



MEDIA RELEASE

Outreach program makes a big difference to small communities

10 June 2022

It might be just having a chat and a cuppa, discovering the joy of art or taking time out to make new friends while the kids are enjoying safe, fun games.

East Gippsland Social Outreach Workers, Nina McDonough-Monahan and Amber Louise, have seen the big difference small things can make to communities.

Gippsland Primary Health Network (Gippsland PHN) funds the Outreach CARE Program, delivered by the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) Victoria in bushfire-affected areas of East Gippsland. Both Nina and Amber believe this low intensity support is mitigating referrals to clinical services.

“While there is always the option to access clinical support, we find the real need is to have those health and wellbeing conversations with people,” Nina said. “We have come up with different ways of engaging with the people who need it.”

According to Amber, other local organisations are keen to collaborate.

“We have art workshops for parents and carers in Orbost, many of them who felt isolated and disconnected,” Amber said.

“GippSport staff did fun activities with the children. The adults could have time for themselves for a few hours while their children were having fun in a safe environment. It was a great experience for everyone after emerging from COVID lockdown. People formed new friendships and we found conversations were similar.”

With winter approaching, the workshops will move from outside at the Orbost Tennis Club to indoors at the Orbost Neighbourhood House.

Nina works in areas such as Omeo, Swifts Creek and Ensay. She said people in these small communities had survived the drought then came the bushfires which forced the evacuation and relocation of whole towns.

They were “just starting to manage life again” when COVID hit. Support services withdrew and people felt isolated and abandoned.

“People are resilient but if you still don’t have fences or you’re struggling to make ends meet because you have no work, you get stressed to the max,” she said. “It was worse for older people who were often alone.

“We connected with other well established services like the bush nursing centres, neighbourhood houses and community centres; we became more visible. Then came the conversations in the local bakery or the café. It takes time to build trust.

“There is no other service like this in the area and people have now come to depend on it. And it’s free.”



Amber, who travels between Orbost, Mallacoota and Cann River, described the outreach program as like delivering “wrap-around services”.

“We give people the best support possible and have gentle conversations that they might not be able to have with anyone else,” she said. “If we think they might need more help, we can talk about the options available.”

Gippsland PHN Chief Executive Officer, Amanda Proposch, said the impact on these small communities over the last few years had been significant.

“It’s so satisfying to see these low intensity outreach programs meeting a need for people who still might be struggling in various ways from the impact of drought, bushfires and then COVID,” she said.

Both workers say communities are gradually reconnecting. Just recently, the Cann River community came together for Cann Care Day. It was organised by the local community centre, supported by the East Gippsland Shire, Outreach CARE and other community groups. There were food vans, musicians, meditation and massage sessions, flower arranging classes and more.

While small and remote communities are often forgotten after major traumatic events, the Outreach CARE Program is helping change that...it’s community capacity building at its best.

ENDS

For more information, contact Lynne Smith on 0437 918 234 or lynne.smith@gphn.org.au