Evaluation of the Heartland Services Initiative

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Abstract

Heartland Services is a government initiative that aims to improve access to government services for people living in rural New Zealand. The evaluation of Heartlands found that the service has made notable progress against its stated goals. The evaluation did, however, encounter a number of areas, which if addressed could lead to even better outcomes. In some areas the service has little or no profile in the community, a problem compounded by a lack of advertising budget and strategy and inadequate signage. The role of service centre coordinator is vital to the success of the service as a client-government liaison. The evaluation found that Heartlands offices situated in a non-government building fared better in terms of both awareness and issues of privacy.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

The Heartlands Service is a relatively new interagency initiative led and operated by the Ministry of Social Development (MSD). Heartlands Service centres are "one-stop shops" from which rural New Zealanders can access a range of Government, and other related services. Government agency representatives visit the centres on a regular basis to offer services in person.

The 28 Heartland centres are based in the following locations.
- Based in government buildings. These are co-located with Work and Income (a social welfare service) offices or Ministry of Justice court offices.
- Based in local community group buildings. These are co-located in annexed to local community group buildings. MSD contracts the particular group to operate the Heartlands Service.

- Standalone sites. These are housed in their own building and offer Heartland Services only.

The goals of the Heartland Services initiative are: to support for rural community groups; to improve access to government services in rural areas; and to improve inter-agency collaboration and service delivery in rural areas.

The formative process evaluation of the Heartlands Service addressed three main questions as they related to the goals of the service.
- Has support for community groups improved in service centre areas?
- Has access to government services for community residents improved in service centre areas?
- Has interagency collaboration improved to aid access to government services for rural communities?

The evaluation addressed these questions through a detailed consideration of awareness, place and people.

Method

The formative process evaluation drew on evidence about the performance of Heartlands Services from coordinators, service managers, key community representatives, government agency representatives (as clients of the service), and local residents (as clients and potential clients of the service).

A combination of census, snowballing and convenience sampling techniques were employed, as befitted the type of questions asked. Structured and semi-structured interviewing techniques and direct observation were undertaken.

The evaluation was based on the following data sources.

A structured telephone survey of the 24 coordinators operating offices when the evaluation commenced in April 2003.

A structured telephone survey of the 21 local managers operating offices when the evaluation commenced in April 2003.

A structured telephone survey of community groups. Two hundred and twenty-three groups of a possible 441 identified as being in the vicinity of all 24 Heartland Sites were interviewed. The sample was randomly selected within each of the 23 Heartlands areas.

Face-to-face interviews were undertaken with: 23 Heartlands coordinators; 23 Heartlands managers; and 155 key informants including for example, local government, REAP (Rural Education Activities Programme) and government agency representatives.

Direct observation of public and coordinator interaction, site layout, advertising and signage were made in Westport, Takaka, Kawerau, Murupara, Dargaville, Kaitaia and Taupo sites.

Results and Discussion:

The data we collected indicated that the Heartlands Service is making good progress toward achieving its goals. It was perceived by its clients and stakeholders to be performing well and regarded as offering a useful service. There were, however, a number of areas for further improvement.

Awareness
The lack of awareness among locals in many centres is restricting its overall potential. That is, people who could benefit from the service do not know it exists. This we found was due to some combination of location and signage problems, small advertising budget and lack of a nationwide advertising strategy.

The data about awareness that we obtained from the survey of local residents was polarised. That is, awareness of the service was either very low (no one had heard of the service) or very high (nearly everyone had heard of the service. Awareness was closely related to the pro-activeness of the local coordinator in promoting the service.

Heartlands centres co-located in non-government buildings fared better in terms of promotion than those within government buildings. Such services associated with a community group were able to secure cheap or free advertisements by virtue of their associated status, particularly when the community group also ran a local radio station. Government-based Heartlands centres were, on the contrary, not eligible for the cheaper advertising rates available to community groups and community-based centres.

The small budget for advertising of NZ$500 per annum per site meant that the coordinators had to be creative in their efforts to promote the service. One coordinator, by way of example, used some of her funding to create a small ad that ran at the local movie theatre.

With regard to branding, we found some confusion about the name of the service. Some residents thought that Heartlands was a health service dealing with coronary disease, others confused it with a popular New Zealand television show of the same name.

The lack of adequate signage added to the low awareness at many sites. Signs for the service were often small and displaced by signs for other agencies that also occupied the same building.

Place
There were a range of issues relating to the physical placement of Heartlands centres.

We found that the public perception of Heartlands was strongly influenced by other activities occurring at the building in which it was co-located. For example, many respondents living in areas where the Heartlands service is run out of a Work and Income building thought that it was only for social welfare clients and did not therefore use it.

A number of respondents in the telephone survey of community groups said that one of the main hindrances to them using the service was that it was housed in a government building. Community-based sites, however, did not seem to have this problem. Location in such sites seemed to have the opposite effect in that they obtain additional foot traffic from clients visiting the other groups. At one community-based site a paved path had to be built between the community group's main building and the Heartlands annex because the clients were literally beating a muddy path across the lawn that separated them.

The location also affected the service itself. In areas where Heartlands was based at Work and Income sites, privacy issues were raised by both clients and agency representatives. Clients felt that in the crowded offices their personal information could be overheard by others.

People
Coordinators are arguably the most important component of the Heartlands Service. Without a good coordinator to establish and maintain rapport and help people access the government service they need, the service would fail in its endeavour.

The ability of coordinators to provide a flexible and adaptive service across all Heartlands sites, particularly the Work and Income and Courts sites, varies. The coordinators in some sites have a more difficult job balancing competing work roles and the different expectations around these. We saw this most in centres dealing with long queues such as Work and Income. The policies and processes that sit behind the Work and Income or Courts services are suited to the primary role and function of those agencies and the type of service they provide.

When interviewed, visiting government agencies attributed the usefulness of the Heartlands centre to a number of factors. These mainly include having a location that was consistently available for meeting clients and everything that follows from that, such as the opportunity to liaise with other agencies in order to help clients. A few of the agencies said that the sharing of information between themselves and Work and Income had been very helpful. As discussed, however, this practice has wider implications.

Some agencies have permanent desks in the Heartland centres, offering the service full time. These were found to have significantly increased utilisation.

The agency representatives also identified problems, such as not having enough space or privacy, and not having the resources needed to deliver the full spectrum of services.

Conclusion

The Heartlands Service is in essence, about linking rural new Zealanders to government agency representatives (to improve rural outcomes). It thus serves an important role in increasing the stock of 'social capital' in rural and provincial New Zealand. Social capital as a construct, represents the tangible benefits which individuals accrue by virtue of their relationships with others in their community (Putnam (2000), Cote & Healy (2001), Woolcock (2001)). Social capital is a function of the pattern and strength of networks among people and the shared norms and values which arise from those networks. Discussion of social capital in the literature generally includes references to citizenship, 'neighbourliness', social networks, and civic participation (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000). The accumulation of supportive interpersonal networks is therefore central to building social capital (Robinson, 1997).

Many coordinators get out into the community (not a standard requirement of the role). This not only promotes the service but also fosters the belief that government cares about the community. This can only help to build social capital.

In one centre, the local Community Board donated money for Heartlands to advertise its services. This is an example of reciprocity, another aspect of social capital. This action shows a community's commitment to the project and their belief that it is promoting positive outcomes in their community.

The findings of the evaluation showed that, overall, the activities undertaken by Heartland Services are adding value to New Zealand communities. With attention to the processes identified in the evaluation, the outcomes achieved are likely to be improved further.

References

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