

## Heart Foundation Walking—a series of rural case studies

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**Background:** About 7 million Australian's (32%) live and work in widespread, rural and remote places. Rural and remote areas share common traits such as generally older populations, higher levels of health risks and higher rates of chronic disease. Additionally, people living in rural and remote areas have lower rates of physical activity than those in major cities. Research conducted in rural and remote Australia has identified various barriers faced by residents in undertaking physical activity, including lack of time, limited transportation to sporting facilities, social and cultural barriers, and affordability.

Walking is a popular, low cost form of physical activity which is easily accessible to most people, including those in rural and remote areas. Heart Foundation Walking (HFW) is Australia's largest free national network of community based walking groups. HFW engages those least likely to be active including older Australians, people who are socially isolated, and those with a low house-hold income. Walking in groups has the added benefit of social interaction. Our walkers make friends and report increased mental health and wellbeing.

**Methods:** HFW provides a national framework based on a train-the-trainer model. HFW forms partnerships with local governments, health and community services who become Host Organisations. Each organisation appoints a Local Coordinator who recruits volunteer Walk Organisers and trains them to engage with walkers and lead the groups. The Heart Foundation provides a range of resource and merchandise supporting Local Coordinators and Walk Organisers to establish and maintain groups, while also motivating participants through recognition schemes and regular communications. Quantitative data is collected through a national database (n=20,069) and qualitative data collected via participation surveys.

**Results:** HFW currently engages over 20,000 active participants who walk in 1385 groups across the country. The average group is active with the program for 3.4 years, with HFW total retention rates of 98% at 3 months and over 75% after 3 years. This included numerous groups in rural and remote settings across all states and territories. Group specialities include over 50s, groups for culturally and linguistically diverse people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and groups in aged care facilities. This presentation will include case studies of HFW groups in various rural and remote settings including Alice Springs (NT), Mallee Region (VIC), Flinders Ranges (SA), Toowoomba (QLD) and the West Coast of Tasmania.

**Discussion:** HFW provides a sustainable and affordable national framework that engages and supports a range of regional and rural communities to participate in physical activity through establishing and maintaining walking groups. HFW develops long term walking behaviours, and provides social inclusion for isolated individuals and populations.