

## Case Study: Reclink the link in Social Prescription in Far East Gippsland

*Reclink activities have made a positive impact on increasing participants' mental health and wellbeing, particularly for some of the isolated older women in the community with a history of trauma, facing accommodation issues, and other social stressors. Feedback from Reclink's free weekly art program included "I desperately needed an outlet after the bushfires and Covid. The company and "chit chat" has been missing throughout Covid. I feel spoilt."*



A social prescription collaboration model between Reclink Australia and the Mallacoota Medical Centre has been pivotal in the Far East Gippsland's post bushfire recovery journey after the Black Summer bushfires of 2019/2020.

Dr Sara Renwick-Lau, Practice Principal of the Mallacoota Medical Centre, provides GP care in Mallacoota. Dr Sara has been involved with the co-ordination and delivery of bushfire recovery services in Mallacoota since the Black Summer fires of 2019/2020. Reclink Australia was (and continues to be) funded by the Department of Health and Human Services as part of the Bushfire Recovery Response. Reclink's mandate was to deliver recreational opportunities with a focus on increased participation, social inclusion and greater opportunities, with emphasis on improving mental health within the Mallacoota and Cann Valley districts.

Reclink is a "perfectly formed social prescribing resource" that has been unearthed through the bushfire recovery needs of the Far East Gippsland communities of Mallacoota, Genoa and Cann River, Dr Sara says.

"Reclink staff understand and prioritise the important role of the Reclink program to not just create opportunities for activity, but as a social prescribing resource for those with mental

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illness, trauma, social anxiety, social disconnection, chronic illness, limited financial resources and other barriers to social connection,” Dr Sara said.

“The effectiveness of the ReLink programs in Mallacoota District and the Cann Valley, lies in their long-term relationships, ‘boots on the ground’ awareness of the local context as well as regular meetings and networking with larger agencies and also those providing local health care and programs.

“Through working with local health professionals, ReLink is able to provide the ‘missing link’ for our unwell patients to access a path to their health and well-being as well as play an important role in the prevention of chronic physical and mental illness.”

ReLink ensured that the staff on the ground were local to the area, which supported a key aspect of the rollout of recreational programs; to collaborate with service agencies, particularly the Mallacoota Medical Centre.

“The ReLink staff were local to the community, had been through the bushfire and were in a advantaged position to have an understanding and insight into community needs and experience. We were able to network with local agencies and outside services through wellbeing recovery groups, and we had a vested interest in ensuring programs suited the needs of our community in collaboration with Dr Sara and her team, alongside other health and wellbeing professionals,” said ReLink’s Eastern Victoria Manager Callista Cooper.

ReLink created and delivered a weekly program with a range of activities including artistic journaling, stand-up paddle-boarding, a running group, boxing fitness, and pop-up sports for children. Posters of the activities were advertised on the big screen in the Mallacoota Medical Centre waiting room, with the Mallacoota Medical Centre team referring patients into the program. ReLink also ensured all health and wellbeing services in the region had access to ReLink’s program to ensure there were strong pathways for referral.

Referral is a partnership and requires relationship and trust between agencies in a small community. Local networking with community groups and support agencies was important to be able to ensure not only were services referring clients into the ReLink activities, but ReLink staff could also refer participants to services that were available to locals. ReLink staff often found themselves as the first, or a key point of connection for individuals in their recovery journey. These two-way pathways had significant outcomes for some impacted by the bushfires and the covid pandemic.

Social prescribing is an integrated model of care, built on trust, that links clinical care to supportive community-based programs or activities to improve a person’s health and well-being.

**- by Callista Cooper**

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