



Southern Mallee Primary Care Partnership ACHIEVEMENTS

Mental Health First Aid in the Southern Mallee



In 2008, Southern Mallee Primary Care Partnership (SMPCP) funded three professionals from member agencies to become trainers in Mental Health First Aid (MHFA). The training was part of SMPCP's priority area of *mental wellbeing and social connectedness* and in response to the mental health challenges faced by communities impacted by years of drought and rural change.

In 2013, SMPCP funded another two trainers and at least one MHFA facilitator in each of the three Southern Mallee Local Government Areas, delivering standard and youth MHFA to professionals and community members across the catchment.

SMPCP agencies trained to deliver MHFA include East Wimmera Health Service (Buloke Shire), Northern District Community Health Service (Gannawarra Shire) and Swan Hill District Health (Swan Hill Rural City).

Since 2008, local MHFA instructors have delivered approximately:

- 50 standard MHFA courses across the Southern Mallee, training 662 individuals
- 27 youth MHFA courses across the Southern Mallee, training 383 individuals
- 1 teen MHFA course held within the Southern Mallee, training 15 individuals

Courses were delivered across small and large towns within the region including Kerang, Leitchville, Murrabit, Koondrook, Birchip, Donald, Cohuna, Lalbert, Quambatook, Wycheproof, Ultima, Nyah West and Swan Hill.

Mental Health First Aid

MHFA is the help offered to a person developing a mental health problem or experiencing a mental health crisis, until appropriate professional treatment is received or until the crisis resolves.

More information can be found at www.mhfa.com.au.

The 12-hour MHFA course is suitable for all adults. It is recommended as a prerequisite for human service employees. Training in MHFA provides:

- Skills in recognising the issues and symptoms of mental health problems
- Knowledge of possible causes or risk factors for these mental health problems
- Awareness of evidence-based medical, psychological and alternative treatments available
- Skills in providing appropriate initial help and support to a person experiencing a mental health problem
- Skills in taking appropriate action if a crisis situation arises

Positive impacts

One of the many contributing factors to the success of MHFA training in the Southern Mallee has been each agency's commitment to the program. The course has been rolled out to many rural communities and different sectors including education, health and Victoria Police.

Each MHFA facilitator lives and/or works in the Southern Mallee, ensuring they have knowledge of the local community and the Southern Mallee rural context, including mental health challenges at community and professional level. This knowledge adds significantly to the quality of delivery due to the facilitator's ability to connect with course participants. Some of these facilitators have since trained in youth and teen MHFA.

MHFA facilitators have also partnered with service clubs, schools, neighbourhood houses and local government in

planning and providing courses in the community, providing considerable community development benefits.

As the program engaged the community in the planning, courses were well attended. The program also provided a purposeful and positive experience of community for the participants.

The MHFA program delivery within small communities also contributes to strengthening relationships. Participants often develop supportive relationships with others in their community.

Most importantly, the skills and confidence developed through the program enhance the capacity within the community to support someone with a mental illness and their carers/family. Anecdotally, this is abundant evidence that the skills taught are put into practice in the community.

Benefits of Mental Health First Aid in the workplace

MHFA can be delivered directly to staff as part of orientation and ongoing staff development. MHFA training delivered in this capacity can provide staff with skills and knowledge to assist their fellow colleagues and/or clients if and when they are experiencing a mental health problem or in a mental health crisis.

For organisations that provide services to a particular community or target group, MHFA training can be arranged to assist them in becoming empowered to support each other and seek appropriate assistance from local organisations.

Feedback from participants

MHFA enables people to better recognise when someone may be experiencing mental health problems and teaches them how to support someone in a mental health crisis or someone who is developing a mental health problem.

Facilitator Claire Gillen says the MHFA training continues to receive positive feedback from its participants.

“We do an evaluation at the end of the session and participants are telling us that they found the training very interesting, relevant and have learned a lot. Not only do participants learn about the treatments that are available to people experiencing mental health issues and the first point of call, generally the participants are also learning about themselves.”

“The training, which is delivered to community members and people from the workplace, is also helping to reduce the stigma of mental health issues within the community. The more people learn about mental health, the more they understand it.”

“We believe that MHFA should be part of workplace training and staff development – like physical first aid training. As well as learning about the options for treatment and supporting someone who is in a mental health crisis or developing a mental health problem, the training will further develop greater understanding of mental health in the community.”

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The Southern Mallee Primary Care Partnership (SMPCP) is located in north-western Victoria. It is comprised of three Local Government Areas: Buloke Shire, Gannawarra Shire and Swan Hill Rural City (not including Robinvale). SMPCP is an established network of local health and human service organisations working together in an effective way to improve the health and wellbeing of the local Southern Mallee communities.

More information can be found at: www.smpcp.com.au.