

Responding to the mental health impacts of drought

Planning and practice guide

A resource for drought-affected Victorian communities
September 2009



This guide has been developed to assist health and human services, organisations and partnerships in drought-affected communities to plan effective interventions by identifying principles of emerging good practice, encouraging an environment of innovation and facilitating idea-sharing to build the evidence for sustainable practice.

This guide includes:

- principles of effective planning and practice
- links to tools and resources
- references to good practice case studies.

Background

Since September 2006, the Department of Human Services has delivered nearly \$16 million for initiatives that respond to the mental health impacts of drought. Programs included: 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 supported the mental health and wellbeing of communities impacted by drought.

This program resulted in numerous initiatives that:

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

Focus on sustainability

Both the Victorian and federal policy focus has now shifted from an emergency recovery response to drought, to one of rural adjustment and climate change adaptation, aimed at assisting rural communities in coping with all aspects of rural change.

In 2008–09 the department's drought initiatives were focused on helping agencies and rural communities undertake the transition from drought-specific, emergency relief programs to sustainable, embedded practices.

This guide is aimed at assisting with this process of change.

Principles of effective planning and practice

The following information encapsulates the background and the findings of the two main reports arising from:

- the Review of the Sustaining Community Wellbeing Drought Initiatives
- the Rural Change & Community Wellbeing Forum—this forum aimed to help improve the mental health and wellbeing of those living in drought-affected areas by showcasing a range of initiatives developed in rural Victoria and by sharing practice experience.

Both reports, produced in June 2009, highlight important principles for effective planning and sustainable practice.

Review of the Sustaining Community Wellbeing Drought Initiatives (August 2009)

In January 2009, the Department of Human Services (now the Department of Health) undertook a review of the initiatives addressing the mental health impacts of drought developed since 2006. The aim of this review was to gather high-level information to identify models and approaches that have added sustainable value to rural health and community planning, and service systems.

Funding for drought initiatives has enabled 19 Primary Care Partnerships (PCPs) across 47 rural and regional local government areas (LGAs) to extend health promotion and service coordination work and build capacity for planning, partnership, leadership and workforce development. PCPs support and, in some cases, lead the emergence of innovative evidence-based practice—providing flexible and sustainable responses to the community impacts of drought, rural adjustment and climate change.

PCPs and health and human service organisations in the rural sector were consulted widely to draw out specialised local knowledge and experience that, although specific to their region, is often able to be adapted to other community settings.

Key findings:

Valuable approaches

Valuable approaches adopted by PCPs that influenced positive outcomes are outlined below.

1. Expansion and strengthening of existing planning structures and processes that:
 - build on and extend existing partnership processes to facilitate collaborative responses to local issues
 - enable participation in, and lead, local community needs analysis
 - harness resources and information to allow effective mapping and identification of clear drought social impact planning priorities
 - facilitate local government leadership within the PCP
 - tap into drought and other service networks including organisations that received federal funding for drought work.
2. Expansion of networks and partnerships to include organisations beyond traditional health sector agencies in order to:
 - demonstrate to the sector the readiness of local communities and funding authorities to work collaboratively
 - increase knowledge, sectoral links, access to resources and improved coordination to inform the planning and implementation of drought responses
 - strengthen ongoing commitment to supporting rural people in a changing environment critical for sustainability.



3. Shared leadership for innovative integrated health promotion programs aimed at engaging and enhancing mental health protective factors can produce many good ideas that are often shared and adopted by other areas. Here are some examples.

- Be creative and explore diverse ways to respond to local needs, for example, the Drought Postcard initiative; Southern Grampians Glenelg in partnership with the education sector and Singing for Health; and Wimmera and Grampians Pyrenees PCPs in partnership with Sing Australia.
- Respond to local expressed needs when developing practical solutions, for example, disseminate locally relevant information in forms such as wallet-size 'drought cards' (Central Victorian Alliance).
- Consider different methods of communication that will engage local communities, for example, utilise local TV stations to disseminate key messages (Northern Mallee PCP).
- Flexibility to design and implement localised community-based responses based on evidence and an understanding of community norms will result in increased uptake and improved sustainability. The Harrow Men's Shed is a good example that has now become part of the Wimmera Men's Shed network (Wimmera PCP).

4. Development of innovative and adaptive service models that enhance service access and build community capacity by:

- utilising the flexibility of funding to respond and adapt to local situations to provide a tailored response that is accepted by the community (this will build credibility and engage potential partners and the community)
- using the adaptive practice model, demonstrated by The Benalla Drought Outreach Service (this model is tailored to suit the culture, norms and needs of the target group and will build capacity within the community necessary for sustainability)
- providing innovative ways to enhance access to services such as the Assertive Outreach model employed successfully by Campaspe PCP's Farm Gate initiative (outreach strategies were implemented to reach farmers and connect them to services and the broader community and have subsequently been taken up by other rural sectors).

5. Purposefully develop and seize opportunities to build in sustainability by:

- engaging with key community leaders and other champions and working in partnership with these leaders
- using, wherever possible, the train-the-trainer model to ensure the retention of knowledge and skills locally (Wimmera PCP adopted this model when funding the local Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training)
- developing meaningful and practical local solutions to larger problems, for instance, tackle climate change locally with immediate response to a demonstrated need. As an example, the Southern Grampians and Glenelg Drought Committee have developed the *Climate change adaptation framework* for local action that provides a strategic planning tool and framework for action to address the health and social impacts of climate change and rural adjustment. The goal of the framework is to support community resilience to the social, environmental and economic impacts of climate change.

Six illustrative case studies (refer to the following section: Rural Change and Community Wellbeing Forum) have been developed through the review process. Each case study provided reflective insight into aspects of partnerships, health promotion, service coordination and workforce development to improve coordinated and integrated planning and delivery of services in drought-affected communities. A number of key enablers, detailed below, emerged through an analysis of the case study findings.

Key enablers

These key enablers were identified as critical to effective practice and are all illustrated previously in the discussion on approaches. They were recognised by PCPs as being critical to success.

1. Flexibility of funding guidelines.

Allows innovation of practice and engagement with non-traditional partners to explore less conventional approaches tailored to a community.

2. Building and extending existing partnership platforms.

Requires PCPs to lead through activities such as coordinating needs analyses, provision of forums (for example, workshops that bring different organisations together around a common goal and engage with non-health sectors to harness a broader view and integrate services).

3. The use of adaptive practice and innovative community engagement techniques.

Actively encourages 'thinking outside the square' to engage with local organisations and community groups about local issues in a way that is tailored to the situation and is useful and credible to the community. By starting in a very concrete manner with a very practical approach, success can be attained more easily and built upon incrementally.

4. A focus on building and sustaining community capacity.

Ensures that knowledge and experience is captured and is used to form the basis of other initiatives by embedding this knowledge in community-building exercises, such as local committees. This empowers local communities to take ownership of local issues and builds resilience by increasing self-reliance.

Rural Change and Community Wellbeing Forum (August 2009)

In June 2009, the Department of Human Services (now Department of Health) hosted the Rural Change and Community Wellbeing Forum for rural health and community service providers to gain new ideas and strategies for the mental health and wellbeing of drought-affected communities. The forum was attended by people from across Victoria who were engaged or interested in the issue. Participants included those who receive, design, lead or deliver programs including senior managers, leaders of change, government representatives, agency staff and community members.

The forum aimed to provide an opportunity for participants to hear about some successful integrated and sustainable strategies, and to encourage them to continue building sustainable practice to strengthen communities, thus ensuring their resilience in the context of the changing environment. The forum presented Strengthening Community Wellbeing in Drought initiatives that demonstrated creative thinking, were based on partnerships, leveraged existing resources and harnessed community spirit.

Six case studies were presented that illustrated ways in which Strengthening Community Wellbeing in Drought initiatives have helped to build the resilience of individuals and communities to respond in healthy ways to the physical, emotional and social impacts of drought and rural change. These were:

1. Adaptive Practice: Benalla Drought Outreach Service
2. Building Community Resilience: Wimmera PCP
3. Assertive Outreach: Campaspe Farm Gate Pathway

4. Climate Change Adaptation Framework: Southern Grampians and Glenelg
5. Sustainable Approach to Health: Northern Mallee PCP
6. Loddon Mallee Region Sustainable Development Network

[Read the case studies](#)

[Read the full report](#)

Key findings

Principles of good practice

Key insights identified by forum participants on the day were understandably similar to those identified in the Review of the Sustaining Community Wellbeing Drought Initiatives (August 2009), discussed above. These principles are considered to be widely applicable when dealing with farmers and rural communities and are categorised into the following eight themes.

1. Community

Engage with farmers and other community members and create opportunities to express feelings and offer suggestions. Partnering with local communities will reap rewards as the knowledge, skills and strengths inherent will be invaluable to build capacity and local leadership. Empower local leaders and champions by using these community members and organisations to reach a wider and more diverse audience. Likewise, these leaders will add value with their local knowledge and insights and be able to harness community spirit at a grassroots level.

Build on existing engagement and strengthen ties through community activities and forums. Focus on strategies to include hard-to-reach pockets of communities such as indigenous residents or those with a disability.



2. Creativity

Use existing evidence where possible, but be prepared to be innovative to interest and engage with the community. For example, Southern Grampians and Glenelg PCP used Message Stick ideas to start a conversation with the community. Use of local community resources such as local newspapers, nurses and banks can reach more people than a central distribution point such as a community health centre. In this way, expert knowledge can be disseminated in a practical way that is easily accessible to communities.

Flexibility and resilience is needed to overcome barriers. All communities are different so approaches need to be tailored to the audience with consideration given to local conditions and characteristics.

Recognise unexpected positive outcomes such as an unintended audience, and build on these to help work towards local objectives from a variety of sources.

Capitalise on all opportunities presented to share experiences (both positive and negative) with others to enable peer learning and shared goals. Always capture the knowledge in some way so that others can build on existing work and avoid unnecessary repetition.

3. Taking risks

It is important to be proactive even if this means living with a certain amount of risk. For example, almost all assertive outreach models of engagement inherently carry risk in terms of achieving the outcome of engaging with community members in difficult circumstances. As an example, Campaspe Farmgate Assertive Outreach and the Adaptive Practice: Benalla Drought Outreach Service. There will be uncertainty (at

least in the beginning) so be aware of all nuances and influences that could possibly pose a risk to the work and maintain a flexible approach to allow a change of course when warranted. When working locally, consider the bigger picture, such as what is happening in the region or state that affects this initiative and if it poses a risk or if it can be harnessed to strengthen local action.

4. The right people

It takes a special set of skills to engage with farmers and rural communities; identify those in the organisation and/or community that have these skills and support them. The importance of face-to-face contact, plain speaking and patience when working with rural communities and farmers has been recognised. Just as important is the grief and stress that may be a constant factor and needs to be recognised appropriately. Not everyone has the ability or skill to do this well.

Local leadership is critical to the success of a project. It is important to recognise leaders and emerging leaders who are resilient and positive. Support them to try different approaches to working with their community.

Nurture and maintain networks to support outreach work. Ensure that contacts (for example, Centrelink) are able to act quickly to ensure follow through. Aim to link community members to services in a variety of ways, such as technology. Ensure any trainers or presenters are experts in their field but can also understand and connect well to the audience. An ability to adapt to the audience will improve the likelihood of successfully projecting the message. Consider local community members' ability to present as a local expert in tandem

with a more widely known expert. This will bridge the divide from expert to local knowledge and application.

5. Organisational commitment

Support staff to maintain their work and wellbeing by retaining a focus on workforce development and information sharing. Provide supervision, coaching and opportunities for networking and participation in forums/workshops.

Encourage regional collaboration and sharing of ideas by organising forums and meetings across regional government departments and ensure that central departments are connected and understand the work to influence policymaking.

Engage with other organisations addressing the impacts of drought within the region and develop frameworks to link and coordinate effort to achieve a more effective outcome. Develop strategies to retain important stakeholder relationships.

Senior leadership commitment is vital for success. Try different strategies to engage all levels of an organisation to ensure policies and practices are embedded into work culture. This will support sustainability. Involve other senior leaders in the region when developing policy by creating opportunities to leverage off current commitments. For example, use existing meeting structures to present work but link to the audience in areas of policy development or best practice depending on the context.

Plan for sustainability by building capacity in local communities. Invest in training community leaders utilising the train-the-trainer model illustrated in the MHFA model.

6. Partnerships and collaboration

Partnerships at the local level are critical and may start with social opportunities. Build on existing relationships to draw stakeholders together around a common theme. Learn from others to see the connection opportunities and build on current programs to disseminate information and reach intended audiences. For example, use contacts in local government or service industries to begin discussions about local issues and build on their structures to expand the partnership. Cross-sector/agency/government collaboration is necessary at all levels. There must be a common understanding and collaborative goals for this to be achieved.

Community members can keep partnerships informed of local issues, so maintain and expand local networks of all types, such as planning networks and social networks. These may provide important information to add value to planning. Make sure relevant community members are represented on committees to ensure information is as credible and meaningful as possible; it is important for everyone to have their own support system. Make sure that workers are supported and encouraged to ask for help when needed. Rural issues can be challenging and maintaining supports can be difficult but are critical to maintain workers' mental health.

7. Using evidence and experience

Where possible, use evidence to inform planning and to support interventions and use data sources such as the Department of Primary Industries and local government to reflect conditions locally. It is important to reflect and identify what isn't working. As this is valuable information to share with others. For example, education about a subject may be a worthwhile goal but it may be that work needs to be done first on social connectedness to ensure people are able to hear the intended message.

Build on work that has proved successful and use existing models and approaches that have worked for others with the same population group characteristics. Network and talk to peers in similar situations to optimise learning and maximise effort. As each community is different, community members can be a valuable source of information. It is important to remember that innovative approaches and interventions will contribute to the evidence base.

8. Vision

It is often difficult to achieve success in rural communities that are affected by complex factors, but it is critical to be persistent and encourage a positive attitude. Successful interventions often begin in a very small way and are slow to grow. This can be disheartening. A shared vision with others in the local region can provide a bond to offer support and help to maintain hope.

Building on successes, however small, can lift expectations and effort. It is important to adapt and respond to community need to maintain strong engagement and maximise opportunities for success.

Tools and resources

There are a number of useful tools and resources that may assist in effective planning and practice, some of which are specific to drought or rural change and others that are of more general application.

These include the following.

Department of Health dedicated PCP drought web page. The tools and resources on this page are provided to assist rural agencies to plan for effective and sustainable interventions.

<http://www.health.vic.gov.au/pcps/drought.htm>

Southern Grampians and Glenelg PCP have produced a valuable guide to practical measures for a local response to climate change adaptation. Climate Change Adaptation: A framework for local action.

http://www.sggpcp.com/news/Policy_signpost_3.pdf

The website of the Department of Primary Industries features information on a variety of topics related to rural life. A dedicated section on drought is accessible via the relevant link.


<http://new.dpi.vic.gov.au/>

The Department of Human Services has a dedicated climate change website. Read up-to-the-minute information about what Victoria is doing to adapt to climate change. Be a part of this by using the information on this website to contextualise your local work.

<http://www.climatechange.vic.gov.au/index.html>

The Department of Health and Ageing provide federal funding under the Mental Health Support for Drought Affected Communities strategy. See link for details.

<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/mental-drought/>



The Integrated Health Promotion (IHP) kit and the evaluation resources remain the cornerstone of IHP planning and evaluation.

http://www.health.vic.gov.au/healthpromotion/evidence_res/integrated.htm#info

This Canadian initiative provides a general framework to assist with evaluating health promotion interventions. It has been endorsed by various Department of Health and Department of Human Services programs.

<http://www.re-aim.org/>

VicHealth Mental Health and Wellbeing website provides a wealth of information about mental health and prevention. Learn what's happening in your area and if funding is available for local initiatives. Visit regularly to see what events are occurring and read about initiatives that have worked to lessen the impact of mental health. Adapt these to suit the local context.

<http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/en/Programs-and-Projects/Mental-Health-and-Wellbeing.aspx>

PCP contacts list. This is updated regularly. Use this list to initiate or maintain contact with your local PCP or PCPs nearby. Visit PCPs' individual websites to learn what is happening and see if you can link in or work collaboratively on an issue. PCPs regularly run a variety of training sessions about numerous subjects. Learn the main focus of interest for each PCP to narrow your search for future partners.

http://www.health.vic.gov.au/pcps/downloads/pcps_chairs_managers.pdf

Federally funded programs that target drought-affected communities

The Department of Families Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) fund a number of family support drought response teams in Victoria and have produced a map of service areas. Consider approaching one of these teams to partner with a funded agency.

<http://www.health.vic.gov.au/pcps/drought.htm>

This link provides information about the Australian General Practice Divisions that have received federal funding for mental health support for drought-affected communities. Consider approaching one of these divisions to partner with a funded agency.

<http://www.health.vic.gov.au/pcps/drought.htm>