

A rural community seeks possibilities in addressing youth homelessness

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The Riverland is a low socioeconomic region in rural South Australia experiencing a rising level of youth homelessness. Local service providers have difficulty meeting the need for primary crisis accommodation and addressing the complexity of youth needs. A working party of rural youth service providers developed a community project in partnership with local university researchers in early 2014, to better understand the local issues influencing youth homelessness (10-18 years); to develop useful approaches to address local youth homelessness, and to foster information sharing between service providers. A World Café on youth homelessness in the Riverland was held for service providers and community members as an initial step toward achieving these aims. Primary causes of youth homelessness identified in the region are family breakdowns, domestic violence, intergenerational unemployment, no local homelessness shelter or public transport, and a declining local economy. The youth often have a co-morbidity of mental illness, and drug and alcohol abuse; seeking shelter by couching surfing, camping on the riverbank or living in caravan parks. Consequences of homelessness include disengagement from education and relocation to the city. Additionally other youth are moving to the area from the city attracted by cheap housing and the drug culture. The wider community does not openly acknowledge the youth homelessness problem.

The agencies providing assistance to homeless youth over 16 years of age have no formal process of collaboration. There is no emergency accommodation available for youth under 18 without a legal guardian. The best support for under 16 year olds exists outside the region, however relocation removes youth from support networks, reducing the likelihood of reconnecting with family and education.

The World Café identified seven multifactorial goals including a) *24 hour emergency care*: step down, short and long term housing options; b) a *prevention strategy*: includes early identification, intensive family support and raising community awareness; c) keep homeless youth *connected with their community*: for example activities offered by Headspace, the youth theatre group and Aboriginal youth activities group; d) develop *affordable non-discriminatory housing*: elicit financial support from local businesses, private enterprise and district councils; e) *education focus*: partnership between education providers aims to connect youth at risk with relevant services, and maintain engagement with learning; f) to *formalise interagency collaboration* with inter sectorial meetings, to review referrals and assessments; and g) support the collation and sharing of data to create a *local evidence base*, to inform future funding proposals.

The World Café identified research as a useful evidence-based approach to inform the development of programs and policies to better support rural homeless youth. While there are many challenges meeting the needs of rural homeless youth in the Riverland, there is also a commitment to collaborate and identify possible solutions. The Reconnect program has since received funding to reinstate for 12 months, and the Riverland Community Service Alliance has reinstated its monthly meetings, forming a subcommittee to progress identified goals.

Presenters

Janet Richards is a research assistant with the Flinders University Rural Clinical School in Renmark, South Australia where she contributes to research in the field of medical education and rural community health. She has authored and co-authored peer reviewed articles and presented at conferences in Australia and New Zealand. Janet has a Bachelor of Applied Science in Medical Laboratory Science from the South Australian Institute of Technology and worked as a medical scientist before changing her career direction and joining the rural clinical school in 2009. She has recently completed an Honors Degree in Health Science which explored the role modelling of resilience to medical students. Her research interests include determinants of rural and remote health and assisting rural communities to improve their health services.

Heidi Hodge is Partnership Manager of the Mid North Knowledge Partnership (MNKP), a rural and remote university research hub based in Burra, South Australia. Hosted by the Flinders University

Rural Clinical School, the MNKP collaborates with rural communities, researchers, universities, industry, government and non-government organisations to ensure ready access to locally-relevant research. Heidi is developing a community engagement framework for the Rural Clinical School, to explore how rural universities can meaningfully partner with their local communities in sustainable ways, and in an academic context. Heidi assists researchers with undertaking local rural and remote research, contributes to grant and ethics applications, hosts local community seminars with visiting academics, presents research findings, and provides support to visiting students and academics. Recent and current research she has assisted with includes rural health professional mobility, tourism innovation systems in rural communities, digital participation of older people in rural communities, and the Mid North Youth Wellbeing Observatory. Heidi has extensive experience with rural communities, community engagement, facilitation, primary industries and natural resources, and has lived and worked in the Mid North of SA for over 15 years. She volunteers with several local, State, and national committees, and has recently completed a Graduate Diploma in Professional Communications.