

Equal pay for community workers

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The substantial wage gap in the community services sector between not-for-profit and government positions has now gained recognition by Australian Governments, with changes expected to award conditions. This will mean that people working in occupations including social work, disabilities, aged care and welfare are expected to gain comparable rates of pay with equivalent positions in the public sector.

After a Queensland case awarded pay increases of 18-37 per cent to community services workers in 2009, the Australian Services Union (ASU) lodged an equal remuneration case under the federal Fair Work Act. This case, which is currently being heard, had triggered rallies.

The ASU was originally concerned that the Federal Government was backtracking, however, the union is now confident that there is support for the case and the associated funding implications. Jack Carnegie of the NSW office of the ASU recalls when the SACS award was first introduced some 10 years ago. "Once we got the award, slowly both the federal and state came round and provided the funding," he said.

Important to the case is highlighting the cultural devaluations that have existed to deny pay equity to a predominantly female work force. Mr Carnegie said: "We are arguing that had this type of work traditionally been done by men, it probably would have



Newtown Neighbourhood Centre staff, students and volunteers Photo: Ali Blogg

been paid better." Research presented in the Queensland case explained how care work has often been associated with women's mothering skills which are likely to be seen as natural and go unnoticed. It is care provided out of love, not money.

This is a cultural stigma that has attached to some professionals who have undergone extensive professional training to be able to deliver critical services. "You have people with tertiary qualifications working 38 hours a week, working face-to-face with people who for all sorts of reasons have emotional problems or are very vulnerable. They are only earning \$40,000 to \$50,000 a year, while someone in the public service is earning \$70,000 or \$80,000

a year doing basically the same work," said Mr Carnegie.

Lisa Burns of the Newtown Neighbourhood Centre fights to prove the value of the work provided by the centre. "I don't understand why we who work in the community sector are considered second class citizens when we provide comparable services," Ms Burns said. She is proud of statistics that show how nominal funding invested in services at the centre was used to place homeless people in accommodation, saving hundreds of thousands of dollars in potential costs to governments for emergency and crisis accommodation.

An outcome to equal pay case before Fair Work Australia is expected by April this year.