

BADFS Story in " Odd Socks : Why the survival of small community organisations is critical" published by Local Community Services Association, September 2002

Blacktown Alcohol and other Drugs Family Services Inc. (BADFS)

BADFS started 23 years ago as a project of Centacare in response to a recognised community need in that they were getting a lot of clients with alcohol problems. It was eventually set up as a separate independent agency. It was originally called DIFSS (Drink in Family Support Services).

Its purpose was to provide face-to-face services for individuals, families and the community that address alcohol issues. The service also looked at the context of the problems and became involved in advocacy and in communicating with the community. The agency had a team of volunteers making home visits. The workers ran groups in the community. The service was very innovative at the time and did amazing things so became very well known. The service went through a period where it had a stronger focus on counselling and less on community development. Now we have a strong focus on both activities as they are both equally important. We also now address other drug use as well as alcohol use.

We often receive calls from people wanting counselling who tell us that there is nowhere else for them to go. BADFS is a unique service because of our focus on the family as well as alcohol and other drug issues and our particular activities. Our uniqueness goes beyond the local area but as I haven't done the research I can't say how far it goes. Simply, I don't know of another organisation that matches our focus, approach and activities. Being small, we can be flexible and can respond to our clients changing needs without going through the hoops of bureaucracy. Often issues identified in counselling and in our day-to-day practice inform our community development work and vice versa. The Bridges project is a community and interagency project that brings young people, adults and organisations together to address drug issues. We have co-ordinated this project in collaboration with workers from Western Sydney Area Health Service. Lots of other organisations have also been part of the team that has implemented the project. We are developing a culture of understanding on just how complex drug issues are and the importance of strengthening relationships and working together. We've involved lots of young people through drama and other creative activities and held community gatherings. We've been really successful in this first stage in engaging community and organisations. We recently held a forum with Centre for Popular Education, University of Technology to share Bridges as a model of developing social capital to address alcohol and other drug issues. The event was booked out and people from all over NSW and even Queensland attended. The feedback was great.

In terms of dealing with funding issues, we define what is needed and fit the work into funding categories. Probably because we have been around for so long and maintain a good relationship with our funders at an individual level, we feel we have some flexibility from them. We receive core funding from two government departments. This means that there are two sets of opportunities to fund what the community needs but it also means that there are two sets of meetings to attend and two sets of documentation that have to be processed.

Our core funding covers less than two full-time equivalent workers. This is inadequate for the work that is required. Also because annual funding increments do not meet increased costs, existing staff never know if our own hours are going to be cut. Structurally, it feels like workers are being discouraged from staying. This is the case for lots of workers in small organisations. Extra funding for project work has meant that so far we have not had to reduce our hours. But this funding has always been temporary and so we constantly have to be looking for more funding. Yet when we receive more funding from other sources this gives us more administration. Last year we had five sources of funding that we had to account for. Given we are such a small organisation, there is immense staff stress related to the time and energy required to seek additional funding as well as administrate and account for it. The statistical and reporting requirements are unrealistic, not to mention the increased workload related to the GST. And of course there's also lots of other general administration and I.T. tasks.

In January 1999 one of the workers left owing to the poor conditions and the constant threat that his hours may be cut. The organisation became very vulnerable as another worker was on leave without pay and only I remained. During this time there was pressure on me to do more direct service, for fear that we would otherwise be defunded. I resisted this pressure as I was so aware that something had to change or we would not survive in the long-term or even in the short-term. I was also aware that the issues we were facing were also being faced by others in small organisations. I negotiated to close the service and have some time to bring stakeholders together and review BADFS role. We brought together 17 high level stakeholders, including a number of directors of regional and local government departments who manage budgets in the millions, to look at how we could work together to address family and substance use issues whilst identifying BADFS role and its future. We had to rethink our impressions of government officials as uncaring and unable to think outside the square. Relationships that were formed through that meeting and the support that was received meant that this was a turning point for BADFS. I also felt personally encouraged to stay working in the organisation.

At the same time, good relationships with high-level stakeholders is not enough for an organisation that is struggling financially to survive. We also need funding. For me it has not made sense that BADFS has struggled for so long with limited concrete support, especially as we have received such positive feedback about our work. Working here has made me understand and believe in not just the value of BADFS, but in the value of all small organisations. I believe that small NGOs in general are undervalued. Society values big, not small. This belief led me to raise issues of survival of BADFS and of *all* small organisations with key people and at various meetings and conferences. I was also aware that it was safer to raise BADFS issues as part of a larger problem that needed to be challenged. The issue was again raised at our AGM in November 1999 which led Jackie Wilgress from Family Worker Training and Development Programme and other workers -Brad Wessling and Tony Hayes and myself to meet for coffee and decide to take this issue further. We then initiated a group that became Voice for SONG(Small organisations Non Government) - a coalition of small organisations from various fields who have found our voices together and are no longer alone in our struggles for survival. I facilitated or co-ordinated this group in its founding year with Jackie's support. Those of us in Voice for SONG are raising awareness of the value of small NGOs and the need for strategies to support our survival and development. We are also lobbying for representative bodies at local, regional and national levels. Being part of Voice for SONG has helped me to stay at BADFS. I have gained hope and strength from being part of a group that is challenging the small/large culture and that is working together 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.

Small organisations are certainly important for the services we provide at the local level. But people often don't recognise that we influence big picture issues. As we are independent we can use our "voice" to influence change to government policy and strategies. Before family members like Tony Trimmingham found their voice in the media, I often found myself *alone* at State, regional and local conferences and meetings in advocating for families in relation to alcohol and other drug 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 but are not recognised for this.

BADFS role in the development of Voice for SONG is also an example of our influence on big picture issues. We have also shown that small NGOs are capable of leading large scale projects through collaboration. The Bridges Project is an example of this. We can also develop high level links and share them at the grassroots. BADFS has developed links to senior government officials and other influential stakeholders. We share these links with Voice for SONG and other projects. For example we were approached by Westpac to participate in a partnership project. Westpac then met with other members of Voice for SONG and will be providing human resource management training for small NGOs.

I am increasingly being consulted and invited onto committees with senior government representatives and academics. This is really significant and a recognition of the value that can be found in small organisations and our role in influencing big picture issues. However, it can be difficult from small organisations to find time to attend to such meetings and there is a case for them being paid for this sort of work.

The funding for the Bridges Project finished at the end of June 2002. This funding provided additional staff hours for the organisation. With BADFS poor infrastructure we put some of the extra income into additional hours for the counsellor and administrator, while I took on the tasks of Bridges co-ordination in addition to my role as BADFS Co-ordinator. This was a strategic decision as Bridges has strengthened the organisation as well as being a valuable project in its own right. The Co-ordinator's role does involve increasing the organisations profile and Bridges has achieved this. However, with my working on Bridges, other key roles of BADFS co-ordination have suffered. At the same time without Bridges funding the organisation would have suffered in other ways.

A big problem is that the co-ordination and administration activities are not recognised. Both the time given to support the everyday running of the organisation and activities that go beyond this and support development and capacity building need to be valued. Funders, including our core funders, request that we report on direct services, with little emphasis on organisational and inter-organisational development and advocacy. Yet these roles keep the organisation together, support the development of co-operative links at all levels and give voice at these many levels to the issues. A lot of the work I do supports the development of trusting, co-operative relationships and addresses common goals, not just goals for BADFS. Sometimes it all feels too much and I think maybe we could be auspiced by a large organisation. However, if that happens the service will offer primarily counselling and most of the high level and local level interagency linking, community development, advocacy and emphasis on common goals would be lost. In this instance I would leave. I love working here because of the autonomy, flexibility and freedom to be creative to affect local and big picture issues.

There is something special about working in a small NGO. Pat, the counsellor and I have been here over 10 years and Gilda, the administration officer has been here for 4 years. We all gain immense satisfaction from our work. I think we need models of small organisations to help people understand our value. I've just written a discussion paper on BADFS as a model of a small organisation. It's just one model. Other models are equally valid.

In the last couple of months I have been openly stating that I might be forced to leave. Since this time, some additional funding has come through to extend our counselling service. We also have other applications being assessed to continue the Bridges project. However, the funding we have received is temporary and covers counselling hours with some co-ordination hours. But co-ordination and administration hours are still not enough – which means myself and the administration officer still don't know if we will have to reduce our hours. So I continue to openly state that BADFS future is uncertain and ask what people can do to support us to continue our work. Recently I was approached by a teacher from TAFE who plans for her advocacy class to advocate for BADFS.

Our profile and networks continue to grow. We have demonstrated how much a small NGO can do. All of this holds us in good stead. I increasingly feel the support for myself, for BADFS and for small NGOs. I somehow think that we are turning the corner and we will get the funds and concrete support that we need. I feel that I will be here for a while longer and both others in the field and in the general community will increasingly understand, value and support small NGOs. While I state my fears and concerns, I am an eternal optimist. That's how I have managed to stay here so long. Let's see if I'm right.