

Heart Foundation Walking—a series of rural case studies

Kyle Schofield

National Heart Foundation of Australia

About 7 million Australians (32%) live and work in widespread, rural and remote places.¹ 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.

Forming partnerships with local governments, health and community services who become Host Organisations, HFW provides a national framework based on a train-the-trainer model to deliver a community based walking program. 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 resources 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.

HFW currently engages over 20,000 active participants who walk in 1385 groups across the country.² 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 50's, 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), and Shoalhaven Region (NSW).

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. Additionally, HFW encourages development of long term walking behaviours and provides social inclusion for isolated individuals and populations.

Community based programs like HFW, can play a crucial step in reducing socioeconomic and geographic inequities in physical activity rates. The following are recommendations³ to support people who experience geographical or socioeconomic difficulties to participate in physical activity:

- Federal Government to invest in the delivery of accessible and affordable evidence-based physical activity programs, such as HFW, to be available to all communities, including those isolated for geographic, socioeconomic, or cultural reasons.
- Design and build local environments that promote safety and physical activity through walking and cycling.
- Build partnerships with local organisations and groups to identify and support appropriate and affordable physical activity options in areas of geographic or socioeconomic disadvantage.

Heart Foundation Walking is funded nationally by the Medibank Community Fund and the ACT Government through ACT Health.

References

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2. Wilson M. Heart Foundation Walking Program Evaluation Report, December 2012.
3. Ball K, Cleland V, Dollman J, et al. Action Area 7: Disadvantaged populations. In: Blueprint for an active Australia. 2nd edn. Melbourne: National Heart Foundation of Australia, 2014.

Presenter

Kyle Schofield graduated from Indiana University with a BA in Chemistry and completed her Masters of Public Health through Flinders University. She began her professional career in the field of medical sales as a Specialist Representative and Manager, before pursuing her passion for work in Health Promotion. In her current role at the National Heart Foundation as National Recruitment Officer, she oversees the promotion and recruitment of Heart Foundation Walking, Australia's largest free network of community-based walking groups. She is also a member of both the Public Health Association of Australia and the Australian Health Promotion Association.