‘WHY CAN’T YOU JUST TELL THE MINISTER WE’RE DOING A GOOD JOB?’
Managing Accountability in Community Service Organisations

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SUMMARY

Community service organisations play a crucial role in the delivery of many social services while functioning from a strong values base often associated with a particular religion. They attempt to respond to the needs of multiple stakeholders. This creates a complex and sometimes ambiguous set of accountability relationships.

Government contributes significantly to the funding of most community service organisations, and often this is reflected in close working relationships between public servants in funding departments and managers of community service organisations. The nature of this relationship was changed as a consequence of a wave of public sector reforms beginning in the 1980s. These reforms aimed to increase the efficiency, effectiveness and accountability of government departments. Strategies adopted included funder-purchaser-provider models of service delivery, leading to the contracting out of some services previously provided by government and the adoption of more contract-like agreements with existing external service providers. This led to the development of additional mechanisms for measuring and monitoring performance. These were directed both internally towards public sector staff and externally to funded programs.

The community services sector's concern about the impact of reform on their functioning and survival provided the impetus for undertaking this qualitative study of the management of accountability in community service organisations in South Australia. Data were collected in 2000-2001 through interviews with community service organisation and public service staff, and through analysis of organisational documents related to accountability. Staff from twelve community service
organisations, and state and federal public servants participated. While the analysis shows the costs to community service organisations and the damage to their relationship with government resulting from reform, it also identifies improvements to the management of accountability in some organisations.

Governments at both state and federal levels have since adopted the language of partnership and collaboration. This occurred partly in recognition of the negative impacts of an over-zealous emphasis on distanced purchaser-provider relationships and partly from an increasing recognition of the failure of existing systems to resolve complex social issues.

Follow-up data were collected in 2004 that identified changes in the relationships between the community service organisations and funding departments, and in the community service organisations' management of their own accountability. Analysis of these data found a significance increase in formal relationships between community service organisations but limited change in the relationship with government.

Through an analysis of the impact of public sector change on community service organisations in South Australia, this thesis contributes to the understanding of inter-sectoral relationships and the management of accountability in community service organisations.