

Passion, Challenge and Hope
Tirrania Suhood
Presentation for National Community and Family Conference on Drugs 10-11
November 2000

How wonderful to have a conference that gives small organisations a voice. This is so much needed. There are so many stories that I could tell. This story will be about Blacktown Alcohol and other Drugs Family Services as well as being my personal story. It acknowledges the service that BADFS provides, though equally important discusses organisational concerns - recognising that without the organisation there is no service.

I have worked at Blacktown Alcohol and other Drugs Family Services (BADFS) for 8 years. My family and friends and even a number of my colleagues from other services have so regularly asked “Why do you not just move on – after all the conditions are not good, there’s no career prospects, it just doesn’t have the status and why stay somewhere where you have to fight to maintain your own position - its not that important a job or organisation – after all - its only small !:”Some colleagues who work in large organisations, have suggested I consider working for them. Essentially, structurally and personally I have not been encouraged to stay with this organisation. I do have skills and qualifications that would make it easy for me to move - my most recent being Masters in Community Management. What has kept me here has been the relationships, the needs of the community and my own need to be satisfied in what I do and to make a difference. This period of time has been hugely challenging and very exciting.

I realised after a short time co-ordinating BADFS that a small organisation can have a lot of influence in making a difference at the local level and beyond. BADFS is a family service. We recognise family and social context when we address drug issues. This understanding has in turn supported me to understand wider systems. We recognise alcohol and other drug use can be both a problem and a symptom of other problems. We offer individual, couple and family counselling as well as participating in health promotion activities around relationship and alcohol and other drug (AOD) issues. Many have recognised the value of BADFS. We continue to receive positive feedback on our approach to AOD issues. We have continued to see clients who tell us there is no where else they can go.

The work BADFS and other small organisations do at the local level is very important - I think there is general agreement on that. However, people seem to be less clear on the significance and influence of a small organisation beyond the local level. While the previous National Drug Strategy(1993-1997) identified family issues, it did not include them in strategies. The last NSW Drug Strategy(1993-1998) did not even mention “family”. Before family members like Tony Trimingham and Brian McConnell found their voice in the media, I often found myself at state, regional, local conferences and meetings *alone* in advocating for families in relation to AOD issues. It made no sense to me that *I* was raising these issues when I came from such a *small* organisation. It soon became clear to me that small organisations often carry national issues - and are not

recognised for this. I cannot know of the impact my organisation made on these issues - however I do know that this organisation has been and continues to be important in influencing thinking in the field. The influence is now also on issues beyond the AOD field.

It is for some years now that I have recognised the importance of such a small organisation to both addressing the needs of our society and influencing future directions. I have also recognised the importance of encouraging dedicated staff to use their potential. I was sure that we would be supported to further develop the service. After all, small businesses are supported financially to be innovative. Yet, with funding increments not meeting increased costs, for a number of years staff meetings discussed the possibility of our hours being dropped unless funding could be found. Decreasing an 80 hour per week service meant decreasing the hours of all three staff working at BADFS. (No wonder people asked me and other staff why we stayed!). Additional funding was found to delay this process - however we have now had to reduce the core hours of the service. To receive such positive feedback about the organisation but little support to encourage workers to stay or support the development of the organisation just did not make sense. One of our workers did eventually leave.

I was also seeing really skilled workers leave other small organisations for better conditions and status in large NGOs, government departments and even the private sector. I could no longer stay in this organisation without sharing my concerns. BADFS had also reached a point where it needed more support soon in order to survive. I wanted to stay if the support was there but otherwise I was prepared to leave. I decided to seek support and share my concerns. This resulted in a meeting of 17 stakeholders including a number of directors of regional government departments and peak body representatives – to look at the ways forward for BADFS. The high attendance at this meeting of such senior representatives renewed my sense of optimism, hope and trust in such people. While no funding was received from this meeting, new valuable relationships were formed. These relationships have supported further work of the agency and indirectly they are supporting BADFS continued survival.

BADFS has since received some funds to co-ordinate a community and interagency project called Bridges. The project seeks to enhance relationships between young people, adults and agencies whilst creating an environment that develops knowledge and skills to better work together to address drug issues. The project involves holding a series of gatherings to achieve its goals. It is a very exciting project.

However, it still remains that core funding for the agency is reducing in real terms and long-term (possibly short-term) survival of the organisation has never ceased to be a major concern. Raising these issues to funding bodies and peaks has not resulted in quick enough action to assure me that my organisation will survive. And I have also realised that this issue is a national issue and many small organisations around the nation are struggling. We are in an economic and competitive climate where large is being valued over small. When funding is available it is often the large organisations that receive large sums, while small organisations struggle to obtain an additional \$10,000 or \$20,000. We

do not have the resources or profile to address issues for our survival. We also do not have a separate body that represents us, unlike small business that has chamber of commerce and even a State minister. The importance of survival and development of small organisations is a newly identified issue.

Hence this year BADFS has been involved in initiating and then facilitating “VOICE for SONG - Small Organisations Non Government” - a group of small organisations from various fields to find our voice together and no longer be alone in our struggles for survival. Our mission is to....

“ensure the survival and development of small-non government, not-for profit organisations, through developing and implementing local strategies and promoting the development of a national body to represent them”.

We recognise that there is little awareness of the value and issues for small not-for-profit organisations. Without such recognition, local strategies are unlikely to be successful. Hence, we seek to address our mission by being a VOICE for small organisations, challenging the small/large culture as well as developing local responses. We believe small and large organisations are both important for our society. Neither structure is better. We are really pleased that we are being resourced by our regional peak body - Western Sydney Community Forum. And by the time of this presentation we would have held a forum entitled “VOICE, Value, Survival and Co-operation of Small Organisations”.

The development of VOICE for SONG has also helped me to stay at BADFS. To be part of a group that is challenging the small/large culture gives me hope and strength - and excitement to be part of a movement that seeks to maintain grassroots decision-making and further community and not-for-profit motives in a society that is increasingly motivated by profit.

Just like many of our clients need a voice to survive - so too do we organisations - so that we can still be around to support them and strengthen our community.