

Sustaining meaningful community involvement: An analysis of the strengths and vulnerabilities within organisational networks in the Victorian HIV and Hepatitis C response

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Background:

The Australian response to HIV and hepatitis C has been characterised by collaboration and partnership, involving a network of community organisations working with health services, government, and researchers. The network is needing to adapt to rapidly changing epidemiological, policy, community, and health technology contexts. We investigated the inter-organisational structures of this network to identify the strengths, weaknesses, and sustainability issues as the network responds to future challenges and opportunities.

Methods:

We asked organisations about their relationships with other organisations in the network. Rounds of the study were conducted in 2018 (n=27) and 2022 (n=26), examining relationships over time between government, health, research, and community organisations involved in Victoria's HIV and hepatitis C response. The data collected were analysed using exponential random graph models (ERGMs), identifying significant network characteristics and the social processes which produced the observed structure.

Results:

Networks at both time points were most dense around sharing of information, and least dense around collaborating on advocacy. Organisations were well connected to organisations of all other types (e.g. research organisations connected to government, community, and health organisations). Smaller organisations (fewer than 11 staff members) were significantly more likely to nominate others across all relationships, indicating small organisations had greater engagement across network relationships than larger counterparts.

Conclusions:

The results reflect an integrated network. The sharing of insights, joint work and influential community sector involvement were prominent types of engagement between organisations. However, this involvement requires a high level of

relationship work for community and peer-led organisations to sustain and the density of relationships may place a barrier for newly emerging priority communities to become integrated within the network. Analysis of whole network structures provides useful new insights into the challenges of sustaining meaningful community participation and partnership within a network over time, identifying key pressure points and vulnerabilities.

Disclosure of interest:

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