



A collection of stories

A companion to the
Well for Life in Public Housing
evaluation report



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Published by the Aged Care Branch and North and West Metropolitan Region, Victorian Government Department of Human Services, Melbourne Victoria, August 2008.

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Authorised by the State Government of Victoria, 50 Lonsdale Street, Melbourne.

Printed on sustainable paper by Bart N Print, 18 Deborah St, Bendigo 3550

Selected images provided courtesy of the Older Persons High Rise Support team at Western Region Health Centre



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Introduction

Well for Life in Public Housing (WFLPH), a further innovation of Well for Life, challenges established attitudes and practices about what is possible and achievable in improving functional capacity and quality of life of older residents (55+ years) in public housing.

WFLPH was conducted for 12 months in the North and West Metropolitan Region of Victoria. The Department of Human Services funded eight projects: four in communities designated as Neighbourhood Renewal¹ locations, three specifically in public housing, including the Older Persons High Rise blocks in Footscray and Williamstown, and one Residents' Association.

The 2007 evaluation of WFLPH outlines its overall success and includes a range of innovative activities promoting physical activity and improved nutrition. The following stories reflect some of the worthwhile achievements of the WFLPH project.

¹ Neighbourhood Renewal is a Victorian community rejuvenation and capacity building program operating in a range of locations throughout Victoria characterised by high levels of public housing stock and a significant degree of social disadvantage.

The bicycle group

North Yarra Community Health Service supported a cycling group in the Collingwood Neighbourhood Renewal area. A group of eleven residents, some of whom hadn't been on a bicycle for 15 years, completed a 20-week bicycling for health and transport program, with bicycles for permanent personal ownership provided by the Victorian Department of Infrastructure. Participants learned to successfully negotiate inner city traffic (with both the project leaders and participants surviving intact!) and are now confident and regular bicycle users. The group continues to meet socially and has ventured to previously undiscovered parts of Melbourne including the Yarra Bike Trail, Collingwood Children's Farm, Federation Square and Melbourne Zoo.



The needs assessment

To some extent the public housing residents in North Fitzroy were 'program weary' and suspicious of new short-term projects with catchy names and the North Yarra Community Health Service staff initially found them difficult to engage. The project officer undertook a detailed and carefully planned needs assessment survey of dietary and physical activity behaviours and wellbeing issues among residents. The project officer actively sought out residents using an outreach approach, literally door-knocking the area to introduce herself and the project. The needs analysis found that many residents were not shopping for fresh food and not eligible for the Home and Community Care (HACC) program services. In many instances residents were found to be eating poorly and sometimes infrequently. Accessing transport to get to shops was also a problem for many residents. The needs assessment provided valuable insights into the most pressing health and wellbeing issues of residents, and provided an important base for building relationships with residents.



The fishing group ... and other pleasures What's next?

The Western Region Health Centre built on a successful Well for Life project with a public housing focus and is now running a wide range of activities for older people living in high-rise public housing in Footscray and Williamstown. Older men have enthusiastically joined a regular fishing group – mainly on the Maribyrnong River and sometimes on the Bay – that has led to an increased focus on men's health and links with the successful *Men's Shed*. A variety of physical activity programs are now on offer, including discounted gym memberships with transport provided. Residents are eager to attend programs and starting to ask 'What's next'? Participants are beginning to use their own funds to participate in activities – a major success for the project when dealing with individuals with limited funds. Residents are reporting improvements in quality of life and ability to do more. There is a lot of input from other organisations throughout the west, and these organisations are taking the lead role in running activities for the residents. The involvement of volunteers has greatly increased and is likely to be a key factor in sustaining the many activities Well for Life has generated.

Somali Men's Group – Walking and eating well: a culturally appropriate approach

Through this successful Well for Life project the Banyule Community Health Service has further extended its work with Somali families living in the West Heidelberg Neighbourhood Renewal district. The appointment of a Somali speaking allied health assistant with direct knowledge of culturally appropriate practices was an important factor underpinning the success of the project. Halal meals and prayer opportunities are provided and the Somali-speaking allied health assistant ensures all participants understand the Planned Activity Group activities. The men walk as a group and traditional recipes have been revised and circulated to the women in households who are responsible for cooking at home. The program had an unintended, but very important consequence when the need for greater social support for Somali women was identified and Banyule Community Health Service successfully applied for a VicHealth Community Arts Participation Grant for a Somali Women's Weaving project.

Tai Chi in the leisure centre

In the challenging environment of a large and dispersed public housing community in the Neighbourhood Renewal area of Broadmeadows, Dianella Community Health Service has successfully promoted its services and programs. Through a series of educational visits to community groups the WFLPH project raised awareness of Dianella's diverse primary and allied health services and increased the use of the services by older residents. A new Tai Chi program for older people, initially fully funded and provided by Dianella with Well for Life funds, has been sustained by Tai Chi leaders training leisure centre staff. Broadmeadows Leisure Centre is now offering an extended program more suitable for older adults with the hugely popular Tai Chi class. Given proven demand for this activity the Leisure Centre is now considering offering a second Tai Chi program with Dianella Community Health Service able to negotiate a discounted rate for older people participating.






Market visits

Doutta Galla Community Health Service established a weekly free community Footscray Market bus from the Kensington public housing estate. The Victoria Market bus time was modified to suit residents (run by the City of Melbourne). Both of these trips are consistently well attended, usually at capacity. The Vietnamese and Chinese communities in Kensington have been particularly enthusiastic participants. Participation is augmented by weekly morning teas and monthly barbeques. North Yarra Community Health Service has commenced shopping trips to the Victoria Market for North Fitzroy public housing residents using volunteer drivers, again proving very popular amongst residents who enjoy the opportunity to shop for cheap and healthy fresh food in the bustling market environment.

Our Health – Our Home – Partnerships supporting older people in public housing

In the City of Darebin a partnership was formed in 2004 between neighbourhood houses, public housing, health, welfare and local government organisations to tackle the disadvantage experienced by over 250 older residents in public housing. The partnership has secured funding for more than 15 projects focused on promoting wellbeing and strengthening support and community networks for older people in public housing. Well for Life has been one of the many initiatives within this partnership that implemented a joined-up community approach to wellbeing, promoting links and coordination across a variety of projects that work together to improve the lives of older people. Ongoing funding has been secured to extend the work of the partnership.





And finally – the important tale of a dog called Lexie

A highlight of Well for Life in the City of Darebin, implemented by SPAN neighbourhood house, in the Our Health – Our Homes partnership, has been the successful approach to building trust between housing workers and older residents in an estate with a history of violence and disengagement. The ‘cascade’ of trust development has hinged on Lexie the dog, and works like this:

A resident first trusts Lexie and might spend weeks only patting the dog, not talking to her owner, the community development worker.

This simple trust eventually expands to include the worker.

After some time the worker leverages this trust to encourage a resident to attend a group activity, also attended by Lexie.

Slowly trust develops between residents, where once there might have been animosity and suspicion. The worker introduces staff from other service providers, building on existing relationships to encourage trust of new staff. Ultimately, residents begin accessing services which they would otherwise not have known about or used.

And it all began with Lexie.

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