Queanbeyan, Tallaganda & Yarrowlumla Shire (QTY) Bereavement Project

Final Report

A project funded

under

The Caring Communities Program

by the Australian Government Department of Health & Ageing

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31 May 2006

Project commencement date: June 2004
Project completion date: 31st May 2006
Fund holder: Greater Southern Area Health Service
Name of service conducting the project: Queanbeyan Community Health

Executive Summary

QTY Bereavement Project
Greater Southern Area Health Service
Project Manager: Maxine Lloyd
Project commencement: February 2004
Project completion: May 2006

The QTY (Queanbeyan, Tallaganda, Yarrowlumla Shire) Bereavement Project is based in the renamed Monaro Cluster of the Greater Southern Area Health Service. It covers the towns of Queanbeyan, Bungendore and Braidwood and surrounding area. This is essentially a rural area which, at the Queanbeyan end, is adjacent to the ACT. Many services are provided across the border in the ACT and this has the advantage of providing some access to services in a metropolitan area, but the disadvantage of affecting the development of services locally and appropriate to a rural area.

Background

The project was conceived through the Queanbeyan Palliative Care Service because of the lack of a formal bereavement service in the QTY area of the former Southern Area Health Service. Concern was identified that the lack of a follow up service with bereaved clients meant that there was no way of identifying those who might be at high risk of complications in their grief and those who were not.

Current research identifies the importance of knowing who should be offered professional support or counselling and those for whom community and family support only is appropriate. The literature provides a wider perspective by identifying the factors that contribute to the health of a nation. Of particular relevance in this context is the importance of social connectedness to the health of individuals and communities and the detrimental effects of social isolation.

The project brings together principles of population health within a focus of death and bereavement. It has engaged community participation in the process of recognising existing community resources, identifying need and problem solving.

Objectives

The project has two underlying objectives;

- Engage community participation to ensure sustainability; and
- Develop strategies that enable bereaved people to determine and access appropriate support for themselves.

Methodology

In order to engage the community in the project, the project officer visited a broad range of community and health organisations to understand their contact with bereaved people and invite their participation in the steering group. Twenty five people attended the first meeting and nineteen subsequently formed the steering group. To maintain integrity with the principles of community development, evaluation of the steering group process followed a participatory action research approach.

In order for bereaved people to determine the appropriate support for them as they grieve, the community and health professionals need current information about what helps and how to access it. The special collections of *Loss and Bereavement* at public libraries in Bungendore, Braidwood and Queanbeyan and the service directory through *Queanbeyan Contact* provide essential, free information to the community. The pamphlet, *Recognising Grief and Bereavement,* and bookmark, *Know someone who is grieving?,* form another part of these population health strategies to inform bereaved people and the community around them what to expect and suggestions on how to respond to their grief. Satisfaction with the bookmark will be evaluated following distribution.

Community awareness-raising through a direct approach to small businesses again opens up the conversation about death and bereavement in what is often regarded as a taboo subject. Education sessions on grief and bereavement in health facilities supplements increased community awareness with ensuring that staff respond to patients and clients with current knowledge and skill. Evaluation of the sessions through questionnaires indicates considerable satisfaction with the experience. The evaluations also made suggestions for improvement, which have been incorporated into the education packages.

Results

The success of the QTY Bereavement Project lies in its identification of largely unrecognised informal support for bereaved people within the community and bringing these rich sources of care to the attention of health professionals. This includes the everyday contact and informal care that small businesses provide to their bereaved customers. It is hoped that the steering group, reformed to include other interested participants, will provide ongoing community death education.

The project has also integrated its own provision of knowledge and resources within existing community organisations, thus ensuring sustainability of project objectives. Partnerships with local government have enhanced the library services for bereaved people and the inclusion of relevant resources in the *Contact* community directory ensure that they are routinely updated and remain current. Health professional education packages on loss, grief and bereavement have been developed in collaboration with palliative care and allied health services in community health centres, ensuring the ongoing viability of local professional development in bereavement support.

Discussion

Lessons

The QTY Bereavement project undertook to adhere to the principles of capacity recognition, capacity building and sustainability. This is easier said than done and there were two major challenges. The first was time and the second skill.

Engaging productively with any community, whether it is geographical or organisational, requires time and commitment. The project officer needed to be very flexible in order to meet with people at a time that suited them. This involved evening work as well as repeat visits. The process was slow and often frustrating for all parties as they participated in a process that aimed to be genuinely consultative.

Principles of community development that are implicit in the concepts of capacity building and sustainability are a knowledge and skill base in themselves. This is not necessarily understood by funding bodies, policy makers or community and health services. Equity lies at the heart of the process, for example that all knowledge is of equal value. This challenges traditional concepts of power and the meaning of leadership. The project has struggled with the challenge of inclusiveness, for example in the steering group process, and at the same time produce tangible results. The partnership with Braidwood community and the Multi Purpose Service has provided enormous challenges. These include conveying the principles of community development to people who are used to government services deciding what will be provided to, or withdrawn from, an area and who convey some cynicism about processes of consultation. The process of producing the pamphlet in Braidwood has used local expertise in respect of style, format and language that has relevance in a rural area along with expertise within the project on grief and bereavement.

The challenge and struggle of putting equity principles into practice has produced enormous rewards. It has enabled participants to recognise and use their own knowledge and skill in contributing to the project. Participants have incorporated their own learning about loss and grief into their workplaces. The project officer has gained professionally and personally from the mentoring received in community development and the patience of project partners as we negotiated ways of working that bring out the expertise, gifts and talents of all involved.

Major Achievements

The QTY Bereavement Project aims and objectives were set to be achieved within a timeframe of 3 years. It should be noted that these achievements have occurred within the funding period of 2 years. They include:

- Integration of bereavement resources into the public library system
- Integration of a directory of bereavement services into a public *Contact* community directory
- Engagement of the small business community in sharing information about bereaved customers and their support of them
- Provision of education packages for health and community facilities
- Provision of an information package on grief for the community comprising the pamphlet and bookmark. Ongoing resources to be provided by NALAG

- Steering Group involvement in the project and ongoing activities yet to be decided

A Population Based Approach to Palliative Care

Bereavement care is integral to a comprehensive palliative care service. *A Guide to Palliative Care Australia: A Population Based Approach (2005*) encourages specific initiatives that provide evidence of community development or community capacity building strategy in palliative care. The achievements of the project outlined above will build community capacity generally in bereavement support and this will have a flow on effect in local palliative care services.