

Social Prescribing Initiatives: Nhill West Wimmera Health Service

The Health Promotion team at West Wimmera Health Service has a number of projects underway which may be categorised as social prescribing initiatives. These include the Cafe Health, Friends Across the Ages, and Community Gardens. The team are also working to develop engagement with GPs and other clinicians to embed an understanding of the social determinants of health. Further, they have established a community health and wellbeing grant round, where Participatory Action research modelling is utilised to help communities identify projects and build skills to create environments for health. The small team's work covers 9 towns and about 20,000 sq km in rural western Victoria, but note they have got great communities and a supportive environment. Dorothy McLaren, Health Promotion Manager at West Wimmera Health Service says "Social connection is literally everything for us! Social prescribing connects the dots between community and clinical services".

The Café Health is an innovative solution to a chronic issue - How do we engage the disengaged? How do we reach community members before they develop a need for interventions? How do we increase health literacy in the general community? And, most importantly, how do we identify meaningful and appropriate projects for each community's needs? Cafe Health is a monthly meeting, held in a local cafe (or now, public space or on-line), that takes discussions about health out of the health setting. It is a new project, but is already actively engaging community members to discuss what they can do to support the social determinants of health in their own town or area, identifying projects, and connecting people across existing social divides. Community members are embracing the concept and taking ownership, promoting and supporting the group.

Friends Across the Ages This project will actively support one on one connections between older people and younger community members. It recognises that each group can learn from and support each other. Social connection is a key component for a life of health and wellbeing and FAA will match those with an interest across generational boundaries as equal partners in the friendship. This is not a charity model. Each group retains equal power in the relationship. We are developing the model to encompass the challenges of starting a new friendship in social distance or virtual settings.

Community Gardens Two of our first tranche of Community Health and Wellbeing Grants were awarded to Community Gardens. This proven model for social engagement has the added bonus of encouraging physical activity and healthy eating. In each case, the gardens will be starting from scratch, though the circumstances of the communities and implementation models are quite different. In each case, networks are already forming across the community long before the first soil is turned. The growth of those connections, networks and knowledge about building a community project are as important as the fresh tomatoes and other wonderful produce that will eventually result. Add on projects in future might include community dinners to further extend the impact across the community.

The work of the WWHS Health Promotion team focuses on impacting the social determinants of health rather than a traditional preventative health model. In that sense, almost all of our project work is potentially an avenue for social prescribing.

Source: Dorothy McLaren, Health Promotion Manager | Nhill West Wimmera Health Service