

Social work and social development: Melbourne 2014

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Social work in Australia: virtual teams offer supervision

Technology offers an accessible and affordable way for rural and isolated social workers to connect, reflect and learn

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An old water-pumping windmill stands in front of an abandoned farmhouse in Gawler, South Australia. Photograph: www.corbis.com/Paul A. Souders

Social work practice in rural Australia faces high staff turnover, burnout and difficulties in recruitment and retention. A lack of supervision and professional development opportunities have been identified as contributing to difficulties.

My research describes the process of peer supervision in virtual teams in rural and remote Australia, based on a research trial over a 12-month period.

The research revealed seven themes: connectedness with like-minded professionals; support; education; reflection on practice; structure and process; technology and the challenges of time, preparation and priority.

I found an apparent erosion of traditional social work supervision models in the workplace in rural, remote and regional Australia.

The majority of participants in my research – 80% – received no supervision at all. A small number received what could be termed administrative supervision, often by another health professional, where there was a very limited understanding of what the social worker does and certainly no input regarding social work interventions.

I found a clear structure and process to follow contributed to a safe space where peers could share and reflect on successes and challenges in practice, discuss ethical dilemmas, receive feedback and ideas from trusted colleagues, give and receive support,

learn, and experience connection with fellow like-minded social workers. Participants reported that they reflected before supervision sessions, during peer supervision and afterwards.

The research revealed an unexpected positive if peers from different agencies are grouped together. Participants reported that the experience of hearing from social workers in a different context added to their learning and sense of connection.

Simple technology affords ease and access for virtual supervision. Telephone conference calls offered more reliability and availability than video links, as numerous participants did not have access to reliable internet or video link technology.

Significantly, groups that adopted a structure and followed clear processes lasted the year of monthly peer supervision sessions. Those without a clear framework floundered and ceased to operate after a few months.

In conclusion, peer supervision in virtual teams is recommended for professionals working rural, regional and remote areas. These principles have significant implications for the retention of social workers in rural, remote and regional Australia and this mode of supervision is also accessible for social workers in urban contexts.

Social workers can be professionally isolated even when working in large cities. I propose that peer supervision in virtual teams can be an option for social workers anywhere across the globe and can address gaps in supervision that many experience.

Amanda Nickson is a lecturer in social work and human services at James Cook University in Queensland, Australia; she is presenting her research at the Joint World Conference on Social Work, Education and Social Development in Melbourne

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