

# Rural change and community wellbeing forum

## Report on outcomes

July 2009



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## 1. Introduction

The Department of Human services hosted the *Rural change and community wellbeing forum* on 24 June 2009 for staff from 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 who were engaged or interested in the issue of improving mental health and wellbeing in drought-affected areas from across Victoria. Participants in the forum were 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.

Presentations from senior Department of Human Services personnel, Ms Sylvia Barry (Manager, Primary Health Integration) and Ms Brenda Boland (Regional Director, Grampians Region), launched the morning program, with an overview of the journey so far and achievements to date of the Victorian Drought Initiatives.

Two presentations of exemplary initiatives, by Ms Rosie Rowe (Southern Grampians and Glenelg Primary Care Partnership) and Ms Emily Anderson (Northern Grampians Shire), highlighted the leadership role of Primary Care Partnerships and the incredible community spirit that has been harnessed through local drought collaboration in rural Victoria.

In the middle of the day, six stories were told by individuals who had been involved in six different initiatives, sharing their experience of being involved with forum participants. These stories, which were also provided in written format as case studies, 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. The stories/case studies had the following titles:

1. Adaptive Practice: Benalla Drought Outreach Service
2. Wimmera PCP: Building Community Resilience
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

In groups, participants used the 'story dialogue method'<sup>1</sup> to describe, explore and reflect on each case study, generating information about key insights and practical applications of learning in their work. The story dialogue method and the nature of the forum generated lively interaction, discussion and reflection on practice by participants.

This report captures, under key themes in sections 2–9, the insights people developed from the forum to provide a guide for future practice. These insights have been categorised under the following themes:

- Community
- Creativity
- Taking risks
- The right people
- Organisational commitment
- Partnerships and collaboration
- Using evidence and experience
- Vision

1 From 'Handbook on Using Stories in Health Promotion Practice', Ron Labonte and Joan Feather, 1996.

The final section presents a summary of key messages from the forum, using the acronym SPACES.

## 2. Community

Participants at the forum identified a number of key insights and practical applications that broadly fit under the category of *community*. These included:

- **Partnering within community and listening**

For example, use feedback from farmers to help identify strategies; analyse attendance and participation at events to identify gaps in participation; work with local venue providers and sporting clubs; use links with neighbourhood houses; link into community/church groups; host a community film night bringing many people together as an opportunity for education and social interaction; host a community barbecue; provide spaces and opportunities where people can express their grief and feel it is normal and acceptable; have community members involved in working groups; continue to listen to what's happening in the community; and have methods to capture this information in an ongoing way.

- **Valuing the knowledge, skills and strengths of local communities to build capacity and leadership**

For example, consider ways of resourcing rural towns, such as through training; use valued champions; appeal to people's value of small community; learn from experienced PCPs, for example in addressing men's issues; approach well-known people to be guest speakers; involve the local GP, sporting groups, Country Fire Authority, Victorian Farmers Federation, Country Women's Association and the like; flood the area with advertising; look at increasing men's health checks and men's shed programs; build leadership skills of men, women and youth in the area. Passion is catching, it spreads quickly!

- **Community spirit is a wonderful and powerful thing!**

Build social capital and social connectedness by running events such as a family fun night where people can have fun and regain a sense of hope.

Conduct a forum in town for the community to discuss readiness for climate change. Build on existing level of engagement, for example discuss energy efficiency, offer free energy audits of homes. Focus on disadvantaged areas. Engage small rural towns through cumulative and culturally sensitive strategies.

## 3. Creativity

Participants at the forum identified a number of key insights and practical applications that broadly fit under the category of *creativity*. These included:

- **Think outside the square and look for new ways of doing things**

For example, use the arts and humour in programs; use the message stick ideas (used by the Southern Grampians and Glenelg PCP) to engage and start a conversation with the community.

- **Combine expert knowledge with practical application (tools and techniques)**

For example, use local people and local images in the development of information resources (such as the booklet produced in Mildura); distribute resources through community nurses, banks, newspapers and other new ways; use "I buttons" (used by the Southern Grampians and Glenelg PCP to measure temperature inside and outside of homes, collecting data for later use); work with universities and researchers to generate ideas and strategies; build on the practical skills and knowledge of community members.



- **Use flexible approaches by adapting to overcome barriers**

Move away from a single focus on mental health for resource development. If something doesn't work, accept it and try another way. Look for unexpected outcomes and capitalise on these. Be ready to adapt practices to local contexts—what works in one community may not work the same in another.

- **Share your ideas**

Use stories and histories as mechanisms for change. Tell others about successes and challenges so they can build on them or learn from them. Write down or record what you do and share it. Present the work at workshops or forums or in the media or websites.

#### 4. Taking risks

Participants at the forum identified two key insights and practical applications that broadly fit under the category of *taking risks*. These included:

- **Live with uncertainty**

We don't always know where we will end up so it is important to trust the process. Try innovative projects that emerge from local people, for example research on the effects of climate change on individuals and households.

- **Have a go**

Being bold and stepping out of the comfort zone reaps rewards. Move away from a passive to a more proactive approach. Go for it! Even small regions can do big things. Persistence pays off. Keep trying. If it doesn't work the first time try again and then again.

#### 5. The right people

Participants at the forum identified a number of key insights and practical applications that broadly fit under the category of the *right people*. These included:

- **Direct contact workers with the right personality and skills of engagement**

There is a clear skill set required for counsellors working with farming families. Develop networks and reputation over time. Support is required for drought outreach cold-calling work—organisations and individuals need to know the limitations of the worker. Face-to-face contact is an important and powerful tool for success.

- **People who listen and respect others**

Those engaged in projects, whether leaders, working group participants, counsellors, coordinators or senior leaders, all need to show respect and listen well to those with whom they work, honouring the individual experience of others and understanding that any one of the people with whom they work may be suffering effects of drought and climate change.

- **Local leaders and potential leaders**

With leadership from health professionals, other community members can support health promotion, for example the police. Locate a local asset, such as the Youth Group, with which to start. Try innovative strategies to engage small towns. Utilise existing informal social networks (invisible to outsiders) to promote engagement via a snowballing effect.

- **Leaders who are resilient and positive**

The work is set in an environment of hardship, grief and loss. It can be overwhelming for people such as counsellors and project leaders, participants and communities. Resilience enables people to deal with the difficulties and disappointments more effectively. Those who are able to maintain a positive outlook can influence others through their motivation and hope.

- **People equipped with knowledge and well-supported**

For outreach work it is vital to have a supportive team that can quickly respond to the needs of the community. For example, if you are on a farm and are able to ring Centrelink or a counsellor and get an appointment straight away, it is more likely to be followed through. Providing community members with access to technology, tools and information from research helps to empower them. Weather projections, economic modelling, access to researchers, training, newsletters and websites can all be useful. Providing training to community members and staff in agencies in areas such as mental health first aid and 'no bull' therapy followed up by referral pathway information, networking and follow-up sessions can increase sense of support.

- **Skilled and well-known trainers or presenters**

When training or information sessions were conducted it was important to have presenters who understood and engaged well with the participants and who could adapt to various audiences. There was a suggestion to do some planning for the future that would include local people but also engage an international 'guru' to help us reflect on where we are at, then follow up with action in a workshop format.

## 6. Organisational commitment

Participants at the forum identified a number of key insights and practical applications that broadly fit under the category of *organisational commitment*. These included:

- **Supporting staff to maintain their work and their wellbeing**

Retain a focus on workforce development and information sharing. Provide supervision, coaching and time for networking and participation in forums and workshops.

- **Supporting innovation**

Continue with a 'response' focus to drought and community engagement. Provide flexibility in development of work and projects that allow for new or different ideas to be implemented.

- **Coordinating across agencies**

Hold regional forums to achieve further collaboration across all government departments. Develop frameworks for collaborative work. Greater coordination, understanding and planning is required between central policymakers and regions.

- **Regional-level support**

Engage with a broader network of responders to drought. Develop a project brief to attract funding to develop a coordinated strategy (paper). Work out how to achieve and maintain stakeholder engagement and buy-in (a strategy framework will assist, for example the Loddon Mallee Strategic Framework for response to climate change projections). The key is leadership. Undertake marketing and promotion so that drought and climate change issues become priorities for other agencies.

- **Senior leadership commitment**

Achieved through demonstrating good leadership. Address the gap in understanding between different levels of policy development that still remains. Regions to continue to move forward in understanding of climate change and need to move out of comfort zone.

- **Planning for sustainability**

Develop frameworks for collaborative work. Look at ways to increase the efficiency of programs such as Farm Gate. As situations change the model needs to adapt, evolve and be revisited. Factors include rural issues, seasons and resources. Utilise the train-the-trainer model to disseminate new information.

## 7. Partnerships and collaboration

Participants at the forum identified a number of key insights and practical applications that broadly fit under the category of *partnerships and collaboration*. These included:

- **Partnerships at the local level are critical**

Development of partnerships may start with: using our own networks (including social networks) to help build further support and ideas; using established partnerships and piggyback on their information distribution channels to the community—for example on grief and trauma issues; learning about other organisations and services for different groups in the community and building on these and developing new partnerships.

- **Cross-sector/agency/government collaboration is required at all levels**

Networks at all levels must have an agreed purpose to promote collaboration.

- **Community members can keep partnerships informed of real issues**

Maintain and expand network; provide support for all stakeholders; use local people on steering committee. It is important to give the community feedback on information they have provided (for example, what happened after the consultation) to keep people engaged.

- **Connecting people and staff to networks of support**

Even strong people need support in some circumstances. People need to take time for connecting to support networks. This can be challenging in rural settings but very important.

## 8. Using evidence and experience

Participants at the forum identified a number of key insights and practical applications that broadly fit under the category of *using evidence and experience*. These included:

- **Learn from research**

Use existing data, for example from the Department of Primary Industries, to capture nuances about the community. Recognise that researching practical issues with the community involved, for example regarding climate change, also provides social research information.

- **Learn from and reflect on what doesn't work**

For example, experience shows that while education is an important goal, a focus on social interaction is integral to success.

- **Learn from each other**

Develop more events and programs based on what is learned; be smarter and more efficient in hitting the target group with issues of concern; use existing models, such as the Wimmera case study, as a methodology for engaging people with local events; use sustainable resources that are general enough for large community distribution, accompanied by radio promotion; use energy generated from the success of one activity to help with momentum for subsequent activities; use frameworks developed by others; move away from mental health language to 'wellbeing'.

When conducting Farm Gate visits or other forms of assertive outreach, clarify concerns regarding confidentiality, trust your gut, gain permission to discuss issues such as depression, and follow up when you say you will. Address concerns about form-filling. The connection with health

services gives credibility to drought counsellor outreach—to establish this, give a card when introducing yourself. Have personal knowledge and connection with Centrelink.

Use this connection to make phone calls to Centrelink on the spot when visiting a farmer. In assertive outreach work share something of yourself to encourage others to share their story—find something to connect with.

When following up a third-party referral, make sure to call into one or two other farms on the same road so people don't feel 'targeted'. Document all tasks and follow up.

- **Learn from community members—each community will be different**

Involve the community in research, and use research in which communities learn about themselves. Engage in ways that are sympathetic to their interests and culture. There are often additional benefits; for example, involving the community in data collection brings greater engagement with the results of the research, and facilitates links into other programs and assistance. Practical ideas could include facilitating a focus group to look at what hasn't worked. Remember the golden rule—'keep in sync with the theme'.

- **Keep learning—it is an ongoing process**

For example, continue to improve on the Farm Gate process through practice experience and reflection.

- **Accept that sometimes there is no evidence, but you can lead the way**

This was a clear message demonstrated by the work of Southern Grampians and Glenelg PCP. For example, investigate issues of equity where towns outside of major regional areas are not getting support or funds.

## 9. Vision

A summary feedback from the group discussion generated five further themes.

- **Be persistent and maintain hope**

A slow and apparently unsuccessful start might not spell failure. A creative response may be to 'rent a crowd' for the first in a series of events. In outreach work sometimes we need to push people a bit for them to seek help and access services. For outreach work, continually maintain the focus on hope and optimism.

- **Build on successes**

Even if you start small it can grow from that point. If something works in an area, try it somewhere else. Reflect on the elements of success for each project.

- **Support each other**

Everyone can go through ups and downs; when people feel supported the tasks ahead seem more achievable. It doesn't have to be in your job description for you to offer support to others or be ready to receive support.

- **Adapt and respond to community need**

Listen to feedback from farmers. Keep track of the changes and trends. Retailers, sports coaches, teachers, nurses, police and GPs can help gauge community needs. If the project is not relevant to what the community needs, be ready to drop it or change direction.

- **Know that small things can make a big difference**

Even simple gestures are appreciated; for example, take food parcels to the farm rather than asking people to pick them up.

### 10. Summary

At the conclusion of the forum, the facilitator presented a summary of take-home messages from the forum. The acronym **SPACES** was used on the basis that the spaces in which we live, work and love are important to us all and contain our friends, our family and our community, and inspire us to continue to work to improve the mental health and wellbeing of our communities.

**S = Sustainability**, which can arise from unanticipated sources. There is a wealth of information and knowledge in the community; we can tap into community resources, change structures to be more sustainable, and gain crucial organisational commitment to sustain outcomes. Building social capital is a key strategy for sustainability and leaves a long-term legacy.

**P = Partnerships**, which are important (we already know this). The Campaspe case study summed it up beautifully: 'Drought does not belong to one organisation alone.' Partnerships that extend beyond the traditional health boundaries can have surprising outcomes. Some examples discussed included various forums (such as Regional Management Forums) involving cross-sector players who ordinarily might not come together, and local drought worker networks that provided peer support and information exchange. Another example of partnerships in action was the Drought Postcard initiative involving local primary schools.

**A = Adaptability**, which gives us the advantage of being able to overcome barriers we meet along the way. It is easy to become dispirited by barriers, and no single person or organisation has all the answers—together we do better. Taking some risks, moving forward with a degree of uncertainty and having the ability to be adaptable and flexible (to catch the wave) in the face of change is required. Celebrate successes as these sustain us and provide motivation to overcome barriers.

**C = Creativity**, which was clearly evident in the stories and presentations. Highly creative responses and thinking outside the square have been demonstrated in examples such as the Wimmera Men's Health night in the use of connections with sports journalists, Benalla Drought Outreach Service's approach to connecting with farmers, and a range of other innovative marketing and promotion strategies. Creativity is often the essence of overcoming adversity and engaging with the community to find solutions.

**E = Enablers**, of which we heard many examples. Effective partnerships offer a myriad of enablers: access to information, another mind, another pair of hands, moral support and encouragement; persistence, creativity, flexibility and the willingness to try new things; access to information and financial and human resources; and using evidence for practice, for example undertaking research or accessing existing data such as the Mildura key indicators.

**S = Spirit** is a wonderful and powerful thing. Tapping into community spirit through activities such as doorknocking, community barbecues or breakfasts, or through existing organisations such as sports clubs, harnesses energy for the promotion of mental health and wellbeing. We cannot underestimate the importance of social occasions and people power to connect and create energy, optimism and hope for the future.

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