

Integrated health promotion is making a difference

A Community Health practical example:

WayOut, Rural Victorian Youth & Sexual Diversity Project

Cobaw Community Health Kyneton and Gay & Lesbian Health Victoria

WayOut aims to raise awareness about the needs of same sex attracted young people and the nature and effects of homophobia in rural Victoria.

The project commenced in January 2002 as a three year youth suicide prevention pilot project targeting same sex attracted young people (SSAYP) in four shires in Central Victoria. It was one of two pilot projects funded by the Department of Human Services as a result of findings by the Victorian Government Youth Suicide Task Force which identified that SSAYP, particularly those in rural areas, are a high risk group.

The pilot stage of the project was completed in 2006, and currently continues with ongoing funding from DHS to work with all rural areas in Victoria.

The project continues to be auspiced by Cobaw Community Health (Kyneton) and since 2006, has operated as a partnership between Cobaw and Gay & Lesbian Health Victoria. Over the past two years, the project has also received once-off grants from VicHealth, The Reichstein Foundation and the Myer Foundation.

Since becoming a state-wide rural service, the project has formed working relationships with a range of agencies that provide direct support to target groups. These agencies include:

1. Brophy Family & Youth Services, Warrnambool
2. City of Ballarat
3. City of Greater Bendigo
4. Kilmany Uniting Care Morwell & Sale
5. Mount Alexander Shire, Castlemaine
6. North East Support & Action for Youth (NESAY), Wangaratta
7. Uniting Care-Cutting Edge, Shepparton
8. Upper Hume Community Health Service, Wodonga

Target groups

1. The principal target group is young people aged 15 – 24 years who are or think they might be attracted to people of the same sex
2. Other young people aged 15-24 years who identify as heterosexual. This may be young people whose health, wellbeing and connectedness are at risk because of the effects of homophobia, for example, young people who have family or friends that are same sex attracted and/or those who do not necessarily conform to traditional gender stereotypes in rural areas
3. Staff in organisations and schools who work with the above group
4. General members of rural communities in which the above young people reside

What has the integrated health promotion response been?

Shortly after the project commenced, a reference group was formed and consisted of workers from across the region. The project team was committed to youth participation in the design and delivery of services and at the earliest possible point we sought to engage local young people. At that stage, the traditional approach for service delivery had been developed by services based in the city and consisted of organisations setting up confidential support groups for young people who identified as same sex attracted (SSA) young people.

Formation of gay-straight youth alliances

Following initial consultations with SSA young people in Macedon Ranges Shire, the first local working committee of young people was established. Membership was open to all young people who shared the project's aim.

When the project commenced it was not aware of any groups that used the model of welcoming all young people and it proved to have a number of strengths:

- It did not require that a young person makes a decision about their sexuality or 'come out' as being same sex attracted or heterosexual
- It enabled a greater 'critical mass' of young people to gather who shared similar views, concerns and interests (where these may not commonly occur in the broader environment)
- It acknowledged that addressing homophobic discrimination is an important cause for all people in the community

Public activism

The young people in the first WayOut group identified that they wanted to "do something public" to raise awareness and challenge homophobia in their community. Accordingly they have (and continue to):

- Give talks about sexuality/ homophobia with secondary students
- Have articles in the local newspapers
- Prepared a short play called "Homophobia Exposed" which was subsequently recorded on DVD/video and widely distributed
- Attend various community events/ conferences to discuss our work

Public activism has resulted in members developing greater confidence in their beliefs about equality and their capacity to raise awareness about the nature and effects of homophobia. The use of peer educators has been successful in engaging young people, including both SSA, and heterosexual adults in the community.

Development and marketing of merchandise

In addition to giving talks, the young people in the WayOut groups believed that the best way to reach other young people (especially those SSAYP who were wishing to remain hidden) was to develop a range of merchandise and flood the environment with accurate information and positive messages about sexual diversity. The merchandise includes information cards, stickers, t-shirts, pens, badges, lollies, a poster and our video. Anecdotal information and evaluation data confirm that this has been an enormously effective strategy for engaging the community.

What are the impacts?

The pilot project was externally evaluated by the Australian Research Centre in Sex Health & Society (ARSH&S), La Trobe University. ARSH&S used an evaluation model called 'consultative evaluation,' that was suited to the design and context of the project. The results are reported in two formats: a written report which can be downloaded from the project website (www.wayout.org.au) and a DVD that consists of interviews with young people and workers involved in the project.

In addition to the direct work with partner agencies, Cobaw Community Health has also created opportunities for agencies and their young people to work together. This has been achieved by acting as the lead agency and preparing various funding applications. Several of these applications have been successful and have led to:

- 16 Workers and 55 young people from across the state participating in a weekend residential forum to address homophobia in rural communities
- Each local group being supported by the WayOut project to develop its own strategic plan
- The establishment of "OUThere, Rural Victorian Youth Council for Sexual Diversity. The Council's role is to consult with young people and advocate and lobby at senior government levels
- The establishment of a 'virtual drop-in-centre' for young people who support sexual diversity and are concerned about homophobia in rural Victoria

What's next?

A rural state-wide project commenced in 2006 and is currently ongoing. The project now consists of two interconnected parts:

- A group of young people from the Macedon Ranges Shire that meets weekly and undertakes various work within the local community
- State-wide services and partnerships

Currently the project focus includes; creating and building partnerships with other rural groups, and initiating and convening state-wide rural initiatives.

Create and build partnerships with other rural groups

Since 2006 Cobaw Community Health have concentrated on establishing and building working relationships with agencies in other rural communities who share similar aims to our project. The nature of these partnerships varies according to the needs identified by each local community and may consist of support with:

- Establishing and running youth groups
- Provision of training for other workers in their towns
- Developing strategic plans
- Undertaking work with local secondary schools
- General community awareness raising through local media
- External supervision for workers and/or secondary consultations with workers assisting individual young people
- Provision of resources and merchandise
- Sharing the lessons learnt from the WayOut pilot project and the model it developed for work in this field

Initiate and convene state-wide rural initiatives

Cobaw Community Health will continue to work with partner agencies, and create opportunities for agencies and their young people to work together through various funding applications.

Further information

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The project team subsequently learned of the Gay-Straight Alliance networks in the United States and has on occasions, drawn from their web resources.