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ARE WE READY YET? SOCIAL WORKERS' PREPAREDNESS TO RENDER SOCIAL SUPPORT TO PERSONS WITH SUBSTANCE ABUSE CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Chemical substance abuse remains a major health and social problem globally and in South Africa. Considering the drug-use-related challenges faced by South Africa's youth, there is a need to design and implement robust interventions to mitigate the impact of chemical substance use. Social workers are not prepared enough to provide drug-dependency treatment to persons with substance abuse challenges. To address this issue, a qualitative research approach was adopted with seven participants who were selected using the non-probability technique of purposive sampling. Data were analysed using Tesch's eight steps and verified using Guba and Lincoln's model to test the trustworthiness of the data. Ethical considerations were adhered to throughout the study. The findings highlight that social workers need urgent intensive training and resources to execute their tasks effectively in the field of substance abuse.

Keywords: social worker, adolescents, chemical substance abuse, social support

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Chemical substance abuse remains a major health and social problem globally and South Africa is not immune to the impacts of this pervasive problem (Khoza, Dube & Nkomo, 2017). In line with this, the South African Community Epidemiology Network on Drug Use (Dada, Burnham's, Erasmus, Parry & Bhana, 2020) reports that chemical substance use among adolescents under the age of 20 years is prevalent. Various factors lead to substance abuse, but they differ amongst individuals; these factors include vulnerability to peer pressure, need to fit into the social environment, poor decision making, self-identity issues, impulsivity, etc.

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(Ramsoomar, 2015). There is a relationship between substance abuse and gender-based violence in South Africa, where intimate partner violence (IPV) is five times higher in relationships where one or both partners abuse substances (Masiko & Xinwa, 2017). These factors point to the vulnerability of adolescents using chemical substances.

It is worth noting that the focus of the study was on social workers as the key role players in rendering services to persons with substance abuse challenges. The report by Manganyi (2015) suggests that social workers are not prepared enough in terms of training and workshops to provide drug-dependency treatment. The author further states that the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) South Africa was among the first to offer a speciality practice section for substance abuse in 1996 to social workers, but only 3% of social workers have substance addiction treatment as their primary practice (Manganyi, 2015). The study by Maluleke (2014) therefore stresses the need for workshops and specialisation in the field of substance abuse. According to Savage (2016), treatment of substance abuse, particularly in the area of adolescent assessment, is a highly specialised practice, so the social worker needs to be highly experienced and willing to provide such social welfare services.

The study aimed to develop an in-depth understanding of the preparedness and experiences of social workers and the challenges they face working with persons with substance abuse challenges in the Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality of Limpopo province. The researchers felt that this study would generate new ideas and knowledge on how to prepare social workers to work effectively with persons with substance abuse challenges. It would assist in improving the policies and frameworks for dealing with chemical substance abuse. This study could generate new information that would assist the Department of Social Development to make the necessary changes to adolescents' substance abuse programmes. The study also aimed to provide recommendations for possible future research.

SOCIAL WORKERS WORKING WITH PERSONS WITH SUBSTANCE USE CHALLENGES

The treatments for chemical substance abuse and addiction have undergone dramatic changes in recent years. Therefore, social workers need to have up-to-date knowledge and access to chemical substance abuse treatment services provided at different levels of care, screening service users, providing brief educational courses on substance abuse, giving advice and making referrals to treatment facilities (Velasquez, Crouch, Stephens & Clement, 2016). The researchers are of the view that, even though the Department of Social Development outlines the standards for social work practice with chemical substance abusers, it does not address social workers' preparedness, experiences and challenges in working with adolescents who abuse chemical substances. This means that social workers may lack the training and resources to effectively provide substance abuse treatment. They need to have knowledge of and access to addiction treatment and social welfare services providing different levels of care (Velasquez, *et al.*, 2016).

What is potentially even more troubling is that social work education and practice do not devote similar attention to substance abuse issues in non-substance-abusing practice areas. According

to the NASW (2013), to meet the needs of service users with chemical substance abuse issues, social workers must remain up to date about the frequent changes in legislation and the requirements for addressing substance abuse, especially among teenage users.

There are a plethora of research studies investigating substance abuse (Maluleke, 2014; Manganyi, 2015; Savage, 2016). However, little has been documented on social workers' preparedness, experiences and challenges when rendering services to persons with substance abuse challenges, and specifically within the Department of Social Development in the Lepelle Nkumpi Municipality of Limpopo province. The purpose of this study was therefore to explore and describe the preparedness, experiences and challenges of social workers rendering social welfare services to persons with substance abuse challenges.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework that was applied for the study was bio-ecological systems theory. This theory is based on the notion that effective intervention occurs by working not only directly with service users but also with the familial, social and cultural factors that affect their social functioning. The application of bio-ecological systems theory in the study was appropriate since this theory has been a central influence on social work practice for some time (Greene, 2008).

The theory helps to describe how an individual is impacted on by others in his relational field as well as in larger systems (Reiter, 2015). This calls for assessment and intervention at the micro, meso, exo, macro, chrono and techno systems, thus providing an excellent framework for holistic assessment and consequently the possibility of a holistic intervention. The environments within which the social workers function significantly shape their own life trajectories and outcomes (Maina, Ogenchuk, & Gaudet, 2021). This means social workers in the Department of Social Development were required to apply a holistic approach when rendering social welfare services to persons with substance abuse challenges. The application of technology may also be used to facilitate various forms of services, including counselling, case management, support and other social work functions. This increased the range of options available to the practitioner to intervene directly in the individual's life or through strategies within the environment, or both.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research approach. In line with the chosen qualitative research approach, the study was guided by a collective case study design and explorative, descriptive and contextual strategy of inquiry.

The following research questions were formulated:

- How prepared are social workers in rendering services to persons with substance abuse challenges?
- What are social workers' experiences and challenges in rendering social welfare services to persons with substance abuse challenges?

The goal was to develop an in-depth understanding of the preparedness, experiences and challenges of social workers working with persons with substance abuse challenges in the Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality, Limpopo province, South Africa. Based on this goal, the following research objectives were formulated:

- To explore and describe social workers' preparedness when rendering social welfare services to persons with substance abuse challenges;
- To explore and describe social workers' experiences when rendering social welfare services to persons with substance abuse challenges;
- To explore and describe social workers' challenges when rendering social welfare services to persons with substance abuse challenges;
- To conceptualise social welfare services rendered by a selected government organisation to persons with substance abuse challenges within the context of bio-ecological systems theory.

The population of this study was all social workers within the Department of Social Development working with persons with substance abuse challenges in the Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality of Limpopo province.

The researchers used purposive sampling for this study. The basic criteria for selecting social workers were:

- The social workers were within the Department of Social Development working with persons with substance abuse challenges in the Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality of Limpopo Province;
- The social workers were registered under the Social Service Professions Act (Act No. 110 of 1978);
- The social workers had at least two years of experience working with persons with substance abuse challenges;
- The social workers could be of any age, race and gender;
- The social workers who were willing and available to conduct the interviews;
- The social workers were able to converse in English.

The researchers first obtained an ethical clearance certificate from the University of South Africa (Ref #: R&EC:06/02/18/61470457_22). After that, permission was obtained to conduct the study from the manager of the Department of Social Development of Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality in Limpopo province. Ethical considerations such as obtaining informed consent, assuring confidentiality and proper management of the research data were observed throughout the process. The seven social workers were purposely selected and data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews.

Data were analysed using the eight steps for thematic data analysis devised by Tesch (in Creswell, 2016). The researchers, with the help of an independent coder, analysed the data through transcribing data, data reduction, breaking down data into segments, and then creating

codes, code themes, sub-themes and categories to make sense of the data and get a better understanding of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2016).

To ensure the trustworthiness of the information gathered, the researchers were guided by Guba's model (in Krefting, 1991), which emphasises that in research the trustworthiness and rigour of the researcher are vital. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study its credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability of the study were discussed in the research report. The main themes were derived from the raw data and these themes were further divided into sub-themes, as indicated below.

FINDINGS

The four main themes were derived from the data analysis and these themes were further divided into nine sub-themes. The findings are presented in line with the research objectives and integrated with the literature.

Theme 1: Social workers' preparedness in rendering services to persons with substance abuse challenges

Research objective 1: The first research objective for the study was to explore and describe the social workers' preparedness to render social welfare services to persons with substance abuse challenges.

To ensure effective delivery of social welfare services to those dealing with substance abuse, the job description of social workers should include a deliverable, knowledge base and adequate skills when assisting with substance abuse cases. This means the social workers should receive adequate training in providing assistance to substance abusers and as well as the opportunity to attend refresher courses. This training should include developing an understanding of the substance dependency rehabilitation process. Support from senior personnel to provide supervision, support and leadership are very important.

The following sub-themes were identified through the thematic analysis, namely social workers' job focus and training received to deliver a social service for substance-abusing adolescents.

Sub-theme 1.1: Social workers' job description

One of the questions of the semi-structured interviews was posed to determine how the social workers interviewed understood their job description. The following was reported by the participants:

I am a generic social worker who deal with everything, disability, foster care, substance, all social problems. (Participant 1)

My section is a generic social work, so I work with all the cases that need social work services, we attend it and assist where we can. (Participant 2)

Well, I am a generic social worker, so I deal with almost everything social work-related... we do not choose cases and we do not specialise in family preservation, substance abuse, foster care, all those social problems. (Participant 4)

As derived from the interviews, the social workers' job focus is generic and does not specifically focus on assisting adolescents who are abusing substances. Social workers regularly encounter individuals, families and communities affected by chemical substance use. Some social workers specialise in dealing with substance abuse, whereas most social workers provide services to individuals and families in a non-speciality setting in which substance abuse is often integral to the client's presenting problems (National Association of Social Workers, 2013).

Holland and Scourfield (2015) also suggest that social workers should work together with clients to develop their inner resources and mobilise outside facilities, if necessary, to bring about changes in the environment. Social workers regularly encounter individuals, families and communities affected by chemical substance use. The participants highlighted that as the nature of the problem is escalating as a result of economic circumstances, the assistance rendered would possibly be more successful if they could be trained to specialise in assisting adolescents with substance abuse.

Sub-theme 1.2: Social workers' training and competency

Regarding the training social workers received, the following was reported by the participants:

Well, when I started coordinating substances, there was no training that I attended, so the knowledge that I used, was from my colleague who was coordinating substances alone in the whole of Lepelle Nkumpi, so when I joined her, she taught me what I know, how to get in touch with rehabilitation centres, how to write the reports and all those things, so I think after two years of coordinating, that is when I attended a training workshop that was provided by South African Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence. (Participant 2)

So far, I only attended one workshop on substances, I think around March this year (2018), which was an eye-opener, it taught me a lot of things that I wasn't aware of in substance abuse, I didn't know or understand the broad issue of addiction and substance, how easy one can get addicted to the substance. (Participant 3)

I was using my experience as a generic social worker, what I was taught in university, and I was acquiring more skills as I am busy rendering these services, so we learned as we go and as we make mistakes, so that's what prepared me. (Participant 3)

Based on the information provided above, some of the social workers have the adopted skills and competencies to work with adolescents dealing with chemical substance dependency. It is clear, however, that some of the social workers do not have the skills and competencies needed for the task at hand. More training and refresher courses are thus needed to ensure effective service delivery.

According to Anderson (2020), it is vital to reinforce the need for all social workers to receive training in chemical substance abuse prevention, early intervention, treatment and recovery support, as social workers who are not in a position to discuss chemical abuse with clients may fail to understand the biopsychological effects of substance abuse, leading to negative consequences and unintentional harm to the client. This is confirmed by Wells, Kristman-Valente, Peavy and Jackson (2013) that social workers have a history of failing to train and prepare social workers to work with persons with substance abuse challenges.

The literature consulted highlights the fact that adolescents are high-risk persons with substance abuse challenges, who require weekly or more referrals to treatment, and that social workers play a major role in the referral process, making it important for them to have the appropriate skills and treatment resources available (Singh, McCann, Weber, Gonzalez & Alzate, 2018). Social workers are required to attend supervision either on a daily, weekly or monthly basis, where they discuss their cases and their work activities as part of the learning process and improving their skills. Anderson (2020) discussed the importance of reinforcing education for social work students on substance abuse, arguing that many students graduate without preparation to effectively address social and health problems related to chemical substance use in their primary practice settings.

Theme 2: Social worker's experiences in working with persons with substance abuse challenges

Research objective 2: The second research objective for the study was to explore and describe the social workers' experiences in rendering social welfare services to persons with substance abuse challenges.

Experience refers to what social workers have gone through while working with persons facing substance abuse challenges and the knowledge acquired through rendering such services. The social workers shared how they perceived working with persons with substance abuse challenges. This theme helped to develop an understanding of what social workers experienced within their own frame of reference.

The following sub-themes were identified through the thematic analysis, namely the magnitude of the substance dependence and social workers' work environment.

Sub-theme 2.1: Magnitude of substance dependence

The following evidence about the magnitude of substance abuse within their social environment was provided by the participants.

This substance abuse problem is already out of hand so if they don't do anything, it is going to cause more problems. (Participant 1)

And again, we work with people from poor backgrounds, the fact that he came here means he cannot afford to go to private rehabilitation centres. (Participant 7)

If you go to the community I work with (Moletlane complex) there are nyaope boys on every corner, and there are more substances there that we are not even aware of now, so it is a big challenge. (Participant 5)

Based on the interviews, it is clear that substance abuse is a social problem that is getting out of hand and affecting everyone in the community. Additionally, economic and social factors contribute to the challenges faced because of the level of chemical substance use in communities. Lebese, Ramakuela and Maputle (2014) further explain that substance abuse has become a worrisome phenomenon in most villages and urban areas of South Africa, because young people are dying morally, socially, psychologically and physically as a consequence. This aspect is also discussed by Geyers, Leroux and Hall (2015), namely that increased risk of substance abuse among adolescents could result from adverse socio-economic challenges, poverty and family instability. Furthermore, adolescents abuse substances because of individual, family and environmental factors (Mohasoa, 2017).

Social workers revealed the issue of unemployment and poverty as one of the leading factors causing a high rate of chemical substance abuse among adolescents. Social workers view the easy accessibility of substances as well as the lack of employment of youths in the community as one of the social factors contributing to the substance abuse problem amongst adolescents. Findings by Simango (2014) indicate that adolescents' drug abuse originates from the availability of drugs within their communities plus the high unemployment rate. These youths are the group most vulnerable to chemical abuse, because there is easy access to substances in every community. There are limited resources to tackle the issue, making it a challenge to eradicate chemical substances from the environment.

Sub-theme 2.2: Social workers' work environment

The work environment is where social workers are rendering social services to substance abusing adolescents. Social workers reported that sometimes working with persons with substance use challenges can pose a danger to their own safety and wellbeing.

We work under a lot of danger, these people are not mentally well so we need more security, and we need danger allowance, we need support from the Department of Social Development. (Participant 6)

Substance-induced psychosis patients are unpredictable, for example, when we are busy in the support group, you may say something only to find out that you are offending one member, or he interprets what you are saying differently, and you become his target, or he singles you out. (Participant 4)

And another thing when a person has to be discharged, patients think that for them to be discharged or not be discharged is because of the social worker. Therefore, he blames you for not going home, only to find out that some issues need to be ironed out before he can go back, so I feel that we are not safe at all. (Participant 3)

Social workers function in a variety of settings. These range from public health practice, medical and social service settings to helping people recognise early indicators of alcohol and
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drug problems. Clients diagnosed with psychosis as a result of substance dependency can be referred to a mental institution/hospital. This is a challenge for social workers at these institutions, since they must encourage these people to adopt healthier habits and instruct them on how to do so (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, Strom-Gottfried & Larsen, 2013).

The participants feel unsafe because substance-induced psychosis makes a patient unpredictable. Substance abuse counsellors in mental health institutions and substance treatment centres may encounter some clients with significant mental illness or severe chemical abuse disorders as threatening or unsettling. The social workers feel endangered and rarely have enough training and knowledge to equip them to intervene in such settings. Therefore, social workers feel insecure when they encounter substance abuse issues (Selseng, 2016).

Theme 3: Challenges faced by social workers in rendering social welfare services to adolescents abusing a chemical substance

Research objective 3: The third research objective for the study was to explore and describe the social workers' challenges when rendering social welfare services to persons with substance abuse challenges.

A lot of challenges may arise when rendering such social services. These can occur at any stage of the process of rendering social welfare services to substance abusers. The challenges faced by social workers while providing such social welfare services to adolescents are presented next.

Sub-theme 3.1: Lack of commitment by the Department of Social Development

Social workers view the Department of Social Development's substance abuse intervention process in a very negative light, considering it as exclusively statistics driven.

I do not know if they have a lot of work or what, but they do not put the effort into these programmes or follow up on them, the only interest they have is stats, how many people you assisted, but they don't care if they got the help, and the progress of helping those clients. (Participant 1)

So as a person, who is passionate about this field, I feel like am pushing alone and of which I can't without the Department's support. As I said, the department is interested in stats, so the treatment part of it they do not care about. (Participant 1)

And another thing, the Department is not supportive at all when it comes to substance abuse issues, we are struggling with resources and we have no idea what we are doing ourselves, so it is still a big challenge that we are not going to win yet. (Participant 5)

The findings indicate that the Department of Social Development is statistics-driven. It is viewed by some of the participants as not providing to social workers the necessary support and resources it is responsible for. The Department of Social Development in consultation with the relevant department and stakeholders is expected to take reasonable measures to combat substance abuse through the development and coordination of demand, supply and harm

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reduction (Department of Social Development, 2016). However, this has not been the case. As indicated from the comments above, social workers have no resources and have been waiting for resources and support for years.

Sub-theme 3.2: Social workers' supervisory challenges

From the evidence below it is clear that delegated supervision is also a challenge. It appears that most of the time the social workers seem to fly solo. When help is needed, colleagues are approached to provide support and guidance.

The following was reported regarding supervisory support:

Well, regarding supervision, we don't have any debriefing sessions, especially for substances, but we have supervision that we attend once a month, where we also raise our concerns and issues in all kinds of cases, and I could say it is a little bit of a debriefing session. (Participant 3)

We do not have any debriefing programmes or anything whatsoever, maybe if you feel overwhelmed during a case; we normally consult each other as colleagues. (Participant 4)

We share challenges we encounter with our clients, and we give each other suggestions and support, the supervisor facilitates the meeting, however, I do not think it is that helpful, because we are there for reporting and sometimes the time is so small that we hardly share anymore. (Participant 3)

Supervision aims to ensure that a quality service is provided to social workers through the provision of advice and guidance. The findings reflect that within the Department of Social Development Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality, there are no supervision or debriefing sessions for substance abuse cases. This is confirmed by Shokane, Makhubele, Shokane and Mabasa (2017), who caution that supervision cannot be effectively implemented because of the poor supervisor-supervisee ratio. Learning in the workplace provides opportunities for organisations to create a productive learning environment at work by developing policies, practices, activities and operations that have worker and organisational learning at its heart (Tam, Brown, Paz, Birnbaum & Kwok, 2018). The supervisor plays various roles in the process of supervision to capacitate the supervisee to be more effective in carrying out his/her mandate and becoming an independent thinker.

Sub-theme 3.3: Challenges with accessing the rehabilitation centres for referrals

To ensure that the client avoids using drugs, he or she needs to learn some coping and personal development skills at a rehabilitation centre, but this comes with its challenges.

Okay, we refer our patient to rehabilitation centres that are very far, and after a long and stressful process of getting him to rehabilitation, they only keep him for a small period, because other people are on the waiting list and they need to accommodate everyone. (Participant 5)

We have a lot of persons with substance abuse challenges loitering the streets, and even if you want to refer the client sometimes they will tell you that they don't have accommodation for them, so in the meantime, so you will have to wait a bit, that is one of the things that stress the client, and the long process of getting a rehabilitation centre, that is why they get tired of waiting and terminate the process. (Participant 7)

Well, the challenge is there are more persons with substance abuse challenges on the streets and they cannot access rehabilitation centres, so substance abuse will always be a problem, and more youth need help, but it is difficult for us to intervene. (Participant 4)

The participants identified challenges such as lack of services for the adolescents since treatment centres are geographically inaccessible, and the lack of awareness about the availability and location of services has contributed to the underutilisation of these services. The centres are far from the communities and it is a stressful process to find space at the centre. Another challenge is keeping the clients committed while waiting, as they easily fall back into their old habits. Regarding the lack of accessibility and space of the rehabilitation centre, response of the Department of Social Development (2013) has been to establish, maintain and manage at least one treatment centre in each province. This has been provided with the concurrence of the Ministers of Finance with money appropriated by Parliament.

Yet, this is not helping because social workers are still struggling to admit their clients into treatment centres as challenges remain regarding available access. A report from the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) states that, since 2016 there has been an increase in the number of persons admitted for treatment across centres in South Africa (Dada *et al.*, 2017). If the prevention programmes had been effective, drug abuse would have declined, but this is not the case. The quality and effectiveness of substance abuse treatment can help to counter these negative trends (Myers, Williams, Johnson, Govender, Manderschard & Kock, 2016).

Theme 4: Suggestions for service delivery in substance abuse

During the interviews participants made suggestions on how social welfare services rendered to persons with substance abuse challenges could be improved. The recommendations ranged from training for social workers working with substance abuse clientele, support in terms of supervision and involvement of the Department of Social Development.

Sub-theme 4.1: Training for social workers working with substance abuse clientele

The participants specifically requested more training and workshops relating to substance abuse cases.

I would suggest more workshops and training on substance abuse, and they must build after-care services in every area and maybe even more where the substance is a problem, and again the Department must come up with recreational programmes to keep this youth busy and they will stop loitering at the complex, learning to use substances. (Participant 5)

We need to be capacitated more on substances since there is always a new drug on the market, so we need to be up to date with all this information and knowledge on substances. (Participant 6)

There are a lot of substance abuse cases, and again as social workers rendering these services, we are doing it blindfolded, just touching bases, we need to have a clear guideline and again we need more training and workshops on substances. (Participant 4)

The evidence suggests that social workers need more training about substance abuse cases for them to confidently execute their work effectively. To meet the needs of clients with substance abuse disorders, social workers must remain up to date regarding the frequent changes in legislation, regulations and third-party requirements. These further state that social workers must also have the knowledge and ability to work with clients to develop effective treatment plans using existing and emerging resources, including evidence-informed practices (NASW, 2015).

There is a need for workshops for social workers in the substance abuse field to be trained about the relevant policies and legislation in the sector and their implications for chemical substance use treatment (Maluleke, 2014). Social workers need training and guidelines on chemical use and recovery to equip them to render services (Van der Westhuizen, Alpaslan & Jager, 2014). Therefore, given the role of social workers in working with individuals, families and communities impacted by chemical substance abuse, there should be more education on chemical substance use included in the curriculum (Anderson, 2020). This will increase skills for serving those populations who are most likely to be affected by chemical substance abuse.

Sub-theme 4.2: Involvement of the Department of Social Development

The first researcher attempted to establish from the participants what the Department of Social Development's responsibility was for substance abuse intervention. The findings are that the Department of Social Development should take the lead in assisting social workers to provide effective social welfare services to persons with substance abuse challenges.

We need support from the Department of Social Development and regarding resources, we need more cars to do more services. (Participant 6)

The Department should at least offer a scholarship for social workers to do short-term courses, on substance abuse, mental illness and others, where we can go and register to specialise in those sections and gain more knowledge and proper skills in working with such cases. (Participant 1)

Social workers suggest that in order to improve social welfare services to persons with substance abuse challenges they must be provided with sufficient resources to execute these services. The need for social workers in practice settings with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively work with adolescents abusing substances cannot be overstated. Social workers also made suggestions about intensive training in substance abuse intervention, as they do not have sufficient skills needed to address this issue. The suggestions included the *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk, 2022: 58(4)*

introduction of short courses and continuous training and workshops on substance abuse treatment, so social workers can specialise in this field. Morkel (2022) cautions that the Department of Social Development has a negative effect on the delivery of the social services, which places South Africa's pursuit of becoming a capable developmental state at risk. Furthermore, the Department of Social Development has a major role to play in putting the welfare of citizens at the centre of the development agenda; this would require an adjustment of its posture towards social welfare vis-a-vis the pursuit of economic development, along with a strategic overhauling of existing regulatory and fiscal limitations.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this research was to develop an in-depth understanding of the preparedness, experiences and challenges of social workers working with persons with substance abuse challenges in the Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality, Limpopo province, South Africa.

During the interviews most social workers mentioned that because their work is generic in nature, they are unable to give the necessary specific attention to substance abuse cases as they have to deal with other cases that are equally important. They further explained that substance abuse cases need a lot of attention and time, as helping a client is a long process. Social workers are not well equipped and trained to carry out social welfare services for persons with substance abuse challenges. It can be concluded from the interviews that insufficient training and experience to manage social welfare services for persons with substance abuse challenges pose a challenge to effective service delivery. The researchers are of the view that social workers follow these helping processes haphazardly. During the interviews, every social worker explained their way of using the process of rendering services to persons with substance abuse challenges, which differ widely and produce a range of different results. Thus, it could be concluded that social workers need clear guidelines on how to render a service to persons with substance abuse challenges.

Training of social workers to deal with substance abuse cases was explored with social workers, who stressed their urgent need for training in treating substance abuse. They mentioned that their lack of confidence and interest in dealing with substance abuse is the result of a lack of training and knowledge. However, some participants mentioned that they have attended some training or workshops on substance abuse during their work experience. Some social workers believe that they acquired the necessary information and skills during the training, while others feel that the training was insufficient and more needs to be done to provide effective training on substance abuse.

During the interviews, some social workers mentioned that rehabilitation centres are scarce, and sometimes they must travel as far as Gauteng to their clients, which is time-consuming and requires a lot of resources. They also stressed the issue of waiting for the rehabilitation centres to respond to their client, which can take a very long time. Some social workers mentioned that they are aware of only one treatment centre, while one social worker also mentioned they are not aware of any treatment centre. This means that social workers still lack knowledge and information regarding the available treatment centres.

Regarding substance abuse intervention, there has been little or no success rate from social workers. This is because of the challenges that they encounter during service delivery to substance abusers; the lack of support from the Department of Social Development and lack of training have been a great hindrance to the improvement of this social welfare service. Social workers feel that because of this drawback, they sometimes work with the same clients over and over again, which leads to frustration.

During the interviews, some social workers pointed out that the Department does not provide substance abuse services, but they are only stats-driven, which makes social workers feel like they are flying solo. The researchers concluded that although social workers are generic workers, there is no doubt that social workers play a crucial role in addressing substance abuse. Therefore, social workers need urgent intensive training and resources to execute their tasks effectively, especially in the field of substance abuse.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Based on the findings that substance abuse is a social problem that is getting out of hand, the availability and easy access of the substances by adolescents, it is recommended that at each social centre a social worker is appointed who specialises in substance abuse social services. Monitoring and evaluation of programmes should be prioritised at the provincial and national levels. Social workers should report to a delegated section within the Department of Social Development with a clear reporting line to the social centre manager. This section should ensure that newly appointed social workers adhere to the job requirements and receive training to render a substance abuse social welfare service to communities. This section should ensure that there is effective supervision that can provide support when needed and that can ensure that the social workers have the necessary resources.

The findings indicate a lack of training of social workers to deal with substance abuse. The involvement of social workers in providing social services to persons with substance use challenges points to the need for more comprehensive training. Social workers should have proper training on dealing with substance abuse, which will ensure that they acquire skills and competencies to work with adolescents who are abusing substances. Chemical substance abuse use is a growing social problem; therefore, social workers should also be continuously trained to expand their capacities and develop the necessary intervention skills.

Social workers should receive specialised training in dealing with substance abuse while studying for their degree or as part of the Continuing Personnel Development (CPD). Moreover, substance abuse should be treated as a field of specialisation. The infiltration of technology into social work practice is inevitable, hence it is recommended that e-social work should be introduced as a direct practice methodology to address the needs of vulnerable clients.

CONCLUSION

The research provides valuable insights from the social workers' point of view because of the challenges they face daily when rendering a substance abuse social service. The challenges

they face are never-ending, and it seems that most of the time they are left to their own devices with very little success. The process of rendering social welfare services to substance abuse clients needs a serious revamp and resources should be allocated to ensure effective service delivery. The Department of Social Development needs to be more involved in assisting social workers to render these services effectively, also making treatment centres and after-care programmes available and accessible.

The researchers concluded that although social workers are generic workers, there is no doubt that they play a crucial role in dealing with substance abuse. Therefore, social workers, need urgent intensive training and resources to execute their tasks effectively, especially in the field of substance abuse. Taking into consideration the scale of substance abuse in communities, the researchers appreciate that social workers continue to work with adolescents despite finding it difficult. It can be concluded that social workers feel neglected in their efforts to tackle substance abuse cases, which left them feeling alone and frustrated.

Furthermore, the researchers conclude that the shortage of rehabilitation centres should be addressed as there is a serious need to run effective social welfare services for persons with substance abuse challenges. Based on the above findings, the researchers concluded that some social workers are not fully equipped to render social welfare services to persons with substance abuse challenges. Immediate training and resources are needed, and the Department of Social Development as the custodian of social services must put more effort into assisting social workers to render their services effectively.

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