

Social Prescribing Initiatives: Improving Social Connections of Older Australians Project Pilot: Hawkesbury

Service: Improving Social Connections of Older Australians Project Pilot: Hawkesbury

Main Component: Improving Social Connections for Older People

In 2019, the Social Connectedness of Older People in the Hawkesbury pilot project held three Community Workshops in targeted areas of the region. Over one hundred professionals, volunteers and community members participated. As a result of the workshop outcomes and committee guidance, three strategies were developed:

1. Training of practice nurses in general practice to become Health Connectors
2. Establishment and training for Community Connectors and Community Connector Points
3. Development and promotion of Website Directory - MyHealthConnector.com.au.

Who is Involved?

Health Connectors

Health Connectors are specially trained practice nurses who work one-to-one with patients and carers. They help people to develop their social support networks, especially those people who are vulnerable and at risk of 'falling through the cracks'. This free service is offered in practices across our region.

My Health Connector Website

The My Health Connector website is a free online directory to help people improve their social connections and lifestyle supports. The directory provides information about local health and community services available to support people living in our region. My Health Connector can be used by both services and community members. It can also be used as a resource for Health connectors and Community connectors to promote services available in the Blue Mountains, Hawkesbury, Lithgow and Penrith areas.

Community Connectors

Community Connectors are members of the general population who know what services are available in the community and can share that information with people in need.

Training was provided to support the community be confident to have conversations around social isolation and use the My Health Connector directory as a resource. Community Connectors can be of any background or profession – neighbours, volunteers, taxi drivers, baristas, retail workers. Anyone who has contact with older people and an interest in helping older people can volunteer.

Community Connector Points

Identified community organisations can provide face-to-face or telephone assistance for improving social connections and reducing social isolation of older people in the

Hawkesbury, particularly those without internet access. The Community Connector Points built sustainability for the program beyond the pilot period. You can access a community connector points on the My Health Connector website. The success of this Hawkesbury pilot project has resulted in the program expanding to the Blue Mountains, Lithgow and Penrith LGAs and ongoing in Hawkesbury.

Who is this for? Older people aged over 75 years and over 65 years for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in the community.

Outcomes: In Hawkesbury LGA 11 practice nurses were trained as Health Connectors, 74 community members trained as Community Connectors

From the Patient Experience Surveys participants felt they had improved well-being, less lonely and more connected. As a result they were more willing to join activities. This was despite showing no significant difference post intervention in some measures such as a loneliness and self-rated health.

In 2020 we commenced the Social Connections for Older People initiative in Penrith and Blue Mountains as a part of the Australian Government's mental health response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This initiative aimed to support older people who may be experiencing social isolation and/or loneliness by promoting connections to services and support to improve their mental health and wellbeing. Similar strategies were implemented for these communities.

In 2023 our work on social connection continues to expand with more Health Connector positions and Community Connector Points being offered. The Health Connectors in general practice will continue to have conversations with patients about health issues, especially staying connected.

Organisations-involved: University Wollongong, Aust College Mental Health Nurses, Hawkesbury Council, Peppercorn Services Inc, Hawkesbury Police Local Area Command

Keywords: Loneliness, Social Isolation, Social Connection, Social Prescribing, General Practice, Health Connectors, Community Connectors, Mental Health.

Links: <https://www.nbmphn.com.au/Health-Professionals/Services/Older-Persons-Health/Social-Connectedness-Project>

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