

Responding to the mental health impacts of drought

Overview of initiatives



Introduction

Since September 2006, the Department of Human Services (DHS) has delivered nearly \$16 million for initiatives that respond to the mental health impacts of drought.

Programs include *Tackling Mental Health* (2006–2007), *Sustaining community wellbeing in drought*, *Emergency Relief Coordination* (2007) and *Mental Health Services and Support* (2008–2009).

Built on *Tackling Mental Health* (2006–2007), the *Sustaining community wellbeing in drought* program aimed to support the mental health and wellbeing of communities impacted by drought. The program has resulted in numerous initiatives that:

- promote mental health
- increase counselling and mental health services
- deliver programs that help sustain community wellbeing.

Key initiatives

Additional counselling

This initiative developed flexible and creative counselling approaches as part of the drought response including:

- offering to provide counselling sessions in locations of the client's choice
- seeking out opportunities to promote mental wellbeing
- strengthening existing networks within drought-affected communities to increase social connectedness and community resilience
- 'training' personnel across the agency to deliver 'drought counselling'.

Primary Care Partnerships—Integrated approach

This initiative has extended the Primary Care Partnership (PCP) led integrated rural health promotion and service coordination work. The PCP activities have included:

- expansion of the partnership to include additional local organisations
- support for local government drought committees

- initiation of integrated planning where it has not existed
- inclusion of longer term rural adjustment and climate change adaptation within drought planning and developmental work
- leadership for integrated health promotion programs
- improved coordination and access to health and human services through the development of accessible information materials
- strengthening service relationships with Commonwealth funded services
- facilitation and delivery of workforce and community skills development such as mental health aid training¹.

Clinical leadership and training for counselling

The counselling component of the drought initiative across rural Victoria is based on the No Bullshit Therapy approach. No Bullshit Therapy training has been delivered to the mainstream counselling workforce so that they are well equipped to provide targeted

¹ See over page

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and accessible counselling to farming communities impacted by drought.

The No Bullshit Therapy counselling approach primarily targets non-traditional service users such as men, young people and people who are rurally isolated. It provides pragmatic short sessions, using language that is accessible.

Mental Health First Aid (MHFA)

The Mental Health First Aid is a 12 hour course aimed at building the mental health literacy and service knowledge of non-mental health professionals across communities. Convened by Primary Care Partnerships, up to 70 Mental Health First Aid courses have been completed across every rural Local Government Area in Victoria. This means that workers and community members are better able to identify and refer people who may need support for anxiety and depression.

Mental Health Promotion Shortcourse (MHPSC)

The Mental Health Promotion Shortcourse is comprehensive training around integrated health promotion focusing on improving mental health. It has a strategic and operational planning focus, targeted at local government, primary and mental health workers, education practitioners with a role in mental health and wellbeing and health promotion planners. While VicHealth provided trained facilitators, PCPs undertook local planning and brought together planning staff from relevant organisations across each catchment to implement the Mental Health Promotion Shortcourse.

'Looking Out for your Neighbour'

The 'Looking Out for your Neighbour' initiative involved local counsellors working with their local Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) Branch. Together they facilitated a workshop for VFF and community members on mental health literacy and the importance of maintaining social networks as a protective factor for sustaining mental health and wellbeing. The development and delivery of these workshops resulted from a partnership between DHS, VFF, the Bouverie Centre and the community and family services sector.

Sustainable Farm Families

Sustainable Farm Families is a health education and development program that targets viable farming families. In partnership with the local industry group (eg Dairy Farmers) farming families are recruited for a two day workshop with follow up training three years later. The department's 'Drought' funding was used to train a further 30 community health nurses across rural Victoria and deliver eight courses in drought affected communities. This initiative has reduced the risk factors of diabetes and cardiovascular disease over a three year period.

Emergency Relief Initiatives

The initiatives used local emergency relief agencies to identify the drought affected families in need. In 2006-07 emergency relief initiatives were targeted at the 15 worst drought-affected municipalities across the Hume, Loddon Mallee and Grampians regions. As the drought worsened across the state, the 2007-08 initiatives were extended to cover all drought affected rural areas including Barwon South Western and Gippsland regions.