Caring Communities Program – Project Overview

Organisation: Mid Western Area Health Service (MWAHS)
Name of Project: Helping Communities Care: Volunteer and Bereavement Support Networks
Length of Project: 2 years

Project Summary:

To increase the capacity of rural and remote towns and villages in the MWAHS, a community development approach will be utilised to develop enduring networks of volunteer activity and bereavement support mechanisms for individuals with life threatening illnesses and their carers. The MWAHS and The Cancer Council, NSW will form a partnership to undertake the project; harnessing the skills, knowledge and resources of each organisation and local MWAHS communities. The aim of the project is to collaboratively develop, pilot and evaluate sustainable context specific community development model/s for volunteer activities and bereavement support suitable for the diverse range of rural communities found in the MWAHS.

Project Objectives:

1. To implement a model of volunteer coordination and bereavement support for rural communities, addressing the needs of people with life threatening illnesses, their families and carers
2. To increase the support available to carers through the coordinated use of volunteers, thereby assisting them in meeting the demands of their role as a carer, and provide the opportunity for increased control over personal health and well being
3. To reduce the feelings of social isolation experienced by people with life threatening illnesses, by utilising a context specific volunteer program, which has the potential to enhance an individual's Quality of Life

Project Activities:

- Recruitment of a suitably experienced community development officer and development of operational targets to guide the following activities
- Revision of current volunteer activities and bereavement supports within the rural and remote communities of MWAHS
- Identification of the strengths and weaknesses of the current structures to inform the development of a self supporting community based model for volunteer activities and bereavement support utilising community development principles
- Exploration and formalisation of partnerships with government and non-government agencies
- Raising of community awareness re: the impact of life threatening illness on individuals and their families and the range of services available to support them
- Working collaboratively with partners to develop a self-supporting community based model for volunteer activities and bereavement support
- Trial and evaluation of context specific volunteer and bereavement support models within the range of communities throughout MWAHS:
    - Towns less than 5 000 in population
    - Towns approx 12000 in population and
    - A regional centre with a population more than 30 000 people
- Promote and implement effective volunteer activities and bereavement support across MWAHS
- Report on the outcome of the project to the Caring Communities funding body

Main Message

What was done

- The project has resulted in the development of a model of volunteer support for people with advanced life limiting Illnesses and those caring for them. It recognises death and bereavement as part of the Palliative Care continuum. Volunteers in this model are trained to provide support to clients and carers along the continuum and into the bereavement period.
- Volunteers have been recruited and trained to provide support in the rural community of Grenfell
- Key staff have been identified to advocate for and support volunteers

What has been learned

- Provision of Palliative Care services can be enhanced with the inclusion of well-trained and supported volunteers
- Volunteers require equal consideration as paid staff in terms of support, training and resources

What is useful to other projects/communities?

- The model developed can be replicated within a variety of communities
- Resources developed for the project provide consistency and can be used directly in other volunteer settings.

What have been the benefits of disseminating information about this project

- Anecdotal information indicates an increased awareness of the role of volunteers by primary health care staff, community support groups, and community organisations in the pilot sites
- Primary health care staff and volunteers involved in this project are now able to confidently provide information about Palliative Care
- The investment of time with primary health care staff and volunteers has enabled these groups to act as advocates for palliative clients and their carers

What needs to happen in order to sustain the key achievements of this project

- Greater Western Area Health Service to ratify project recommendations

What resources were developed and their availability to others

- A comprehensive documentation set has been developed to support the model, now available electronically for use by other service providers free of charge
- 800 Palliative Care and Bereavement Support resources have been produced and will be provided free of charge within GWAHS