

# Sustaining community wellbeing in drought

## Campaspe Farm Gate: Assertive outreach



### Fresh approaches to assist drought-affected communities

By publishing these case studies Victoria's Department of Human Services aims to share what has been learnt from the State Government's *Sustaining community wellbeing in drought* program funded in the 2007–2008 financial year.

The program, involving 19 Primary Care Partnerships (PCPs) in 47 rural and regional local government areas, was part of the department's broader drought response.

The department is keen for others to be inspired by positive experiences gained from it.

The Shire of Campaspe used *Sustaining community wellbeing in drought* funding to develop and implement a range of strategies and actions that aimed to lessen the physical, emotional and social impacts of drought and climate change in its region.

An important part of its response was an assertive outreach program—the Campaspe Farm Gate project. This involved pairs of drought workers cold-calling on local farmers, and subsequently businesses, in order to identify needs and connect them to relevant services and supports.

The Campaspe area also complemented the Farm Gate model by developing No Bull Support workshops with the Bouverie Centre, Victoria's Family Institute within La Trobe University's Faculty of Health Sciences, to encourage people to engage farmers and 'normalise

stress in the face of drought and other challenges'.<sup>1</sup>

Together, the Farm Gate and No Bull Support initiatives have promoted engagement between local drought-affected farmers, their communities and relevant drought support services, helping to build local community capacity and resilience to minimise the social impact of drought.

The shared responsibility attitude of 'drought planning and service delivery does not belong to one organisation alone' informed the collaborative partnership approach taken.

### The region

Reports from the region comment that drought has been experienced for 13 years, longer than most other Victorian regions, with farmers

experiencing negligible rainfall, limited water allocation, the need to buy water and, in some cases, stock fodder—paid for against future milk cheques.

Economic impacts include inter-generational debt (debts carried from one generation to the next), accumulated debt (a result of more than a decade of consecutive drought years), the loss of local businesses and organisations and more farm families requiring emergency food and other relief.

Community concern about reconfiguring of irrigation areas and changes in water access (such as the Bendigo/Ballarat pipeline and proposed Victorian north-south pipeline) add to the stress and uncertainty.

Shire documents note that, due to stoicism and feelings of isolation, many people have been reluctant to access relevant supports.

<sup>1</sup> Young, 2008

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Planners and service delivery agencies are aware that a lack of social cohesion, withdrawal from community and social activities, and an increasing level of community concern, are common drought responses.

The combination of negative economic impacts, limited employment opportunities, young people leaving and erosion of community resilience, have impacted significantly, making sustainable communities a key focus.

The Campaspe Primary Care Partnership (PCP) and local government practitioners listened to their community and used available resources to put ideas into action, demonstrating leadership by building on, and adding value to, existing planning and service delivery.

### The Farm Gate model: Assertive outreach

Traditional counselling approaches have struggled to engage drought-affected people who are reluctant to seek counselling despite major emotional stress which can result in suicide.

The current drought's length and severity, combined with rapid social and economic changes, has caused unprecedented stress on rural communities. Further, recovery from drought is uncertain.<sup>2</sup>

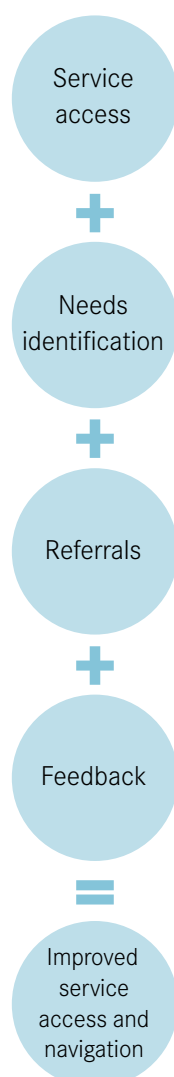
The Farm Gate assertive outreach model was designed to reach drought-affected people by shifting the service provider focus from passive, centre-based services to the methodology of asking: 'What will work in **this** community?'

The model targeted farming families and businesses from the districts of Rochester, Lockington, Gunbower, Tongala, Kyabram, Rushworth, Stanhope, Girgarre and Echuca.

Service delivery organisations included the Rochester and Elmore District Health Service, Shire of Campaspe, Kyabram and District Health Services, Echuca Regional Health and Kyabram Community and Learning Centre.

The Campaspe Farm Gate project was established to improve service navigation and access to government support services for local drought-affected farmers and businesses. Partnering agencies commenced roll-out of the assertive outreach model from late 2006.

The service delivery model was grounded in values of effective engagement, based on agency staff legitimacy, and provision of support that was non-threatening, non-judgemental, genuine and useful. The model has four key stages designed to result in improved service access and navigation.



### How the model works

#### Cold-calling

The Farm Gate model involves direct face-to-face contact between agency staff and farmers or local businesspeople in their natural settings who might benefit from accessing support services.

Originally piloted with 200 irrigators in 2005–06, early evaluation demonstrated that 30% of those visited accepted practical assistance and 68% engaged in counselling with local community health services.

Two drought workers (a community development worker and a counsellor) cold-call on farms or businesses to initiate personal contact. Principles of the visit include confidentiality, and clear statements about the visit's purpose.

The Farm Gate approach was extended to 'Shopfront' cold-calling in which the Campaspe Shire's Small Business Support Officer visits businesses to provide information about the availability of support programs and other resources.

#### Needs identification

During the visit, the drought workers undertake needs identification through observation, engagement, conversation and empathetic questioning (eg 'How are you/your family travelling?') Needs identification is conducted formally and informally (eg evidence of neighbourhood networking, intelligence such as links to Department of Primary Industries).

Informal assessment involves the drought workers' wisdom and experience and Primary Care Partnership (PCP) service coordination protocols. Determining further action is conducted without judgement. Where appropriate, and with the individual's consent, there may be formal assessment of psychological needs and clinical assessment and referral.

<sup>2</sup> Jeff Young (August 2008) *The Bouverie Centre's Collaborative Action Research, Support and Training Project with Victorian Drought Counsellors: Interim Report December 2006–February 2008*, La Trobe University, Melbourne.

## Provision of referrals

Practical referral is a key focus of the model. During the visit information about relevant support services is discussed, and identified needs are met with a link to practical support. Following consent, the Shire of Campaspe Referral Form is utilised to link individuals to counselling, rural financial counselling, Centrelink, Department of Primary Industries, welfare and field officers. The drought workers try to break down assistance into 'manageable' steps that simplify the process of service access.

## Feedback and follow up

The drought workers request consent to provide follow-up service access and feedback, according to PCP practice and procedures.

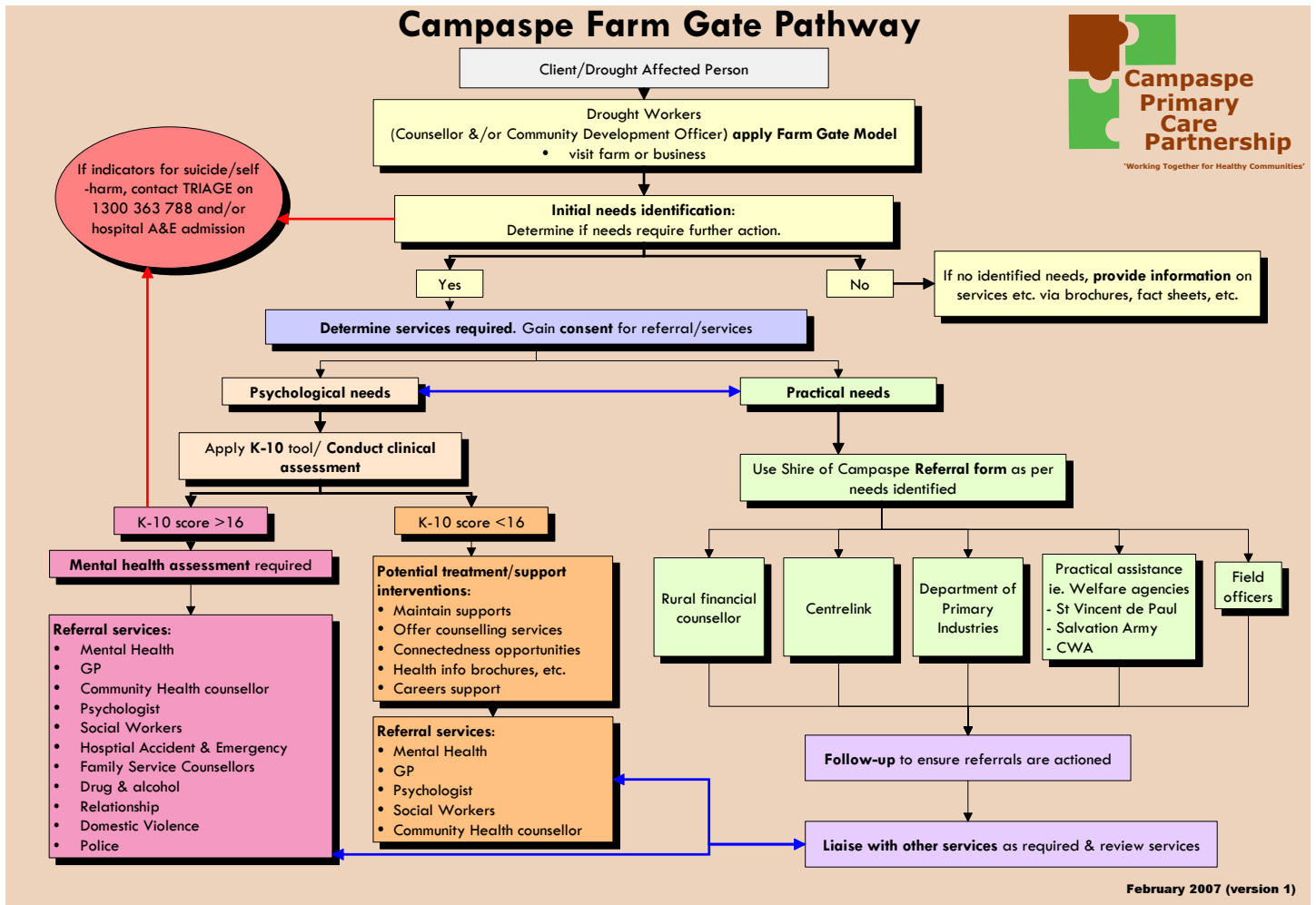
The PCP-facilitated Campaspe Recovery and Support Network, a monthly forum for workers implementing the Farm Gate model, emphasises communication, referral, networking and supervision. Terms of Reference developed in April 2007 describe how the network links to the Shire of Campaspe Social Recovery Committee and the Campaspe Emergency Relief Network. This ensures trends noted by workers are discussed to inform an overall, integrated drought response across the shire.

## No Bull: Building community capacity

One of the Shire of Campaspe and Campaspe PCP Drought Action Plan's complementary initiatives was No Bull Support—a community program bringing together local drought counsellors and community members who, through their jobs, come into contact with stressed farming families and businesspeople.

The No Bull Support half-day workshops are suitable for professionals, local traders and community members alike, from stock agents to water management staff to hairdressers. They are short, factual, and to-the-point sessions delivered in plain English and give easy-to-follow guidelines on how to support someone in trouble.

Figure 1: Campaspe Farm Gate Pathway



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Developed collaboratively by local drought counsellors and the Bouverie Centre, the workshops aim to reduce some of the pressure people experience when they are unsure what to say or do when worried about someone experiencing difficulties due to drought or other stresses.

Following a pilot phase in Campaspe, drought counsellors across Victoria were trained to facilitate the workshops. As at September 2008, 317 community members had participated in 21 No Bull Support programs across Victoria.<sup>3</sup>

This is an example of the use of community development principles to address an identified need for community capacity building, develop a program using local resources and expertise, and become community-owned and therefore self-sustainable with minimal need for external experts.

Evaluation documentation has reported that No Bull Support participants have consistently rated highly all aspects of the training. Feedback highlights the importance of the workshop in providing practical strategies to support people in a helpful way, down-to-earth information about stress and grief, and local referral contacts and connection with the local drought counsellor who was the facilitator.<sup>4</sup>

### Planning and coordination

Campaspe PCP has been supporting member agencies through the Drought Recovery and Support Network. This network has regular participation from drought counsellors from Community Health Services and drought related workers from Centrelink, Department of Primary Industries, CentaCare, CRS Australia, Goulburn Murray Hume AgCare—financial counsellors, Shire of Campaspe, Murray Plains Division of General Practice, Kyabram Community and Learning Centre family services and a number of other local practitioners.

The network is responsible for implementing the Shire of Campaspe and Campaspe PCP combined drought action plan, first developed in 2004. Key initiatives of the plan include:

- coordination and implementation of the Farm Gate model across Campaspe
- collation and analysis of organisation and service utilisation data and statistics
- increasing mental health literacy through No Bull Support training and Mental Health First Aid training
- supporting cross-sector coordination and collaboration for drought and climate change.

The network coordinates initiatives with the Shire of Campaspe Drought Recovery Committee and the Campaspe Murray Mental Health Network to ensure that drought is a key service priority for all organisations.

The Shire of Campaspe Drought Recovery Committee has been supported through either state government or council funds continuously since 2003. Working collaboratively with other tiers of government and across sectors, and in response to the 13th year of continuing 'dry seasonal conditions' and economic downturn, the committee has now broadened to become the Community Social Recovery Committee.

The Drought Recovery and Support Network is planning to use further funding for needs analysis and specific responses, aiming for a longer term focus on the relationship between agencies and their community. Its recent efforts on future strategic approaches include:

- investigation of changing demography and needs assessment of local communities
- identification of a need for a standardised and consistent approach for the use of Farm Gate model
- establishing a working group to target members of the business sector (a group not reached through Farm Gate) through a networking and community forum
- Continual improvement of referral processes.

3 Poll & Young, 2008

4 The Bouverie Centre (September 2008) *No Bull Support: Supporting the People who Support Others Evaluation Report*, La Trobe University, Melbourne.



## Positive impacts

*'The Farm Gate assertive outreach model challenged the existing beliefs of agency staff, but once on board they have continued to run with it. This way of working has increased the capacity of staff to connect with their communities.'*  
Emma Brentnall, Executive Officer,  
Campaspe Primary Care Partnership.

Evidence shows that the approach has enabled agencies to reach the new groups of people who most need their services.

The Bouverie Centre is now evaluating the Farm Gate model through qualitative research to assess its effectiveness in meeting the needs of farming families and gauge the uptake in services and assistance measures as a result of the cold calling approach. It will also determine the benefits and challenges farmers and workers identify in the approach and further document the practice wisdom of people applying it.<sup>5</sup>

The model has successfully been transferred to other settings, including shopfronts and businesses. Its referral pathways and practice protocols have been taken up and adapted to local conditions in other areas, such as Gannawarra Shire, Southern Grampians and Glenelg PCP.

The model reflects new ways of reaching people with information and support that are evaluated in a continuing cycle of quality improvement, with the starting point being: *'What will work in **this** community?'*

Flexible funding enables communities to draw on local knowledge and resources, while having supportive state-wide structures which increase the knowledge pool to build best possible practice in each community.

In addition to ongoing planning and coordination, evidence of enduring partnerships is seen through ongoing, if irregular, use of cold-calling by local practitioners from different organisations working together to reach farming families.

## Lessons learned

In terms of transferability, critical success factors in the Campaspe approach include:

- health and community service organisations having an integrated approach and appropriate resources such as counselling services, waiting list demand management, risk assessment tools, appropriate referral according to the pathway developed, and practice protocols
- leadership by the PCP and local government to engage with organisations across sectors and continuously support social recovery initiatives
- support by agencies for practitioners to employ the approach in their work and to work in partnership across sectors
- a sense of desire and urgency by practitioners and the community to do something practical
- an approach suiting the locality and informed by those who know about farming family needs
- using best practices learned through No Bull Therapy training and ongoing skill development through supervision and peer-based learning
- mutual drought worker support on Farm Gate practice issues through the Drought Workers Network.

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### Conclusion

The Campaspe Primary Care Partnership (PCP) used *Sustaining community wellbeing in drought* funding to improve sustained service access for a reluctant client base, particularly for counselling services, and to develop the community's capacity to support the needs of local farmers and businesses.

The model has become widely known among PCP networks. It demonstrates an action research approach combining assertive outreach methods, referral pathways, practice protocols and shared learning supported by both local counselling networks and state-wide structures.

The strength of relationships between PCP member agencies engaged other organisations and created a service system which could respond to opportunities for innovation.

**Figure 2: Key messages**



The information contained in this case study, in particular **the models for Farm Gate assertive outreach and No Bull Support**, adds to the body of evidence available to services and practitioners across Victoria.

### Acknowledgements

Rural development officer, Shire of Campaspe; Drought Counsellor; Kyabram Community and Learning Centre; Executive Officer, Campaspe Primary Care Partnership; Rural Support Coordinator, Murray Plains Division of General Practice; Director and Researcher, Bouverie Centre.

Please go to <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/pcps/> for further case studies.