

Size, composition, recruitment and retention: Understanding the New South Wales (NSW) Alcohol and Other Drugs Workforce

Angela Stuart¹, Lexi Buckfield¹, Stephanie Hocking¹, Kylie Paulson¹, Elvis Maio¹, Suzie Hudson¹, Matt Craig¹, Debbie Kaplan¹, Chris Keyes², Sandra Sunjic^{3,4}

¹The Centre for Alcohol and Other Drugs, NSW Ministry of Health, Sydney, Australia. ²The Network of Alcohol and other Drugs Agencies, Sydney, Australia., ³ South Eastern Sydney Local Health District, Sydney, Australia, ⁴Discipline of Addiction Medicine, Central Clinical School, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

Presenter's email: angela.stuart@health.nsw.gov.au

Introduction: The alcohol and other drugs (AOD) sector is experiencing critical workforce challenges. Targeted strategies are required to ensure a sustainable workforce supply that meets current and future levels of demand. This must be informed by robust workforce data. To date, there has been limited data collection on the composition of the NSW AOD Workforce.

Method: The inaugural 2022 NSW AOD Workforce Census was sent to all public sector services (n=19) and non-government organisations (NGO; n=82). Organisations were asked to report on total workforce composition as of census date, 30 September 2022. Analysis was performed (n=92%) to derive baseline data for the workforce size, distribution, and priority workforce gaps.

Key Findings: There are 2935 people employed across the NSW AOD Workforce (n=57% public sector and 43% in NGO settings). All services confirmed challenges in workforce recruitment and retention, with 11.5% of all full-time equivalent (FTE) roles vacant as of census date, and 32% of recruitment exceeding six-month duration, or failure to recruit. Such challenges varied across geographic region and service setting. Priority areas for growth include regional, Aboriginal (n=7.9%) and peer (n=1.5%) workforces. There is inequitable access to medical specialists, with roles concentrated to metropolitan settings. Growth is required to build the nascent peer workforce, and Aboriginal workforce (identified FTE vacancy rate n=18%).

Discussions and Conclusions: The census provides the first comprehensive dataset for the NSW AOD Workforce. It highlights capacity and recruitment challenges where targeted strategies are required to address immediate gaps and build long-term workforce stability. Targeted workforce growth is required to ensure the composition mirrors the client profile who access AOD services.

Implications for Practice or Policy: A NSW AOD Workforce Strategy and subsequent priorities will be informed by insights gleaned from the inaugural workforce census. Progress will be measured, and priorities identified through three-yearly data collection.