procedures for income support recipients experiencing homelessness*. The research was initiated to improve current employment assessment procedures for those experiencing homelessness, by investigating the completeness of the Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI) for a sample of job seekers experiencing homelessness.

The key findings of the research was that the current procedures for conducting the JSCI are failing to record homelessness as well as relevant personal factors for homeless Newstart recipients. The report concluded that the current interview procedures are failing to engage this group of disadvantaged job seekers in a way that will facilitate full disclosure of all relevant circumstances to making an informed assessment of their 'job readiness' and capacity to participate in employment assistance programs.

Following on from the dissemination of the research findings within Centrelink and FaCS, a developmental project has been initiated to trial collaborative approaches between homeless services (SAAP/THM) and Centrelink staff. Hanover Welfare Services was approached by Centrelink, National Support Office, Canberra to participate in a Centrelink Community Officer Demonstration Project, whereby three social workers from Hanover were seconded by Centrelink, provided with training and returned to Hanover to work as Project Community Officers. This was an innovative approach with the dual aim of building relationship between SAAP and Centrelink and trialing an engagement strategy for reviewing the income and employment assistance circumstances of those experiencing homelessness.

1.1 Hanover Welfare Services

Hanover Welfare Services is a major provider of crisis and supported accommodation, social policy research and advocacy for those experiencing homelessness. Founded in 1964, Hanover Welfare Services is a non-profit independent company assisting approximately 450 people daily, involving the provision of both crisis and transitional accommodation, financial and material aid, counselling, meals, budgeting, medical assistance, work skills training and recreational opportunities. Providing a specialist homelessness response, Hanover has a range of targeted services located within Melbourne's Northern and Southern regions. For more detailed overview of services provided see Appendix 2.

1.2 Windsor Centrelink Customer Service Centre

Windsor Centrelink Customer Service Centre (WCCSC) services the areas of South Yarra, Prahran, Kooyong, Windsor, St Kilda, Balaclava, Elwood, Caulfield, Elsternwick, Brighton, Malvern, and Glen Iris. The WCCSC was formed during 1999 following an amalgamation of the St Kilda and Prahran Offices.

The Community Support Unit, now known as the Centrelink Community Unit (CCU) commenced as an initiative of the St Kilda Office during 1994. The CCU was established to service homeless and at risk customers who may not be able to access Centrelink services. The Unit began with three staff, including a team leader and provided services to Frontyard, hospitals within the area, St Kilda Crisis Centre, Windana, Bridge, Winja Ulupna and Galliamble. Currently the CCU is still based at Windsor operating with three Centrelink Community Officers and a team leader. The CCU is still servicing the above agencies and has extended services to Collingwood College, Baptist Church at Collins Street and the Melbourne Remand Centre – Spencer Street and more recently Hanover Southbank.

1.3 Project Aims and Objectives

The main aim of the trial was to inform the development of a more integrated service response to homeless job seekers on income support, resulting in more effective and efficient outcomes for shared client group amongst SAAP/THM services and Centrelink.

The specific project objectives were to:

- trial a Centrelink engagement strategy for homeless job seekers by seconding SAAP/THM workers from Hanover Welfare Services to fulfil a Centrelink Community Officer role within three of Hanover's service locations;
- contribute to improved income and employment assessment outcomes for Centrelink customers experiencing homelessness;
- identify current barriers to effective income support and employment assistance for those experiencing homelessness;
- contribute to enhanced understanding of respective services roles; and
- develop a collaborative service framework between SAAP/THM and Centrelink based on learnings from the trial to ensure sustained relationships between SAAP/THM and Centrelink that contributes to ongoing improvements in the assessment of homeless job seekers.

2. Methodology

Following initial developmental discussions between Centrelink and Hanover Welfare Services, three trained social workers from Hanover Welfare Services were seconded as Project Community Officers for a two-month period commencing in April 29th and completed by June 28th. Throughout the duration of the pilot, the PCOs were employees of Centrelink and were provided with two weeks induction and training into Centrelink procedures, including payment types, conducting the Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI), job network and related mutual obligation requirements as well as broader directions within Centrelink through Australian's Working Together policy. A further six weeks were spent within four of Hanover's service sites including Southbank Supported Accommodation Service, Hanover Housing, Youth Adults and Family Service.

The seconded PCOs underwent an induction and training program within Centrelink over a two-week period. The PCOs were employed by Centrelink for the duration of the trial and reported to the Community Officer Team Leader on a day-to-day basis. Following Centrelink training in the initial weeks each PCO returned to a different Hanover service from where they were originally working to avoid working with the same clients that they had supported as social workers.

As the PCOs did not have discretionary decision-making power with respect to income or employment assistance, the PCOs spent 2-3 days within the SAAP services and the remaining 2 days within Centrelink to process review information collected. PCOs were provided with supervisors to oversee income and employment assistance decisions made.

2.1 Defining Participatory Action Research

The pilot adopted a participatory action research methodology to evaluate all stages of implementation to allow sufficient flexibility to adapt and respond to learnings as they emerged and also document activity and case studies that would inform the development of a potential service framework for collaboration. Hanover's Research and Development Unit was appointed to facilitate the action research process.

The purpose of action research is to achieve both action (that is, change) and research (that is, understanding) (Dick, B 1997).

In achieving both *change* and *understanding*, participatory action research is focused on identifying solutions to a specific problem or concern within an organisation or community. Action research is therefore generally participatory, with key stakeholders, practitioners, and researchers working collaboratively as co researchers to identify solutions to the problem.

Participatory Action Research is underpinned by a flexible action and review cycle at all stages of service development and delivery. Action research can be described as having four “moments”, as follows:

reflection → planning → action → observation.

This process often occurs in “cycles” or “spirals” until there is increased understanding of the problem being examined and participants are able to implement action to bring about the desired change.

2.2 Trial Components

The three PCOs, Hanover’s Research and Policy Officer and Centrelink Community Team Leader worked as co-researchers in documenting learnings at the point of service implementation. The trial involved undertaking a complete review of Newstart and Youth Allowance recipients who were currently residing or accessing the four participating services, whilst critically reflecting on service learnings during all stages of implementation. Whilst occurring in a circular reflective planning process, the trial involved the following elements summarised below.

2.2.1 Integration within the Services

Integration activities included:

- development of internal communication strategy;
- attendance at individual service staff meetings on a number of occasions;
- development of flyer to be handed out to clients;
- development of service promotional poster;
- development of service roster;
- development of handout for staff about the JSCI;
- presentation at Hanover’s general staff meeting;
- informally talking to staff about the role of CCO and the trial; and
- participation in Centrelink planning day as well as a range of Centrelink meetings.

2.2.2 Assessment of Client Circumstances

The review process involved:

- seeking informed consent to participate in the trial prior to commencement of review interview;

- completing an open ended checklist to engage the client and determine whether they met the project eligibility criteria;
- completing the Centrelink Looking for Work or Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI), to determine whether current Centrelink information was up to date according to the customers circumstances;
- updating Centrelink customer records as appropriate;
- liaising with Centrelink staff to resolve client issues emerging; and
- providing Centrelink customers with information and advice on matters relating to Centrelink.

2.2.3 Evaluation

Evaluation methods included:

- maintenance of reflective journal to document and discuss learnings;
- seeking client feedback immediately following review interviews;
- seeking informal staff feedback and also attendance at SAAP/THM and Centrelink Community Unit staff meetings;
- documentation of case studies to identify current barriers to effective engagement of clients experiencing homelessness;
- analysis of review data to profile project participants and determine short-term outcomes from the PCO intervention;
- weeking Project Team meetings to discuss the progress of the trial, feedback learnings and make any necessary adjustments in integrating the CCO service into the selected sites. This process enabled shared understanding of SAAP/THM and Centrelink and generated continued enthusiasm for the process; and
- steering Committee meetings to oversee project direction.

3. Integration within the Service

The first three weeks of the trial involved a considerable amount promotional work both within Hanover's Services and Windsor Centrelink. There was some concern amongst service staff at Hanover that clients would be reluctant to see a Centrelink Community Officer (CCO), which would affect the capacity to generate referrals. The co-location of the Personal Advisor at Southbank within the same two weeks of the trial commencing added to confusion amongst service staff as to who was eligible for what program, meaning that referrals for both roles were low to begin with.

From the first two weekly team reflection meetings it was agreed that there needed to be increased promotion of the Centrelink Community Officer role within the services to enhance the case workers understanding of both the CCO role and benefits for their clients. The strategy focused on increasing the workers understanding of the JSCI and the role the CCO had in ensuring that it was accurate, what the JSCI is and how it works. As many support workers were not aware of the JSCI, using an educational strategy enabled services to fully understand Centrelink's dual role of assessing for both income support and employment assistance. The use of case studies of before and after intervention proved effective in enhancing understanding and relayed some concerns that clients are not necessarily going to be adversely affected by contacting the CCO.

While posters and promotional material were used to promote the trial, worker relationships have proven to be the most effective means of generating referrals to the PCOs. Having a CCO located within the crisis and transitional accommodation services represents a different service model from previous CCO locations, which are predominately drop in and provide an easily accessible client base. Given this difference, awareness raising and relationship building was considered a crucial part of the integration strategy within Hanover. Part of this was the recognition that the flow on effect will take time as individual workers increase their confidence of the process and are able to make informed referrals for their clients.

As the PCOs returning back to Hanover from Centrelink training did not go back to the service that they had been originally working in, feelings of being the new staff member were simulated and would be a similar experience other CCOs would experience coming into a different organization. The need to develop one to one working relationships with those who are making referrals will be critical to the success of any future co-location activities.

In terms of integrating into the Centrelink environment, there was some initial confusion amongst Centrelink staff as to the purpose of seconding support workers from another service and how the project was going to be different from the work they are currently doing within the Centrelink Community Unit. As awareness of the project increased over time, staff within the unit and also team leaders within employment and youth section became interested in the trial's progress.

As the CCU is currently undergoing a change management process, management were very open to any feedback emerging from the trial that could assist in shaping the future direction of the Unit.

The PCOs were provided with opportunities to contribute project learnings through weekly project team reflection meetings, CCU team meetings and attendance at community forums and other meetings.

3.1 Referral Pathways

As the project was targeting all Newstart and Youth Allowance recipients, in order to review their circumstances, one of the challenges was to determine the most appropriate referral pathways for those clients who did not necessarily have pressing income support issues and therefore otherwise may not have contacted Centrelink. Critical to the process of ensuring that the SAAP/THM service and PCOs would be able to work collaboratively with clients, the referral process was based on an empowerment model, which involved providing clients with information about the trial and the services provided by the PCOs as a means of encouraging the client to attend the CCO in the absence of pressing income needs.

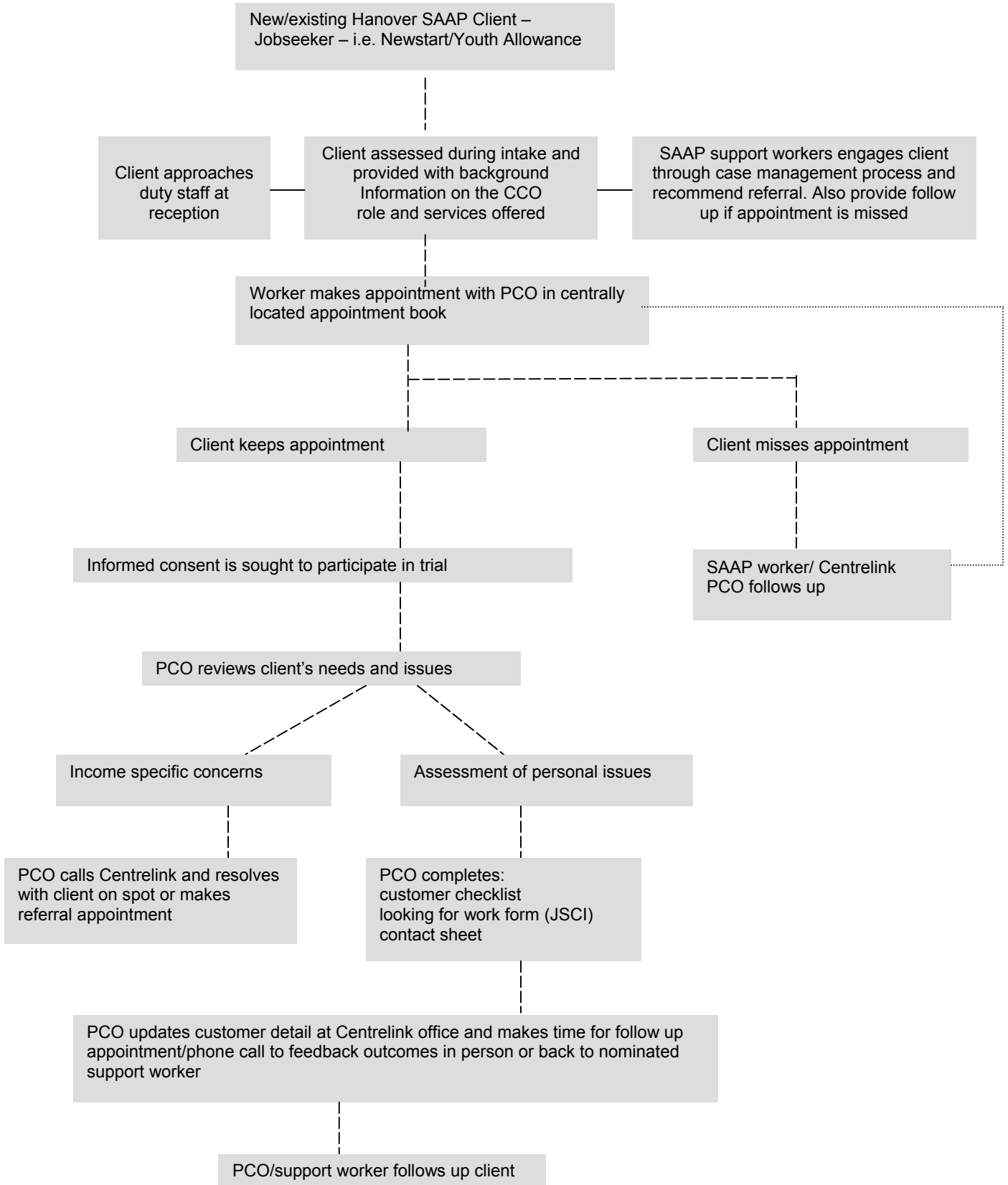
As involvement in the trial was voluntary, breaking down preconceived views about Centrelink, based on prior experiences within the Customer Service Centres in some instances, has required considerable advocacy work on behalf of the PCOs and support workers. This highlighted the importance of ensuring that the referral process is effectively integrated into the intake assessment and case management practice within the services. This approach has appeared to be a successful means of increasing preparedness to report to Centrelink without the need to enforce penalties for non-attendance. The high attendance rate for appointments with the PCOs highlights the success of this approach.

As each participating service has a different service structure and size, the project team adopted different strategies for generating referrals. Hanover Southbank is a large 24-hour service with a large number of staff working within different teams and at different times of the day. Clients also come and go at different times of the day and night.

In order to maximise the opportunity for client contacts with the PCOs, referrals involved a three tiered approach including informing the client during intake and assessment undertaken by Housing Information and Referral (HIR) workers and duty staff, approaching duty staff at reception for appointment, social workers responsible for ongoing case management support of clients recommending that they see the PCO while they are at the service. The appointment book was centrally located within reception and all workers were able to make an appointment. Figure 1 illustrates the referral process within Southbank.

Hanover Housing, Families and Young Adults service all have a smaller staff structure. Within Families and Young Adults referrals were made directly to the PCO and came from ongoing support workers. Hanover Housing Service provides a drop in and appointment based model of service. In addition to promotional material located around the service, housing support workers upon seeing their clients for appointments would refer eligible clients to the PCO. Appointments were made for the same day or within a few days following initial contact with the service. A high attendance rate for appointments was recorded, despite some clients having to return to the service on subsequent days.

Figure 1: Community Officer Referral & Assessment Process for Southbank



3.2 Interview and Review Process

Given the difficulty of fully engaging Centrelink customers in review processes, as evidenced by the high rate of “do not attends” to Centrelink interviews, the importance of being able to undertake reviews in an environment that is more likely to elicit relevant personal information is critical. This is particularly so during periods of instability where contact with Centrelink may be lost through normal means of correspondence.

3.2.1 Elements of Effective Engagement with the Client

The main purpose of the demonstration project was to trial an engagement process, for reviewing and updating the JSCI in addition to addressing any relevant income issues that clients also presented with. As roughly three quarters of clients seen by the PCOs had their JSCI reviewed and updated, the time spent with them was for a longer duration, generally averaging 45 minutes per client. Follow up interviews and phone calls were also provided for client contacts.

The interview process was tested over the period of the trial and demonstrated improved disclosure to the Centrelink Community Officer. Developing a consistent process to update and review the JSCI in addition to addressing any income entitlement issues within the community setting was considered useful and is viewed as having broader benefits in terms of further training for other CCOs within Windsor and across Australia. However, as most Centrelink Community Officer contacts rely on alternating through various computer screens to facilitate discussion, the review process within the current trial presents an artificial process compared with normal Centrelink practices. It would be useful to test continued use of an informal checklist as an initial engagement tool that can be later added to the computer so that the customer does not feel that every word they say is entered onto the computer system.

A key component of the interaction was to seek informed consent for the trial and to explain in more detail what the JSCI is and how it relates to the job network. The engagement process at the very beginning of the interview was very important and determined how the rest of the interview would go.

Based on learnings from the trial and the professional social work training of the three PCOs, the main elements to effective engagement with the client within the homeless service setting are summarised below.

- Body language is critical in the interaction in particular facing the client, not having physical barriers in front of them and the interviewer.
- Non-judgemental or displaying assumptions about the client’s circumstances.
- Explaining the process fully to clients and letting them know the difference between when they are being assessed for income support and employment assistance.

- Explaining what the JSCI is and the importance and benefits of answering openly and taking the time to explain how the job network and employment assistance operates. This includes reassuring clients that their payments will not be adversely affected if they disclose relevant personal factors affecting their ability for participation.
- Clarifying Centrelink processes and reasons why certain decisions have been made.
- Privacy, being able to interview the client in an enclosed space.
- Taking a few minutes to develop some rapport with the client, to determine how their day has been or what's happening in their life at the moment, for example. Three minutes of engagement is likely to result in more open communication and increased trust.
- Using other methods for documenting client information that does not rely on a computer only interaction.
- Listening to what the client is saying and showing empathy and validating past experiences by not dismissing what is being said.
- Appropriate eye contact that is engaging and not intimidating.
- The use of non-corporate promotional material within the SAAP/THM service.
- Flexibility of not having compulsory appointments, including the flexibility to reschedule if the client is not able to attend by providing some follow-up from the case worker/Centrelink officer.
- Excellent service referral knowledge.
- Personalised follow up to clients via phone contact or appointment to provide feedback on the outcome of the review.
- Seeking client's consent to feedback outcomes to SAAP or Housing support workers or nominate support worker as contact person.

3.2.2. Responding to the JSCI Questions

From observations and client feedback provided to the PCOs, there appears to be limited understanding of the JSCI process amongst clients, with clients frequently expressing "why does Centrelink need to know this information". Many clients were initially reluctant to discuss their issues, however, once the project was fully explained and its purpose, clients seemed more relaxed and were able to disclose more freely. Once engaged in the review process the PCOs also observed that clients felt more at ease to raise questions to clarify issues or any confusion and were generally more interactive compared with their observations of reviews undertaken within the normal Centrelink environment.

Due to time constraints during normal review processes within Centrelink, the PCOs observed that many Centrelink CSOs were not able to partake in this level of engagement.

It was also observed that the ordering of the JSCI, particularly on the computer screen does not enable full disclosure within the context of natural flowing conversation. On many occasions the questions on the JSCI had to be read out as they were written and then reinterpreted for the client so that they were able to understand what the question was asking and why the information was needed.

Whilst disclosure generally improved through the review process, there are still a number of barriers that prevent full disclosure to enable clients to be referred for supplementary assessment. In particular reliance on disclosing “other personal factor” as the main trigger for a supplementary assessment is potentially problematic for many of those experiencing homelessness.

Throughout the review process, clients were more likely to disclose homelessness and medical condition/disability/addition and even ex-offender status, however were generally more reluctant to disclose “other personal factors”, even when it was evident from the interaction that these were present. The wording of the question 37 *“Is there anything else that makes it difficult for you to find work or that you would like to speak to a specialist Centrelink officer about”* is believed to be one of the factors contributing to reluctance to disclose any further issues.

This last question in particular required a lot of discussion about what the question actually meant, which did improve disclosure amongst some, however would possibly go undetected within the normal Centrelink review process. Clients were confused as to what a specialist Centrelink officer is and generally have some reluctance about talking about their issues with an occupational psychologist. It was generally found that clients are more willing to access Centrelink social workers, particularly when recommended by their caseworker.

Being able to make direct referrals to the Centrelink social worker for a supplementary assessment process will be critical in ensuring that assessment is not solely based on a computerised automatic referral process. Given that this is a crucial question that can link people in for a supplementary assessment and referral onto to the Personal Support Programme, it will be critical that there are mechanisms to be able to identify clients experiencing homelessness who are not disclosing during the new claim and reviews because of a lack of awareness of the process.

Also, it was observed that literacy is often assumed if the client speaks English well, and competency in reading and writing may go undetected if not prompted, particularly for clients from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. There was one example, where it was documented that a client required an interpreter, however, their JSCI recorded that their literacy was good.

3.3 Feedback from Participants and Service Providers

3.3.1 What ‘Worked Well’?

Participant Feedback

Following each interview, clients were asked to provide feedback on what they liked about the trial, what they did not like and what they thought could be improved. Generally, feedback about the process was extremely positive, with all clients reporting a preference for accessing Centrelink services via SAAP or THM service where they were seeking housing or accommodation assistance.

Having the PCO located within the service was considered extremely accessible and the majority of clients felt that contact was more personal, making them feel at ease during the interaction. In particular, many commented that they felt more comfortable in a private space and did not feel “like everyone behind you in cue is listening”. Further, many reported that they felt more comfortable within the community setting because they did not feel judged and were able to spend more time having their issues listened to. The majority of clients talk about feeling confused about the information they have received from Centrelink and have felt uncomfortable clarifying issues.

Many clients also talked about their past experience with Centrelink being a negative one, feeling intimidated and overwhelmed. There was a view amongst some clients that Centrelink does not understand their predicament, and that they are treated with suspicion. Feedback from many clients was that they are in fact eager to work and reported that current employment assistance programs have done little to assist them in finding employment, with a number of clients commenting that they had been mismatched. Clients generally reported limited understanding of employment assistance programs.

Some their comments include:

The process was helpful... I got more information in 30 minutes then years at Centrelink [Trial participant].

Good...better here than at Centrelink... I prefer one to one relaxed environment...Centrelink is too overwhelming [Trial participant].

More relaxed... I'm highly strung with Centrelink... being relaxed makes it easier [Trial participant].

I feel confused when I go to Centrelink; they never try to help me [Trial participant].

This is the first time I have felt comfortable talking to a Centrelink worker [Trial participant].

Centrelink staff don't understand that everyone is an individual and not a number [Trial participant].

More realistic to see a worker at Southbank....the worker can see the reality of the situation, where at Centrelink they don't. Centrelink is more office like – more corporate [Trial participant].

Going into Centrelink you see three different people and get three different answers [Trial participant].

So Centrelink staff know how to use a computer, they don't have people skills...open plan not good – you can hear everything [Trial participant].

Centrelink staff need more manners, they are quick to criticise without hearing the full story [Trial participant].

I felt that [the PCO] was actually listening to what I was saying [Trial participant].

Service Providers

Feedback about the trial was also sought from service providers through attendance at staff meetings and informal feedback provided to PCOs throughout the duration of the project. Overall, service staff thought that the trial was worthwhile and were glad that Hanover had taken part because relationships have been fostered with Centrelink. Generally, once service staff was fully aware of the services offered by the PCOs, they were very supportive of having a Centrelink Officer based at the service.

Staff reported that their presence has made a significant difference for their clients who are often reluctant or fearful of going into the mainstream office unless the matter is related to urgent income issues, including breaching. There was a view amongst some service staff that whilst contacting Centrelink to revoke breaches might encourage the client to attend the Centrelink Customer Service Centre, it does not necessarily facilitate a willingness to disclose personal circumstances to the CSO at the front desk counter.

Most staff felt the decision to have a Hanover SAAP/THM worker performing the role of a Centrelink officer was beneficial in increasing referrals for the review process as it made it easier to “sell” to clients because they were able to personally recommend the service. In making referrals to mainstream Centrelink service centres staff reported that a crucial aspect in being able to secure effective outcomes for the client in a period a crisis is having a key contact person within Centrelink that relationships can be built. Clients are more likely to be prepared to see Centrelink if SAAP support workers have a contact name and an existing relationship with some one that they can recommend to their clients. Service staff generally reported that they thought having a Centrelink officer located within the service was more accessible, personalised, and less threatening for those who experiencing crisis.

When clients go to Centrelink they often have to go through multiple people, with the project we had a direct worker that we knew could refer to who would spend the time to resolve their situation – many times when we refer to Centrelink they are not picking up on key things – client gets circulated around the system which makes them less willing to engage [Service provider].

When they saw the Centrelink Community Officer they didn't feel like they were in trouble or going to be breached so they felt more willing to engage in the process" [Service provider].

Going to Centrelink causes the client a considerable amount of stress and having a familiar person reduces the amount of animosity ...being able to tell the client that this person was ok was good [Service provider].

Young people see Centrelink as an authority and will generally avoid disclosing personal information unless they feel listened to. Generally within the office environment there is not a feeling that clients can bring up issues because things are processed so quickly [Service provider].

A further critical issue raised by staff was that the referral process to Centrelink was simplified for the client, which led to their situation being resolved more rapidly with less duress. This was considered particularly beneficial in assisting the support services to obtain and secure housing outcomes for their clients.

We can't help a person into housing within the private rental market or public housing until they have a regular income so that they can maintain the placement. Centrelink need to understand this when we contact them to get client income issues resolved – general Centrelink staff don't often understand this [Service provider].

Really good- there have been good outcomes, more appropriate info is being conveyed to clients, and clients are really happy [Service provider].

It's been good to have Centrelink 'in house' – it's better for clients who are in crisis [Service provider].

I have more confidence that clients will access Centrelink services if Centrelink is based here, they will be more able to meet their needs. Assessing clients here is more practical for their circumstances and will be more likely to get clients into the right program [Service provider].

Additional feedback provided included:

- time that the PCO was able to spend with the client to explain the JSCI reduced confusion and frustration from clients;

- having the PCO located on specific days made it easier for referrals;
- increased the accessibility of information about Centrelink income payments and employment programs provided through the job network;
- being based onsite is very accessible for social workers to discuss any issues that emerged in practice;
- assisted the services to talk about income issues
- providing a key contact that the social worker could call on to discuss Centrelink related issues;
- having youth friendly flyers in the waiting room;
- ability to share learnings from the Centrelink training provided to the PCOs;
- being able to link the client into the Centrelink officer at the same time as contact with the service by having a flexible appointment/drop in based system; increases the likelihood of resolving the client's crisis.

3.3.2 What Didn't 'Work Well'?

Service Providers

A major limitation of the trial has been the short duration for which to undertake training of the PCOs, integrate into the service and generate sufficient referrals. The short timeline for which to implement the trial meant that there was limited time before service implementation to promote the trial, as the service scope was not apparent until the PCOs were relocated back into the services.

In addition to the PCO Demonstration project, Hanover also participated in a Centrelink Personal Advisor (PA) trial examining potential referral pathways to the PA and the effectiveness of the PA open-ended interview tool for those experiencing homelessness. A Personal Advisor was located at Southbank for the first two-week period coinciding with the commencement of the Community Officer Demonstration Project. Having both positions commence concurrently added to the confusion about respective roles for workers referring potential clients and initially resulted in a low number of referrals for both roles, which had the potential for hindering relationships rather than building them.

There was not a high demand for Centrelink services from the Families and Young Adults Service. For Families service this was mainly related to the high proportion of families being on Parenting Payment, who were not eligible to have their JSCI reviewed and also had relatively stable income support. Young Adults Service provides intensive long-term transitional support, without lower client throughout. As a result, the PCO service mainly operated from Hanover Southbank and Housing Service.

Client feedback

Participants with urgent payment requests who declined to go through the review process expressed their concern and confusion that the PCO was not able to resolve their income issues on the spot. Clients also reported that the review process and some of JSCI questions were a little invasive.

During the trial some clients received Centrelink mail to the service address informing them of appointments they had to attend. Clients reported that the letters felt threatening making them already feel like they had done something wrong. Clients not having a contact name and limited information in the letter made them feel fearful of going to the appointment.

As there is reluctance for some clients to attend appointments with specialist Centrelink officers and disclose personal factors such as drug dependency, it is crucial that the referral pathway through Centrelink be simplified as much as possible. For example, one client with a drug dependency and mental health issues was referred to a disability officer for supplementary assessment. The outcome of this appointment was that the client was informed that the best option for them would be to remain incapacitated via medical certificate, despite being “incapacitated” for the past two years (which means they can not be referred to programs such as the Personal Support Program). The client attended this appointment with her housing support worker and expressed interest in the Personal Support Programme. At the time of contact there was no link into alternative assessment via a social worker or occupational psychologist or indication that a referral could be made and they were only provided with a brochure without any explanation. After disclosing her situation to the disability officer, the client left feeling confused and unwilling to re disclose her circumstances to Centrelink again.

4. Participant Profile

The following section provides an overview of the service activity data and demographic profile of trial participants. A comparative analysis is provided of the JSCI prior to and following contact with the PCO, along with the short-term outcomes resulting from intervention.

4.1 Contacts by Service

Table 1 illustrates total individual contacts with the PCOs according to service location. As shown, just over half of contacts (53%) were from Hanover Southbank, followed by Hanover Housing Service (30%). It should be noted that these figures represent first interview contacts; individuals were also seen again during follow up appointments or were contacted by phone. Follow up appointments and phone calls were generally between 15 –30 minutes. As shown in figure 1, service provision from Hanover Housing Service commenced during the third week of the trial, corresponding with a move from Family Services.

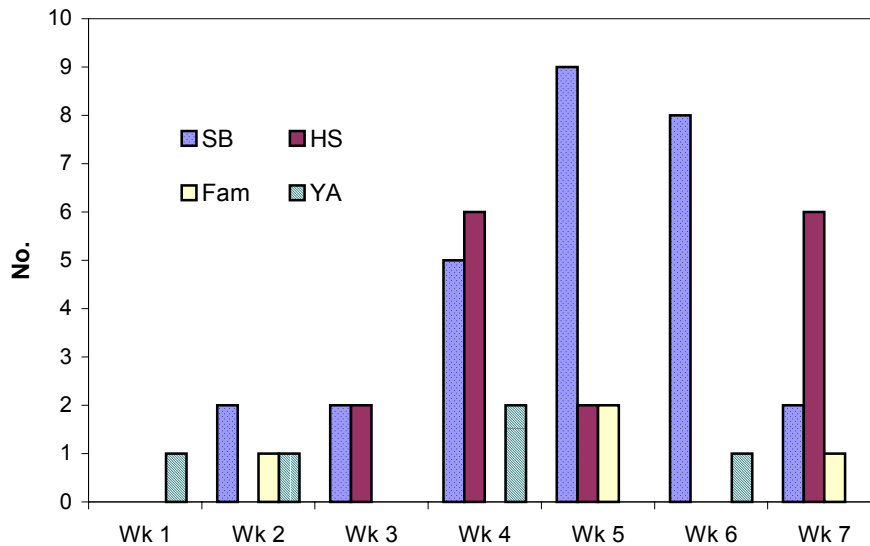
Figure 1 provides an overview of the distribution of weekly service contacts. As shown, referrals generally increased following the third week. The increase in referrals within Southbank was the result of increased promotional and education activity during weeks two and three and integrating referrals into the service intake and assessment process as well as case management practice.

Table 1. Project Community Officer contacts by service

Participating Services	Total number of individuals	%
Hanover Southbank	28	53
Hanover Housing	16	30
Young Adults*	5	9
Family Services*	4	8
Total	53	100

* Please note that the PCOs were predominately located at Hanover Southbank and Housing Service throughout the trial period.

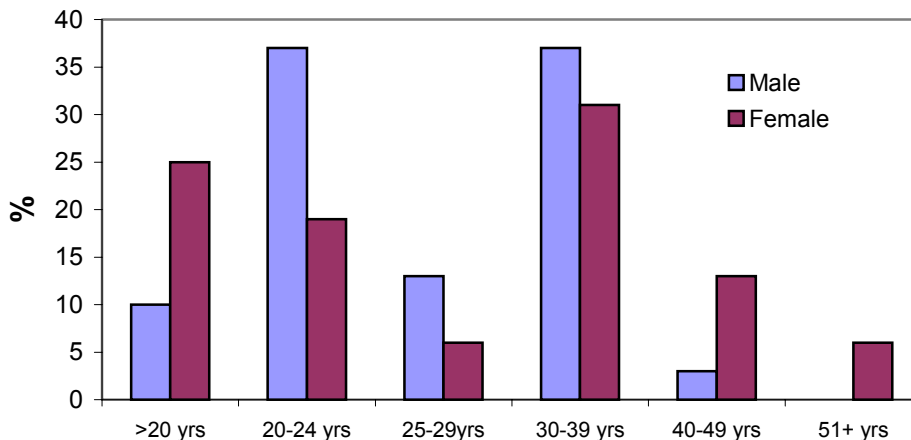
Figure 1. Number of individuals seen by Project Community Officers for first review interview during the trial period



4.2 Demographic Profile

Just under two thirds (64%) of clients referred to the PCOs were male, whilst 36% were female. The average age of clients was 28 years (median 27 years). The average age was slighter higher for females (30 years) compared to males (28 years). Figure 2 illustrates the age distribution of clients according to gender. As shown, the age distribution of males was mainly concentrated in the 20-39 age ranges (87%). The age range of females was more evenly distributed across the age groups, with 56 percent aged between 20-39 years and a higher proportion aged less than 20 years (25%) and 40 years and over (19%).

Figure 2. Age by Gender, %



- 71 per cent of clients were from an Anglo-Australian background, whilst seven percent had an Indigenous background. Other countries of birth included UK, NZ, Somalia, Sudan, Burma, Thailand and Yugoslavia.
- Approximately three quarters (72%) of those reviewed had an educational attainment of year 10 or less, whilst a further 11 percent had completed secondary school.
- In the past year, just under two thirds (65%) had three or more Centrelink recorded addresses and of those 18 percent recorded 6-8 changes in one year. Participants residing within Southbank tended to be more transient, with an average of five recorded address changes in the past year compared to an average of two changes for those accessing Hanover's Housing Service. Numbers within Young Adults and Family Services were too small to provide meaningful comparisons.
- Amongst those who had their JSCI reviewed, the average length time of unemployment registration was 109 weeks (just over two years) with a median of 83 weeks. It should be noted that the current registration period does not reflect the total time receiving benefits throughout participant unemployment history. As illustrated in figure 3, just less than three quarters (70%) of those reviewed had been unemployed for 12 months or longer and amongst those, 43 percent had been unemployed for more than two years.
- Figure 4 provides a comparison between length of unemployment of those contacting PCOs within Southbank and Hanover's Housing Service. Participants residing within Southbank tended to be registered as unemployed for longer, with an average length of unemployment of 128 weeks (median 100) compared to an average of 54 weeks (median 48) for participants contacting Housing Service, indicating more entrenched pattern of unemployment amongst Southbank residents. It should be noted that Housing Service participants referred to the PCO represented "drop in" clients and not those residing within transitional housing properties, providing a sample whom were more likely to be experiencing recent housing crisis at the time of contact.

Figure 3. Length of time registered as a jobseeker, %

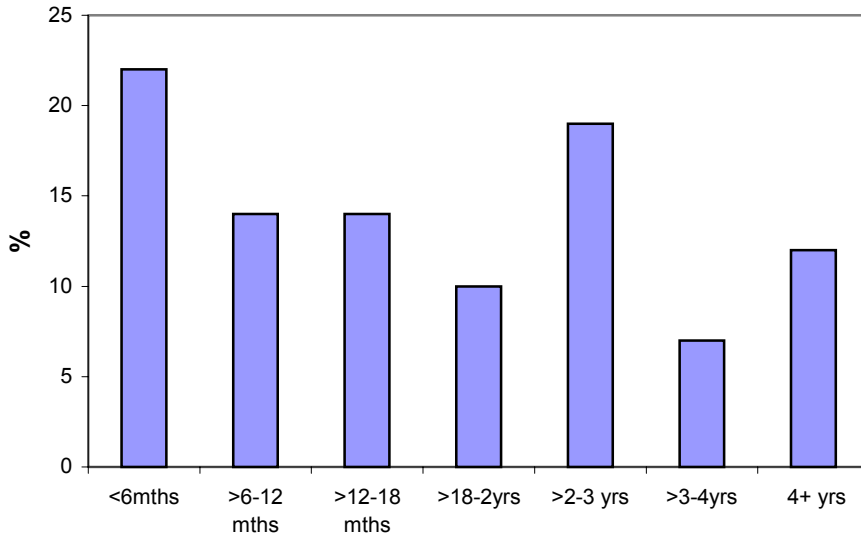
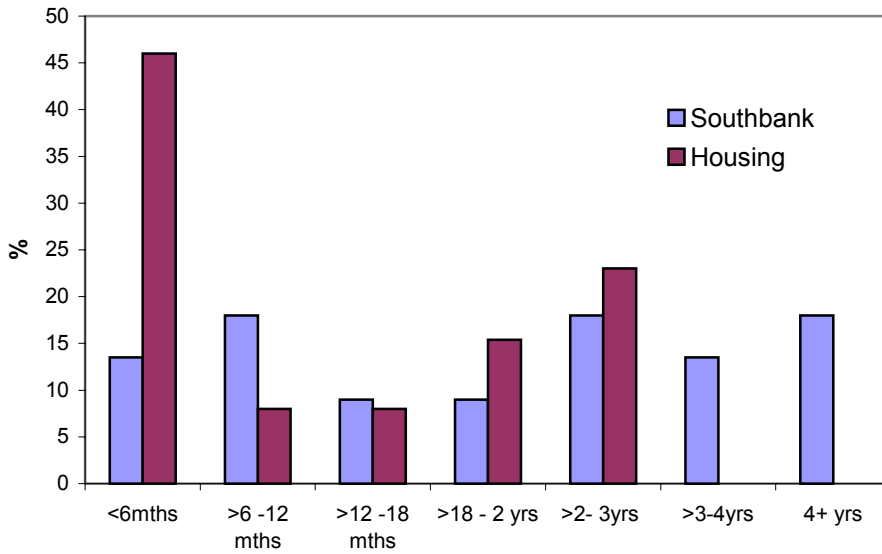


Figure 4. Comparison between Southbank and Housing Service for length of registration as Jobseeker, %

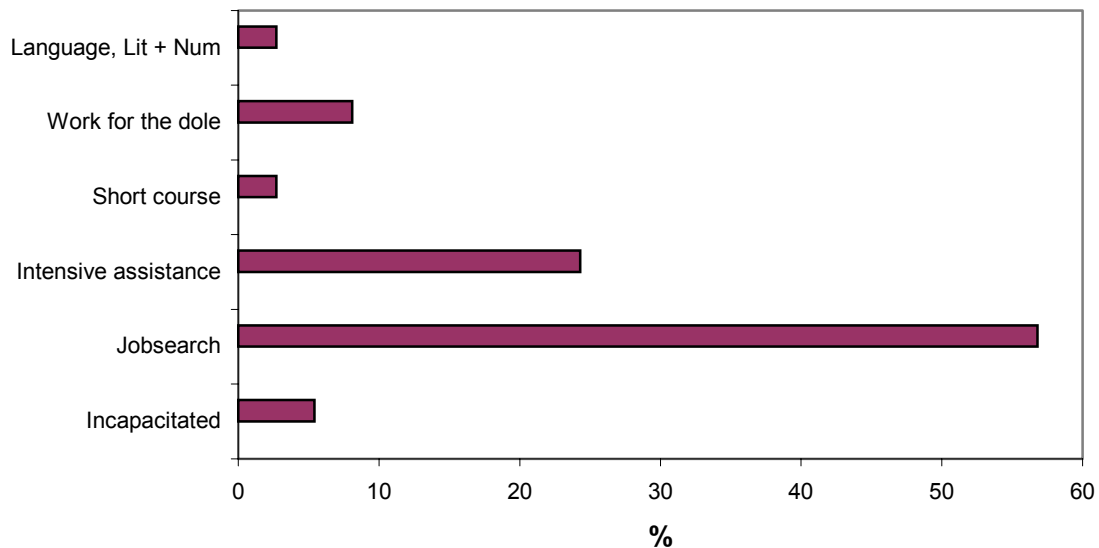


4.3 Review of Job Seeker Classification Instrument

Of all individual service contacts, 38 (72%) had their JSCI reviewed, with the majority of reviews (58%) being undertaken for clients residing within Southbank, followed by Hanover Housing (26%), Young Adults (11%) and Families (5%).

Figure 5 illustrates current Centrelink activity for trial participants at the time of contact with the PCO. As shown, over half (58%) of participants' current activity was Jobsearch, followed by just under a quarter (24%) currently participating in Intensive Assistance. Participants within Housing Service (20%) and Young Adults (67%) were more likely to be currently receiving Intensive Assistance compared to participants within Southbank (18%). Similarly, there was a higher proportion of participants within Southbank whose current activity was Jobsearch (68%) compared to Housing (47%).

Figure 5. Current Centrelink activity type at time of contact, %



4.3.1 Past Activity History

- Throughout participants unemployment history:
 - 19 percent had been referred to the Community Support Programme;
 - 70 percent had been referred for Intensive Assistance for an average of 2 times, with an average length of time of nine months;
 - 65 percent had been incapacitated for an average of 3 times, for an average length of seven months; and
 - 26 percent had been exempted for major personal crisis for an average of one time.

- In comparing activity history of participants from Southbank and Housing Service, Southbank participants were more likely to have been previously referred to IA (72%) compared to Housing participants (47%). Further, participants residing with Southbank were more likely to have had multiple referrals for IA compared to Housing with 56 and 43 percent respectively. The average duration of IA for Southbank participants was 295 days (median 360), whilst the average length for those accessing Housing Service was 146 days (median 137).
- Participants residing at Southbank were more likely to have been incapacitated at some stage during their unemployment (77%) compared to those accessing Housing Service (40%). Participants within Southbank had also generally been incapacitated for longer periods, an average of four times (median of 3) for an average length of 271 days (210 median). This compares to an average of three times (median of 2), with an average length of 88 days (median 47) for those accessing Housing Service.

4.4 Comparison of JSCI Factors Before and After Contact

In order to compare any change in JSCI scores resulting from the reviews, PCOs printed out customers' JSCI record prior to making any amendments. Table 2 on the following page provides a comparison of JSCI factors before and after contact with the PCO. In addition, the table provides a valuable profile of the range of potential employment barriers identified for those experiencing homelessness.

In examining the vocational qualifications of the sample, the majority (95%) did not have any vocational qualifications that they could "use today" and there was a 10 percent reported increase amongst those who were not able to utilise their qualifications due to disability or health problems. In terms of recency of work experience, the main reported activity five years prior to being registered was "not in the workforce" (40%), followed by "being in paid full time work (35hrs+ p/w)" and in "regular paid part time work (8-35 hrs)" at 21 percent respectively. Before and after comparisons revealed that there was an 18 percent decrease in those reporting that they were "not working but looking for work" and a 13 percent increase amongst those who were in regular part-time work. There was also an eight percent increase amongst those who were not in the workforce, possibly due to medical incapacity.

There were marked changes within the family status of participants according to before and after comparisons, with a 29 percent increase in those who were living alone, representing nearly three quarters (74%) of participants. This suggests that there has been a separation from prior networks with the 29 percent increase transferring from "living with others (not family)" to living alone. There was a slight increase (5%) in the proportion that reported that they were currently living with their partner.

The refugee status of one participant was not recorded on their JSCI. In terms of English literacy, before and after changes were minimal, however there was one culturally and linguistically diverse participant whom required an interpreter and this was recorded on their Centrelink file, yet their JSCI recorded that their English speaking, reading and writing was good.

Reporting of disability/medical condition/addiction increased by 23 percent from 24 percent of participants to 47 percent. There was a 16 percent decrease in those who reported that they were able to work at least 20 hours.

The most notable difference for before and after JSCI comparisons was a 63% increase in the recording of "instability of residence" from 27 percent to 90 percent of participants. The 10 percent who were not defined as being in unstable accommodation had exited into public housing or were able to have pending private rental evictions resolved through Housing Service intervention.

A further notable change related to an increase in reporting ex-offender status and other personal factors. In particular, there was a 21 percent increase in disclosure of ex-offender as juvenile/adult within the last five to ten years from 19 percent to 40 percent

of participants. Similarly, there was a 29 percent increase in the disclosure of other personal factors from five percent to 34 percent, enabling referral for supplementary assessment.

Table 2. Before and after comparison of all JSCI factors for all those reviewed (n=38)

JSCI Factors for those reviewed	Before		After		% Difference
	No.	%	No.	%	
<i>Vocational Qualifications</i>					
Vocational Qualification - Declined	35	92	31	82	10 ↓
Vocational Qualification – use today	2	5	2	5	Same
10 yrs since worked in related occupation	1	3	1	3	Same
Can't use voc qual- Acqu disability/hlth problem	0	0	4	10	10 ↑
<i>Recency of work experience (main activity five years before being registered)</i>					
Not in workforce (caring or student)	12	32	15	40	8 ↑
Not working but looking for work	10	26	3	8	18 ↓
In paid seasonal or irreg cas work	3	8	3	8	Same
In regular paid p/t work (<8hrs/pw)	1	2	0	0	2 ↓
In paid f/t work (35hrs+ p/w)	9	24	8	21	3 ↓
In regular paid p/t work (8-35 hrs)	3	8	8	21	13 ↑
<i>Family Status</i>					
Family Status, partner	5	13	7	18	5 ↑
Family status, children under 15	2	5	3	8	3 ↑
Family status, other Family/relatives	2	5	1	3	2 ↓
Family status, others (not family)	14	37	3	8	29 ↓
Family status, live alone	17	45	28	74	29 ↑
<i>Proximity to labour market</i>					
Proximity to labour market	37	97	38	100	3 ↑
<i>Refugee Status</i>					
Not refugee	35	95	34	92	3 ↓
Refugee	2	5	3	8	3 ↑
<i>Literacy</i>					
<i>English speaking</i>					
Good	35	95	34	92	3 ↓
Limited	1	3	1	3	Same
Very limited	1	3	2	5	2 ↑

JSCI Factors for those reviewed	Before		After		% Difference
<i>English reading</i>					
Good	34	92	32	87	5 ↓
Limited	2	5	3	8	3 ↑
Very limited	1	3	2	5	2 ↑
<i>English writing</i>					
Good	35	95	33	89	6 ↓
Limited	1	3	2	5	2 ↑
Very limited	1	3	2	5	2 ↑
<i>Language/literacy course last 6 months</i>	1	3	2	5	2 ↑
Disability					
Disability/medical condition/addiction	9	24	18	47	23 ↑
DSP	0	0	6	16	16 ↑
Seeking referral to HFS Services	3	8	0	0	8 ↓
Work at least 20 hours	5	13	11	29	16 ↓
Documentary evidence	6	16	14	37	21 ↑
Instability of Residence					
	10	27	34	90	63 ↑
Ex-offender status					
Ex-offender custodial sentence over 30 months	3	8	2	5	3 ↓
Ex-offender as juvenile/adult last five/10	7	19	15	40	21 ↑
Result of conviction					
Served period in custody for more than 1 month	5	14	5	13	1 ↓
Served period in custody one mth or less	1	3	1	3	Same
Conviction – Sentenced (no time in prison)	2	5	10	26	21 ↑
Other Personal Factors					
	2	5	13	34	29 ↑

Table 3 provides a comparison of JSCI scores before and after contact with the Project Community Officer. As illustrated, prior to being reviewed, 21% had a JSCI score of 25 or less. Following review the lowest JSCI score recorded was 26. Due to the short duration of the trial, 46 percent of JSCI scores were still pending and therefore would not be fully calculated until a supplementary assessment had been completed.

A further 19% of clients were either currently participating in IA or on waiting list and therefore their JSCI could not be updated by the PCO as the record was unable to be accessed.

Table 3. Comparison of JSCI factors before and after contact with PCO

JSCI Score Before			JSCI After	
Score	Number Responses	% Responses	Number of Responses	% Responses
12	1	2.6	0	0
20	2	5	0	0
21	1	2.6	0	0
24	1	2.6	0	0
25	3	7.7	0	0
26	2	5	1	2.6
27	1	2.6	0	0
28	1	2.6	0	0
29	2	5	2	5
30	2	5	2	5
31	3	7.7	1	2.6
33	3	7.7	0	0
34	3	7.7	2	5
35	1	2.6	0	0
36	1	2.6	1	2.6
37	1	2.6	0	0
38	1	2.6	0	0
39	4	10	0	0
41	1	2.6	2	5
44	1	2.6	1	2.6
45	0	0	1	2.6
46	1	2.6	0	0
47	1	2.6	0	0
49	1	2.6	0	0
52	1	2.6	0	0
Pending review*		0	17	46
Unable to be updated due to referral to IA		0	7	19
		100		100

Whilst incomplete scores make direct before and after comparisons difficult, the high proportion of pending scores illustrates that just under half of those being reviewed identified personal and or medical conditions requiring specialist supplementary assessment, or their score was high enough to trigger an automatic referral for supplementary assessment. This suggests that there would be a significant shift in the average JSCI score of those experiencing homelessness on the basis of before and after comparisons and indicates a high degree of multiple employment barriers amongst the sample being reviewed. Specifically, table 4 below illustrates before and after comparisons for those requiring supplementary assessment for the factors of instability of residence, disability/medical condition, other personal factors, and ex offender status.

Table 4. Comparison of JSCI factors for those with a pending JSCI score requiring a supplementary assessment (n=17)

JSCI factors for those referred for supplementary assessment	Before		After		% Increase
	No.	%	No.	%	
Instability of residence	2	11	18	100	91 ↑
Disability/medical condition/addiction	7	39	14	78	39 ↑
Ex-offender custodial sentence over 30 months	2	11	2	11	Same
Ex-offender as juvenile/adult last five/10	4	22	12	67	45 ↑
Other personal factors	1	6	8	44	38 ↑

As illustrated, there was a marked increase in recording of instability of residence (91%), ex-offender as juvenile/adult in last 5-10 years (45%), disability/medical condition/addiction (39%), and other personal factors (38%). These data suggest that without review, many factors would not have been identified through a normal review process, potentially resulting in inappropriate employment assistance referrals.

There was some variation in the recording of multiple employment barriers amongst participants accessing the PCO from Hanover Southbank and the Housing Service, with those residing within Southbank more likely to record multiple employment barriers on their JSCI compared to “drop in” clients at Hanover’s Housing Service. Specifically, 38 percent of Southbank participants disclosed a disability/medical condition/illness/addiction compared to nine percent of Housing Service participants. For ex-offender status, 27% of Southbank participants reported that they had been ex-offender as juvenile/adult in the last five-ten years compared to no participants from Hanover’s Housing Service.

4.5 History of Breaches

Breach history was able to be collected for 44 participants and amongst those 34 participants (77%) recorded at least one breach.

For those who had been breached (n=34):

- The average number of breaches was 4 with median of 3.
- A total of 128 breaches had been imposed for 34 records and of those 30% resulted in rate reduction or non-payment period.
- Amongst those who had been breached, 22 (65%) had one or more penalties imposed, with:
 - 32% receiving a 16% reduction
 - 36% receiving an 18% reduction
 - 18% receiving a 24% reduction
 - 14% receiving a 100 % reduction

In addition to breaching, PCOs came across a number of clients who had their payments suspended for reasons other than breaching, including not being able to provide an address and not signing a preparing for work agreement.

There were 34 different reasons for breaches, with the main reasons including:

- Failing to attend interview with job network provider (18%)
- Failing to attend information session (8%)
- Failed activity as result of job seeker diary (6%)
- Failed to declare earnings (6%)
- Failed to reply to letters (6%)
- Failed to attend compulsory work for dole project (6%)
- Failed activity test (4%)
- Failed to attend compulsory wfd interview (4%)
- Failed to agency office interview (4%)

4.6 Short-term Client Outcomes from Project Community Officer Contact

Table 5 illustrates the short-term outcomes directly resulting from contact with the PCO. As the trial was conducted for a short duration only immediate outcomes resulting from the interaction could be documented. As shown, the main direct outcome from the trial for 73 percent of participants was the updating of their JSCI to reflect their current circumstances. Other significant outcomes included referrals for supplementary assessments with Specialist Centrelink Officers, this included the JSCI flagging the need for JSA supplementary assessment and being able to make direct appointments with appropriate Specialist Centrelink Officer. Increasing engagement with Specialist Officers is a crucial outcome for those experiencing homelessness as it provides an opportunity to undertake more complete assessment of their circumstances, and possibly prevent cycling to and from inappropriate forms of employment assistance. Referral for Intensive Assistance was another outcome for 19 percent of participants.

Other common outcomes included being able to update address history, which could be verified instantly at the point of contact, as the Centrelink Officer was located within the accommodation service. Fourteen percent of participants had current breaches revoked as it was impacting on the capacity to resolve their current housing situation. A further 14 percent were exempted from mutual obligation activities for Major Personal Crisis.

Table 5. Short-term outcomes resulting from PCO contact

Outcomes from Intervention	Number*	Percentage*
JSCI updated	38	73
JSA Special Needs Assessment required	13	25
Referral for Intensive Assistance	10	19
Address updated	10	19
Explanation of different payment options	8	15
Exemption for Major Personal Crisis	7	14
Current breach revoked	7	14
Appointment made for occ. psych	5	10
JSA Personal Factors Assessment required	4	8
Referral for WAT Assessment	3	6
Appointment made to see social worker	4	8
Back paid	4	8
Already on waiting list for Intensive Assistance	4	8
Referral to CCU	3	6
Rent updated	3	6
Appointment to see Disability Officer	3	6
Debt repayment schedule adjusted	3	6
Payment restored	3	6
Feedback about rent assistance options	2	4
All info was up to date	1	2
Was given info on CDEP/PSP	1	2
Had already been referred for DSP	1	2

*Multiple responses

4.7 Case Studies

Box 1: Case Study, Ben*

Ben is 18 years old and is currently living in Windsor. He has an educational attainment of less than year 10. Prior to accessing the current SAAP service he was living between his mothers house and different youth refugees. Ben's Centrelink address history show five address changes over the past year.

Ben was registered with Centrelink as a student on the 14th of September in 1999, before leaving school at the end of year 10, from where he went onto Jobsearch during January 2000. During February, 2000 he went onto to complete a language, literacy and numeracy course, indicating extreme educational disadvantage. His record does not record any referral to Intensive Assistance throughout the duration of being unemployed. His current Centrelink activity is work for the dole, which began on the 17th of May, 2002. Before contacting the Centrelink Project Community Officer for the trial, Ben had a JSCI score of 25, which was last updated on July 19th 2001.

As Ben was participating in work for the dole, his JSCI was inactive and he could not be referred to IA even though his initial score of 25 (later reassessed to 36) meant that he was eligible for level A Intensive Assistance. Ben has been breached three times in the past two years for not entering into compulsory work for the dole, being dismissed from employment, and failed activity test.

Ben reported that he is unhappy with his requirements of work for the dole as he feels he needs extra assistance in looking for work, which is not provided by work for the dole. During the trial interview Ben reported that his drug use along with his lack of confidence due to being underweight affect his ability to seek and participate in employment. Ben's JSCI did not record 'yes' for instability of residence even though Ben was living in emergency accommodation.

After updating Ben's JSCI his score increased to 36. The increase in Ben's score is due to recording instability of residence, that Ben lives alone and there are personal factors which impact on Ben's ability to seek and participate in employment.

**Names have been changed to prevent identification of individuals*

Box 2: Case Study, Sarah

Sarah is a 19 year-old women living in transitional accommodation. She has an educational attainment of year 12. Before accessing the participating SAAP service she was extremely transient. Sarah stated that she had moved over 15 times in the past two years. Her Centrelink file recorded 8 moves in the past two years. Sarah has been registered for Newstart from 15th of July, 1999. In this time Sarah has been registered as incapacitated.

Prior to participating in the trial, Sarah had a JSCI score of 25, which was updated on the 18th of May 2002. Despite Sarah living in emergency housing and a number of address changes, Sarah had been recorded as 'no' to instability of residence. Despite being incapacitated via medical certificate for 'drug dependency' for the past two years, Sarah's JSCI did not record yes for disability/medical condition or personal factors. The Centrelink Project Community Officer, has now updated Sarah's JSCI to reflect her current situation. Sarah was referred to the Disability Officer as she also disclosed that she had on going mental health issues.

As attending her appointment with the Disability Officer was emotionally difficult for Sarah, her SAAP support worker attended with her. It was reported that the appointment was approximately 10 minutes and Sarah was told that she would be best to stay exempt from Jobsearch via a medical certificate. As Sarah has already been incapacitated as a result of her drug dependency for the past two years she has not been able to be referred to the Personal Support Program (formally Community Support Program), which is designed to assist those who are both homeless and also experiencing drug dependency issues.

Sarah and her housing support worker expressed interest in the Personal Support Program, however was only provided with a brochure, with no further explanation during the consultation or link into further assessment by a social worker or occupational psychologist at the time of contact. This experience has left Sarah feeling confused and angry after disclosing personal issues and being told that she should stay on a medical certificate. Sarah does not want to go back to Centrelink for an assessment by a social worker or occupational psychologist to retell her story for an assessment for the Personal Support Programme, asserting quite angrily that this has all been for nothing and was a waste of time.

**Names have been changed to prevent identification of individuals*

Box 3: Case Study, James

James is 25 years old and has been unemployed for the past two years. He has an educational attainment of less than year 10. James was last residing at a private hotel before accessing a SAAP crisis service. His Centrelink records show eight address changes in the past 12 months.

In the past two years James has been breached six times, with two of the most recent breaches resulting in a rate reduction period. The first of the two breaches was due to an administration breach and the second due to an activity breach for not attending a job network member. The two breaches coincided with periods of homelessness as confirmed by his Centrelink address history and also mail had been returned to sender indicating that he did not receive notification of the appointments. Following review of his circumstances during the time co-inciding, the breaches were revoked and he was back paid. Following from this the Project Community Officer informed Jame's SAAP support worker that he had been back paid, with the support worker incorporating this additional money into the case management plan to assist in securing housing for James in the private rental market.

**Names have been changed to prevent identification of individuals*

Box 4: The following three case examples were crisis payment contacts, who did not have their JSCI reviewed....

Urgent issue one...

A homeless young man was referred to the PCO from Hanover's Young Adults Service who informed PCO that he was told that he was not able to receive benefits because he was homeless. The PCO then contacted the Windsor Centerlink Community Unit who arranged to see him the following morning. The CCU worker feedback to the PCO that the previous Centrelink Customer Service Officer had misinformed him and that he was in fact eligible for payments. Payments were reinstated the following morning. The PCO recontacted the customer to inform him that his payments had been reinstated.

Urgent issue two...

A woman who was escaping a domestic violence situation, informed the PCO that she had an appointment at Centrelink the following day, and did not want to attend as she feared for her safety because her partner was aware of the appointment. The PCO phoned the Social Worker at South Melbourne Centrelink and informed her of the situation. The social worker then placed the woman on Major Personal Crisis, which exempts her of all appointments and mutual obligation activities for a period of time. Her address was also changed so her partner would not be aware of further Centrelink issues that would enable him to identify her movements. This highlights the importance of being able to be linked into a social worker immediately to resolve a crisis situation without having to wait for an appointment time to be allocated.

Urgent issue three...

A Southbank resident who currently receives disability support pension approached the PCO and reported that he currently has a debt with Centrelink. It was identified that approximately \$50 of his payment is being withheld per fortnight, making it more difficult for him to budget his money. The PCO informed the CCU team leader at Centrelink who then changed the amount being withheld from \$50 to \$15 per fortnight so that he was able to manage financially.

Box 5: Case Study, Bill

Bill is 29 years and lives alone in a private rental property paying \$170 a week in rent. Bill approached Hanover's Housing Service because he was seven weeks in rent arrears and was being evicted, indicating that his housing situation was very insecure. Bill has been on and off payments during periods of fluctuating employment and unemployment and had recently only been receiving Newstart payments for the past few weeks.

Upon assessment of his circumstances by the Project Community Officer located at the service, it was discovered that Bill had existed on a reduced payment of \$393.18 (instead of 459.60) from a penalty imposed in error during a period of non-payment. His record showed that the breach was for "not taking reasonable steps to find employment", however Bill's payment summary details indicated that he was not receiving any income support during the month of the breach. Bill did not know why he had been breached and had accepted it. The PCO was able to revoke the breach and Bill was back paid, which together with financial assistance from the Housing Service went towards repaying some of the rent arrears so that he could maintain his housing.

This case study highlights the importance of being able to intervene during the early stages of pending homelessness. Both the Housing Service and the Centrelink officer were able to resolve his situation to enable Bill to maintain his current housing and by removing the penalty Bill now has a little more income in which survive on until he is able to find employment to increase his income base.

**Names have been changed to prevent identification of individuals*

Box 6: Case Study, Jemma

Jemma has just moved into Hanover Southbank. At the time of Jemma moving into Southbank it was identified through the intake and assessment process that she was having difficulty with her Centrelink payment.

Upon seeing the PCO located within Hanover it was discovered that Jemma's Centrelink payment had been suspended due to the expiry of her period of 'major personal crisis'. Jemma had been registered as a Newstart recipient and her payment was suspended because she had not signed a looking for work agreement. Jemma's Centrelink records indicated that she had moved 32 times in the past five years yet her prior JSCI recorded no for instability of residence. The last time that Jemma's JSCI was updated was 1 month prior to Jemma seeing the PCO worker, at this time Jemma was on Jobsearch and her JSCI was recorded as 36. Jemma has been breached five times in 2000.

Following contact with the PCO, Jemma's payment was restored and she was subsequently referred to see an occupational psychologist for a supplementary assessment for a referral into the Personal Support Programme. It was decided that PSP would be the best option for Jemma as she has cycled between 'Jobsearch' and incapacitation for the past five years with no apparent referral to any higher form of assistance. During the PCO review interview, Jemma's SAAP support worker sat in with her and the PCO sought Jemma's consent to feedback her appointment time for the occupational psychologist. This will ensure that both Jemma and the support worker are aware of the appointment time, minimising the risk of Jemma missing the appointment.

**Names have been changed to prevent identification of individuals*

Box 7: Case Study, Tom

Tom is 32 years old and has an educational attainment of year 10. At the time of contact with the PCO he had been registered as unemployed for the past three years. Prior to updating his JSCI, Thomas had a score of 39. Despite his high score, his JSCI did *not* record “yes” to instability of residence, disability/ medical condition/illness/addiction, ex-offender status, or other personal factors.

Following a review with the PCO located at Southbank, he disclosed that he had a drug dependency, was homeless, and also had a prior conviction as juvenile/adult in the last 5/10 years. His JSCI score is now pending because an appointment to see the social worker has been arranged. Tom was seen by the PCO on the 6th of June and before staying at Southbank, Tom was living in Bendigo for a month until the 2nd of May. Tom’s address change had not been updated as his record displayed his previous Bendigo address. Tom’s Centrelink address history shows extreme transience over the past year, indicating that he has stayed at Southbank on two previous occasions as one example.

Tom’s Centrelink activity has cycled between Incapacitated, Intensive Assistance, and Jobsearch for the past two years. Specifically, over a two-year period, Tom has been referred to Intensive Assistance three times, the first in March 2000 – May 2000 (66 days) before going back to Jobsearch from May 2000- Feb 2001. The second referral for Intensive Assistance was for 21 days before returning to Jobsearch during April 2001 – July 2001(76 days).

Following a 168 day period of incapacity from November 2001 – May 2002, Tom’s Centrelink activity has gone back to Job search and he was referred for a work for the dole interview, which he did not attend because of his homelessness. Tom has been incapacitated for 206 days over the two-year period and it was noted on his Centrelink record that the reason was for drug addiction and was receiving treatment at Windana.

Tom was breached on the 30th of May, 2002 for failing to attend a compulsory work for dole interview at the Bendigo office, however was staying at Southbank during that period. He has been breached six times in the past two years, three of them for not attending job network provider during period of Intensive Assistance, one for not declaring earnings from casual employment and one for moving to an area of lower employment. Tom’s most recent breach for not attending work for the dole interview appointment was revoked because he did not receive correspondence and was experiencing homelessness at the time of the breach.

Tom’s case study highlights that the cycling between different activity types combined with transience and personal factors such as drug dependency has meant that he has not been able to benefit or actively participate in employment assistance programs that he has been referred to. Currently staying incapacitated has been the only means by which to stay exempt from mutual obligation activities. This scenario presents a significant policy challenge for Centrelink in the context of Australians Working Together. The imposition of penalties is unlikely to have significant impact in assisting Tom into ongoing employment or improving compliance because his circumstances would mean that breaching would contribute to undue hardship and make it extremely difficult to enter stable accommodation.

**Names have been changed to prevent identification of individuals*

Box 8, Case Study, John

John approached the Hanover's Housing service as he was on the verge of becoming homeless. John was living in a boarding house and fell behind with rent as his income from Centrelink was suspended due to a 100% breach. John did not know that he is able to do something about his income and did not want to pursue this avenue, as housing was more of a priority to him.

John was breached due to not attending an interview at Centrelink. During the review process, John told the PCO that he could not attend the interview as he had a job interview on that same day. At the time John called Centrelink to inform them of the job interview, which was documented on his file, however a breach was imposed regardless of this. Following contact with the PCO, John's breach was overturned and payments were restored as there was evidence in his document file that he informed Centrelink that he was not able to attend the appointment.

During the assessment process John disclosed that he has self-esteem issues and that he finds it hard to keep a job. This was also evident in his interactions with the PCO through out the engagement process. John was subsequently referred for an appointment with an Occupational Psychologist to address some of the issues he had disclosed. John's records indicated that he attended the interview with the Occupational Psychologist. By solving John's income issues he is more likely to obtain and maintain accommodation, and his current housing crisis with help from housing workers is more likely to be resolved.

**Names have been changed to prevent identification of individuals*

Box 9: Case Study, Rose

Rose is an Indigenous 19 year-old women who has been transient for the past two years. She is currently living in a caravan park and is waiting for transitional housing. Rose has had issues with drug dependency in the recent past, but is currently not using. Rose has also recently been a victim of domestic violence and has been suffering from several ongoing medical conditions.

Rose's JSCI had been recently updated in April 2002 and she had a score of 46. Her JSCI also recorded yes to instability of residence and also to disability/medical condition/ addiction. Despite her high score, there was no record of referral for supplementary assessment and she was currently on the waiting list for a referral to Intensive Assistance. Her record also indicated that she had been exempted for major personal crisis on two occasions in the past year and had been incapacitated for a period of 147 days up to 9th of April 2002. Rose reported that her homeless situation is making it very difficult to look for work. Rose is currently living in Frankston and her job network member is in South Yarra. Rose has been breached three times in the past year, all for failing to attend initial mutual obligation interviews. These three breaches have all been revoked. Rose's document list indicates that there are numerous requests for duplicate SU19JN forms (fortnightly forms), particularly in the past three months indicating that she has not been receiving her mail.

Upon seeing a Centrelink Officer at Hanover, Rose's situation (JSCI) has been reviewed and Rose is now being referred for a supplementary needs assessment due to her disclosing that there are other factors affecting her ability to seek and participate in employment. This will enable Rose to be assessed for a referral to the Personal Support Programme and improve her long-term chances of gaining employment by working on her personal development. Collaboration between the Centrelink Officer and Rose's social worker will be crucial to ensure that Rose is able to attend the occupational psychologist for further assessment.

Box 10, Case Study, Jo

Jo and his wife approached Hanover housing requesting assistance with rental arrears. Jo and his wife are refugees and have been residing in Australia for only 3 years. They both require interpreters as they have great difficulties speaking English and this is documented on their Centrelink file.

In addition to his language difficulties, Jo is completely blind in one eye and this condition is recorded on his record via the medical screen and his JSCI indicates medical condition. Jo's previous JSCI scores indicate that he is eligible for IA or a possible exemption from activities due to his medical condition. Despite this he was inappropriately referred for WFD as he did not respond to letters regarding IA because he did not understand them. Jo brought all the letters he received from Centrelink for the PCO to explain what they mean through an interpreter.

At the time of claiming Newstart Jo reported that he has previously done welding work. Through WFD Jo was referred to a welding company even though he is blind in one eye. The constant and strenuous use of his one healthy eye has made him ill and caused him to miss out on a few days work, for which he has a medical certificate. Jo's payments have been reduced due to a 24% breach, and his payment was about to be suspended, as there was a 100% breach pending. His record indicates that the reasons for the breaches were for not attending his work for dole project regularly. Jo had medical certificates to verify why he wasn't able to attend the work for dole project.

Following contact, the PCO was able to advocate having Jo's breaches over turned, as well as cancel the 100% breach recommendation. In addition contact with the PCO identified that his language literacy had been inappropriately recorded on his JSCI, in particular it stated that his English is good, even though his Centrelink file states that he needs an interpreter. Jo's JSCI was now updated to reflect his current situation and an appointment was made to see a specialist worker to address issues with health.

Being able to spend the additional time with Jo was vital in being able to resolve his numerous issues and to be able to overcome language difficulties through an interpreter. Jo was particularly vulnerable to breaching because of miscommunication about his mutual obligation requirements and inappropriate referral in the first instance.

**Names have been changed to prevent identification of individuals*

Box 11: Case Study David & Kelly

David and his wife, Kelly, approached Hanover Housing requesting assistance with rental arrears as they were in the process of being evicted from their private rental property. David and Kelly have a two year old son and Kelly is also due to give birth in two weeks. David's payments have been suspended due to a 100% breach, as he did not attend an appointment at Centrelink. At the time, David told Centrelink that he did not attend the appointment because he was working for his uncle on that day and that he earned \$50 cash in hand. David phoned Centrelink to notify them of this, which was documented on his record. David was required to bring in a letter on an official letterhead stating how much he earned for that day. David was not able to obtain such a letter and was subsequently breached.

The income suspension meant that the family had to survive on \$300 p/f from family payments and rent assistance. David and Kelly could not afford to pay rent and thus fell into arrears and were at risk of becoming homeless.

During the interview David disclosed that he has been diagnosed with the post-traumatic stress disorder and that he is currently on anti-depressants. David reported to the PCO that he had not notified Centrelink of his condition. After reviewing David's Centrelink record the PCO noticed that he had been breached at 100% two times in the past seven months. Given this, John should have been referred to a social worker prior to his most recent breach in May this year, however there was no record of an appointment on his file.

As David's breach was placing the whole family in crisis and pending homelessness, the PCO advocated having David's breach overturned and payments reinstated. An appointment was made to see a social worker to address issues around his payments and medical condition. David was encouraged to attend a doctor to get a medical certificate to verify his condition. With David's payments being reinstated the family could now maintain their private rental and with the help of Hanover Housing the family's arrears should be brought up to date thus bringing the family out of crisis.

**Names have been changed to prevent identification of individuals*

5. Learnings from the Trial – Creating Sustainable Partnerships

The case studies and client contacts raise a number of critical issues that need to be addressed to ensure effective referral pathways for those experiencing homelessness, particularly in the context of the implementation of Australian's Working Together (AWT). As AWT emphasises increased social and economic participation, Centrelink will have increased responsibility for ensuring that jobseekers are channelled into the most appropriate program that is relevant to their circumstances and capacity for participation.

As one of the main programs targeting those experiencing homelessness the Personal Support Programme (PSP) relies on referrals from Centrelink through the gateway assessment process or JSCI. Supporting Hanover's previous research (Parkinson & Horn, 2002), the current trial has highlighted that a key element in the successful implementation of employment assistance programs will be effective assessment of customers circumstances at the point of 'front-line' contact.

Consistent with previous findings of the Hanover study, the current trial found that there was under recording of JSCI employment barriers for the majority of participants experiencing homelessness. A large proportion of the trial participants were long-term unemployed and throughout the duration of unemployment, their records indicated a high degree of "cycling" between different Centrelink activity types matched with a high incidence of breaching. Despite evidence of long-term transience for a proportion of participants and periods of ongoing incapacity, particularly amongst Southbank residents, there was generally low participation in the former Community Support Programme, with multiple referrals for Intensive Assistance.

The trial has also demonstrated that the development of relationships within the homeless service system can enhance the process of assessment for employment assistance that will ultimately assist Centrelink in achieving *"improved customer profiling to improve service and reduce risk"* as outlined within their current business plan. This will also assist Centrelink in meeting the key objective through the quality first policy by *...enhancing its capacity to pay the right person, the right payment at the right time under the right program by continuing to improve our quality processes and staff training and introducing decision support systems"* (Centrelink, 2001a: 2-3; Centrelink 2001b: 5).

Based on learnings from the demonstration project, fostering an integrated approach between Centrelink and the homeless service system should comprise the following strategies:

- Co-location or out posting
- Improving referral pathways
- Training

5.1 Co-location

The data emerging from the client contacts indicate significant advantages from having the Project Community Officers located onsite at the Homeless service. It can be argued that more intensive engagement and follow up from both SAAP support workers and Project Community Officers with those experiencing homelessness has provided preliminary evidence of more accurate assessment of employment barriers and thus contributing to better short and long-term outcomes.

This trial has demonstrated the crucial need of being able to maintain contact with Centrelink in an environment that is more accessible and less likely to result in miscommunication of information and confusion on behalf of the client. There is great potential within the existing CCO program to improve engagement with those who have traditionally been difficult to engage or even barred from the mainstream Centrelink Customer Service Centres. It appears that more accurate assessment of circumstances is able to occur within the homeless service setting, when the process is voluntary and the fear of being breached is removed from the interaction.

Homelessness is an extremely complex issue and so requires more specialist front line response than that provided through the main Centrelink Customer Service Counter. Within this context, the supported accommodation and housing service provides a different site from which to engage clients that is more likely to elicit more complete information of their circumstances. Undertaking a review within the crisis or transitional accommodation context provides direct evidence of the customers' homelessness and provides immense opportunity for improved understanding and engagement in employment assistance programs to avoid circulating around costly activities that are inappropriate to their needs and job readiness.

The supported accommodation setting provides an opportunity to engage the client in setting where they will be staying (potentially up to three months for crisis and more ongoing for transitional) enabling follow up for appointments. Having time to be able to effectively integrate all existing information that Centrelink holds on customers, particularly those who are long term unemployed has been critical to the process of making informed referrals throughout the current trial. The PCOs have had the additional time required to ensure that the JSCI matches existing Centrelink information held within DOCS records, medical screen and the JSCI to enable a complete review of circumstances.

Whilst initially spending more time with clients within the homeless service may run counter to notions of efficiency and the generation of throughput, the added value of being able to ensure accurate assessment with appropriate employment assistance referrals is more likely to generate savings by improving long-term social and economic participation outcomes. The case studies highlight the significant inefficiencies of only relying on the JSCI as the tool that triggers an automatic referral process.

Following the current trial period, the Windsor CCU has extended services to Hanover Southbank. This has been a significant outcome from the project, ensuring that working relationships that have been fostered throughout the trial can be maintained.

The groundwork undertaken through the integration strategy has provided a framework for working effectively within the existing service structure and will assist with maintaining momentum for a collaborative response between Centrelink and support workers.

Currently, the Centrelink Community Officer Program is not widely implemented or evenly distributed across Centrelink Areas as the program relies on the commitment of individual Area Support Offices, which can result in inequitable access and ongoing program vulnerability. As a key goal of the National Homelessness Strategy, the Commonwealth Advisory Committee identified the need *...to establish more flexible service arrangements, mutual obligation requirements and communication procedures to reflect the special circumstances of people who are homeless*. In addressing this goal, the Advisory Committee outlined that a priority action should be to offer *“Centrelink services at locations where homeless people feel comfortable, including community agencies and SAAP services”*.

It is therefore recommended that there be increased commitment to the Centrelink Community Officer Program within Family and Community Services, Housing Support Branch through the provision of recurrent program funding as a specialist Centrelink homelessness response.

In many instances, particularly within Hanover’s Housing Service, the PCO positions demonstrated an increased capacity for an early intervention response that prevented progression into more entrenched homelessness by being able to maintain or restore the persons income.

Being able to resolve the Centrelink participant’s situation more rapidly based on an understanding of their housing issues and being able verify their circumstances at the point of contact prevented pending evictions, where they may require further ongoing accommodation assistance. A further theme emerging from the contact data is that just under half (46%) of participants were 24 years or less. Increasing capacity for more complete assessment of employment barriers for younger clients is likely to prevent progression into a ‘homelessness career path’.

The combined trends of housing history, unemployment duration and past Centrelink activity suggest that participants residing within Southbank were further along the homelessness continuum. Whilst participants accessing Hanover Housing Service (not including clients residing within transitional properties) were more likely to still have some links within the private rental market within their local community. This indicates that Centrelink service response will need both an early intervention focus as well as capacity to respond to those with more entrenched homelessness issues.

It is therefore recommended that the CCO program be integrated within a range of service models within the homeless service system including SAAP Crisis, medium term, and transitional housing services to provide a continuum of service response according to different stages of homelessness.

5.1.1 Well-integrated Co-located Response

Co-location strategies can be highly successful initially but may suddenly lose momentum if not effectively integrated into the structure of the service in which they are located. From the demonstration project it appears, particularly within the supported accommodation setting, that there needs to be a shared ownership of the service response amongst both services to ensure that good will and flow on referrals are maintained.

To engage clients in a review process not necessarily relating to income support relies on all service staff, co-ordinators and managers having a good understanding of the CCO role and being able to inform their clients of the benefits of attending the Centrelink Officer voluntarily. In some instances this requires a significant cultural shift for many of the clients who are long-term recipients and may have had negative experiences with Centrelink in the past and access the office on a high needs basis only. Throughout the trial, the majority of clients were willing to participate in the review process voluntarily once they were given information about what the process involved.

Based on the learnings of what “worked well” and what did not, the following points illustrate some of the key aspects that need to be linked to future co-location responses:

- **Outline the purpose of the exchange/co-location process clearly, including objectives and what the expectations will be for those participating.**
- **Make an agreement of what each party i.e. SAAP and Centrelink is to gain from the exchange/co-location and who will be responsible for co-ordination at both service sites.**
- **Develop a good understanding of the service structure and culture in order to enhance referral processes. Recognising that each service has unique service models will mean the need to adopt service specific strategies.**
- **Ensure sufficient time to allow all staff to be familiar with the purpose of the exchange/co-location before direct service delivery component commences.**
- **Have a specific person within SAAP/ Centrelink that acts as a “buddy” or key contact person.**
- **Whilst maintaining separateness of SAAP and Centrelink functions, ensure integrated response for the client through the development of clear referral pathways/protocols and mechanisms for shared communication between workers, including obtaining client consent.**
- **Include component of attending staff meetings regularly to ensure that working relationships can be maintained.**
- **Be able to share facilities.**

5.2 Improving Referral Pathways

One of the apparent limitations within the current JSCI assessment process for Centrelink customers who have multiple barriers to participating in ongoing employment is an over reliance on an automatic referral process. This is particularly problematic if the original assessment or screening is incomplete as referral for supplementary assessment often relies on disclosure to only a limited number of questions, which do not take into account existing barriers noted elsewhere on the customers record.

The lack of interfacing between the JSCI and other records such as address history, DOCS and medical history which identify potential employment barriers can result in repeated referrals to Intensive Assistance and low levels of referral for PSP (formally CSP). Clearly emerging from the data from this sample of jobseekers, and validating Hanover's previous research, is the high degree of cycling back and forth, mainly between jobsearch, incapacity and Intensive Assistance, with no evaluation employment outcomes achieved.

Participation in the trial has indicated the extreme difficulty of being able to accurately assess and determine the real employment barriers that exist and whilst disclosure has improved, there is still some reluctance to disclose all relevant personal factors to Centrelink because of their perceived regulatory role. In many instances, from the perspective of the customer, if they have already previously disclosed to Centrelink certain issues, via a medical certificate for instance, they do not need to retell this to Centrelink during the JSCI interview.

From this, it appears that an automatic referral procedure based solely on the JSCI is not going to be able to circumvent activity cycling and yield effective outcomes that will progress many of those experiencing homelessness towards "participation". Being able to undertake targeted reviews within the homeless service system will enable Centrelink to identify extremely vulnerable customers, many of who are long-term Newstart recipients.

It is therefore recommended that

A targeted review process be introduced within the homeless service setting through the Centrelink Community Officer Program that incorporates past activity history, medical certificates, address history, and other document notes in order to make informed JSCI referrals.

There be processes implemented to prevent repeat referrals for Intensive Assistance without follow up of previous outcomes and reassessment for eligibility to other employment assistance programs including specialist Intensive Assistance providers and Personal Support Programme.

5.2.1 Enhancing Pathways into Supplementary Assessment

For many of those participating in the trial, the main outcome was a referral for supplementary assessment by an occupational psychologist. Whilst this poses another opportunity to fully engage those experiencing homelessness to improve accuracy of assessment, exploring the most effective means of ensuring that they are willing to engage and attend appointments will be an ongoing challenge that must be addressed within an effective referral process.

From the trial there are a number of barriers to this that will simply not be resolved by breaching those who are homeless if they do not attend. The first is their transience, meaning that by the time the referral is made to an occupational psychologist/social workers the client may have already moved on from where they are staying and therefore not receive correspondence. Secondly, imposing breaches is providing preliminary evidence of contributing to ongoing difficulty in securing housing and employment outcomes in terms of increasing reliance on the homeless service system and therefore the absence of a permanent location from which to seek stable employment. Thirdly, transience contributes to difficulty in keeping track of appointments, as those experiencing homelessness do not generally maintain a diary on their person. Ensuring that the Centrelink Community Unit has sufficient flexibility to refer to these specialist officers as close as possible to the time the original contact has been made will be crucial.

Developing Referral Protocols for Supplementary Assessment

Given the short duration of the trial, the project was not able to follow through on the referral pathways to other specialist providers in terms of difference in attendance rates to specialist providers from the PCO compared to normal referral mechanisms. Preliminary observations and feedback is that the particular client group is generally more willing to engage with social workers as opposed to occupational psychologists.

Social workers now have discretionary power to determine referrals for PSP and being able to increase the capacity of the homeless service system to make direct referrals to Centrelink social workers for supplementary assessment is likely to have the net benefit of increasing attendance for appointments. Emerging from the trial is that clients are more likely to disclose their homeless situation in a JSCI process rather than other personal factors that will normally trigger a supplementary assessment. Within current processes, homelessness alone recorded on the JSCI does not trigger referrals for assessment by social workers, however engagement with trained Centrelink social workers could potentially elicit any further employment barriers.

Throughout the trial, consultations with service staff indicated a need to be able to make direct referrals to Centrelink social workers for clients and it was reported that this often worked best when relationships had been established. There was a common view amongst service providers of the need to develop, with the client's consent, an improved system for sharing information so that the client does not have to retell their story. There was a view that Centrelink should consider direct referrals to Centrelink social workers for participation in PSP based on in-depth assessments undertaken during the intake and ongoing support process within SAAP. The cases of Sarah and Jemma demonstrated a joint approach to undertaking review where the social worker

accompanied their client to a PCO interview or supplementary assessment and with the client's consent was informed of the outcome.

It is therefore recommended that a formal referral protocol be developed between local homeless services and Centrelink Customer Service Centres to enable a more direct pathway for a supplementary assessment by Centrelink social workers for the Personal Support Programme.

5.2.2 Developing Referral Protocols for Breaching

Case studies, particularly for clients accessing Hanover Housing Service provided evidence of breaching contributing to their ongoing housing stress. The imposition of penalties for non-compliance or participation, as evidenced by the high number of multiple breaches amongst trial participants, does not appear to be an effective means for improving employment outcomes for those experiencing homelessness. It can be argued that for many of those experiencing homelessness, breaching does not improve compliance nor does it serve as a disincentive to someone who is transient or provide context for improved disclosure of their circumstances to Centrelink.

Service providers expressed the need for ongoing relationships with key Centrelink personnel who have authority to reconsider decisions that have been made within Centrelink that are affecting the client's ability to maintain independent housing. Further, it was maintained that there needed to be a shared understanding of the policy framework governing SAAP and THM services' work, including the need to restore payments in order to provide housing assistance.

It is therefore recommended that a formal referral protocol be established for the immediate review of breaches in the instances where the breach is affecting the client's capacity to enter into or maintain independent and stable housing.

5.2.3 Additional Collaborative Strategies

Additional collaborative strategies suggested during consultations included:

- Training programs within Centrelink and Homeless service system (discussed in greater detail in section below).
- SAAP worker as nominated support person on Centrelink customer DOC list.
- Should be invited to take their support worker into the interview.
- Case plan meetings with SAAP social workers and Centrelink officers.
- Following up clients after contact with CCO and Centrelink.

- Social workers/Disability Officers/Occupational Psychologist within Centrelink attending Network meetings.

5.3 Improving Availability of Training

Throughout the trial the need for training emerged as a critical issue within Centrelink and the broader homeless service system. One of the main reasons for adopting a seconded staff model for the trial was to identify potential training requirements, both within the homeless service system and Centrelink.

Enhancing working relationships between the two sectors relies on a shared understanding of both local service issues and as well as broader policy direction to ensure that an appropriate service response sits balanced within these two. The difference in organisational cultures and guiding policy, at times, act as a barrier to effective collaboration between the two, with sometimes-entrenched views based on prior interactions and misunderstandings about respective roles.

It is therefore recommended that Centrelink and the Housing Support Branch, through the National Homelessness Strategy work in partnership to develop a training program for Centrelink and the homeless service system.

That local Centrelink Customer Service Centres and Homeless Services undertake training exchange programs that incorporate service delivery issues relevant to local communities.

5.3.1 SAAP Training

With the redevelopment of Centrelink as the main referral point for employment assistance through the Job Network, there has been reduced involvement of homeless service system as source of referral for employment assistance for job seekers experiencing homelessness. As a consequence, knowledge of current employment assistance options for clients varies across the sector, with some services having good knowledge whilst others have limited knowledge. Further, amongst ongoing changes within Centrelink, there are no regular training opportunities to keep abreast of broader policy directions for all SAAP/THM services.

In the context of being able to make informed referrals and advocate for those experiencing homelessness, the following training requirements are suggested:

- **Centrelink information book for caseworkers**
- **Case workers to be given Centrelink Community Unit direct phone number/mobile phone numbers**
- **Phone numbers of all Centrelink Customer Service Centres, including social workers and other Specialist Centrelink officers**
- **Basic training on all benefits – DSP, NSA, YA – eligibility, amount, independent youth allowance**