

## **Caring for the Carers: A Qualitative Study to Evaluate the Perspective of Mental Health Carers on the Effectiveness of Community Services in the Illawarra Region (NSW)**

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**Abstract :** In Australia, one-third of mental health carers provide 40 hours or more of unpaid care per week. These hidden workers contribute significantly to the Australian mental health workforce by providing unpaid services both direct and indirect to people in their care. However, carers are often neglected in the healthcare system because Government services focus on those with a mental health condition rather than those supporting them. The aim of this study is to evaluate the perceptions of mental health carers on the effectiveness of community services designed for carers and how these services could be improved. We collaborated with One Door Mental Health, a community organisation that supports mental health carers. Through semi-structured interviews with 27 mental health carers residing in the Illawarra region (NSW), we documented their daily challenges and evaluated outcomes of the current programs for carers. Our findings demonstrate that services such as education programs enable capacity building and improve the social life and mental health of carers. Drawing on the perceptions of mental health carers, this study maps pathways for making meaningful changes in the lives of carers and proposes an outcome framework to evaluate the impact of a community organisation on the lives of their clients. The framework prepared by this project would be replicable, allowing other community organisations to measure the outcomes and improve their services.

**Keywords :** capacity building, community development, community service, mental health carers

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