Together we deliver in Golden Plains

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**Purpose**

This paper aims to present the importance of delivering programs, services and health promotion activities in partnership with government and key health agencies in a rural setting. The paper will focus on the three key aspects of the Golden Plains Health and Wellbeing Program; Strategic Direction, Community Group Support and Health Promotion/Service Delivery. The partnerships in the Golden Plains Health & Wellbeing Program will be discussed by highlighting the successes as well as acknowledging the challenges and looking to the future.

**The setting—a tale of two cities**

Golden Plains is a rural shire close to 3,000 square kilometres with a population of approximately 18,000. It is based between the two largest regional centres of Victoria, Geelong and Ballarat.

This means that while the Shire offers a country lifestyle and environment, there is no major township, so residents need to seek services, employment, education and entertainment in the larger centres and are drawn away from their communities.

There are over thirty five recognised communities based in dispersed towns and settlements throughout the shire with most having fewer than 200 people. These communities are typically rural residential in nature which presents unique challenges as many townships have little or no services or infrastructure. An indicator of the lack of commercial infrastructure is highlighted by the fact that only 12 of the 35 communities in the shire have a shop.

There is only one pharmacy, one GP clinic, one dental clinic and one bank—and all of these are in one town in the far south of the Shire. There are minimal community based service providers with a home base in the shire.

Travel is a challenge in the shire with limited and infrequent public transport options. Many families have limited access to a vehicle, as 19.3% of households have only one vehicle and 1.6% of households have no vehicle. The high level of employment outside the shire and limited public transport means that many households are left with no car during the day which restricts community members’ ability to travel to community activities and access services.

There are no post primary education facilities within the shire and this has implications for the provision of youth services and adequate consultation with youth. This is a growing concern as the proportion of infants and children in Golden Plains is higher than the Victorian average with young people aged 17 years and younger comprising almost one third of the population.

The shire is characterised by three waves of new arrivals. The first was the original settlers and land owners. Their descendants are still involved in broad acre farming. The second wave was the soldier settlers with their wives and children. Currently, the shire is experiencing a third wave of population growth with many young families and new retirees moving to Golden Plains.
Since the late 1990s, Golden Plains has been ranked in the top two or three fastest growing council areas in regional Victoria, and generally in the top six state-wide. The majority of this growth has occurred in the small towns and communities in the north and south of the shire as more and more people come from Melbourne and the regional cities looking for more affordable housing and a country lifestyle.

Communities across Golden Plains, particularly those in the high growth areas at either end of the shire, are affected by growth in a variety of ways. Bigger populations mean that better services and facilities can eventually be provided, but they also place pressure on existing services, facilities and the local sense of community. Through community planning and strategic plans for town centres and local environments, communities in Golden Plains are working hard to deal with and take advantage of rapid population growth.

**Commitment to health and community services**

In responding the lack of service provision and coordination of health services in Golden Plains during 2004 the shire, in partnership with key external agencies developed the Golden Plains Health and Wellbeing Program to initiate and integrate planning and service delivery of health and community services with the key objective of enabling residents and local communities to improve overall health and wellbeing.

The Shire and the key partner agencies Barwon Health, Ballarat District Nursing and Healthcare and Ballarat Community Health Centre were successful in obtaining recurrent funding from the Victorian Department of Human Services during 2004 to assist in establishing and maintaining an ongoing Health Promotion initiative actually based within Golden Plains.

In order to achieve the program objective the Shire and the key partners have a commitment to work together to:

- promote wellbeing and prevent and/or decrease future ill-health among residents and communities
- plan and develop health promotion strategies that are informed by and responsive to community needs, issues and opportunities
- improve local services for managing health amongst the Shire’s residents.

The program is divided into three Key Areas covering, community support, Health promotion/applied health services and strategic planning:

- Strategic Directions & Health Planning; The Golden Plains Shire Health Planning Forum
- Community Group Support: Gem of An Idea—Health and Wellbeing Community Grants Program
- Health Promotion/Allied Health Services which are delivered across three hubs through out the Shire and offer a range of locally based health promotion activities and outreach allied health services.

Key achievements of the Health and Wellbeing Program over the last four years have included:

- development of a local Health Planning Forum with representation from key departments/agencies
• commitment to a community development approach in working with the community, project partners and key stakeholders

• Health & Wellbeing Gem of an Idea Grants contributing over $70,000 to more than 80 community based projects

• a fantastic Men’s Cooking Group—Community Kitchen

• increased access to Allied Health & Community Health Services within the Shire. These including diabetes education, physiotherapy, dietetics, podiatry, counselling and community health nursing

• community meals increasing social connections

• Seniors Debutante Ball

• farmgate: distribution of essential information to drought affected farming families

• mental health first aid training to community members

• increase physical activity with walking groups and strength training.

The growth, development and success of this program over the last five years is a testament to the partner agencies, even though at times their can be struggles in delivering programs/services in partnership with a range of service types it can and does dramatically input into the communities and individuals health in a positive way.

**Strategic directions and health planning: the Golden Plains Health Planning Forum—“Improve Health and Wellbeing of people living in Golden Plains Shire”**

With strong commitment from the Department of Human Services the Golden Plains Health Planning Forum was established in 2004. The forum is comprised of the decision makers (managers & directors) from over 20 agencies and government departments from the Geelong and Ballarat Regions. The forum meets quarterly to identify and address issues and barriers affecting health and wellbeing within the Shire across all life stages, such as; social, cultural, economic and environmental.

The key role of the Golden Plains Health Planning Forum is to:

• identify emerging issues and opportunities

• provide data and intelligence on service planning and development

• take action to resolve service system problems and difficulties

• provide ideas for addressing complex issues

• build networks and relationships between service planning and providers

• be a critical reference group in the development of the Council’s Municipal Public Health Plan and Health & Wellbeing Strategy.

Since its inception several forums have been conducted and priority areas identified and actioned, including:
• Improving Youth Services in the Shire—The forum has an awareness raising and advocacy role to improve youth access to health services, secondary and post secondary education and training and employment services.

• Lack of Community Information—How does the community access its information, is information readily available and how can we ensure we are providing relevant information across the ages? Research is currently under way.

• Investigating service planning and provision options to address family violence by looking at the statistics and providing outreach counselling for individual and groups in areas of need,

• Developing community and public transport across the Shire. The Shire with support from key partner agencies was successful in obtaining Transport Connections funding from the Victorian Department of Planning and Community Development. The Program titled ‘Golden Connections’ is an integrated approach to improving access to and increasing the range of transport services in Golden Plains Shire and surrounding communities. The program has been extremely successful to date with a number of achievements such as the introduction of the Rokewood – Ballarat scheduled public transport service, that increases access to medical services, shopping and social activities for those located in the centre of the Shire.

As the Shire’s population grows the Golden Plains Health Planning Forum will continue to bring the regional ‘decision makers’ to the table in order to ensure health and community services are changing with the ever expanding community needs and demographics.

**Community group support: ‘Gems All Year Round!’—Health and Wellbeing Grants**

The Golden Plains Health and Wellbeing Program has a budget allocation that is available to small community groups to develop project ideas that aim to improve the health and wellbeing of their communities.

The Gem of an Idea grants provide up to $500 or occasional larger amounts local to community not-for-profit groups for projects that aim to promote:

- community connections
- good nutrition
- physical activity
- mental wellbeing
- accessibility.

These grants are called the ‘Gem of an Idea’ grants, and are available all year round or until the budget is expended.

A couple of previous successful projects include:

- The MARES (Mothers Appreciating Recreational Equine Support) program. This program was piloted by Haddon Community House, and targeted mothers interested in re-learning horse activities in a supportive and encouraging environment. The program was a roaring success, and the group not only continues to meet but has become incorporated to expand the MARES activities and to seek future funding and fundraising opportunities.
Through the allocation of the ‘Gem of an Idea’ grant, a need was met in the community. The Golden Plains Shire has many horse enthusiasts and I found a group that wasn’t provided for. The positive feedback from this group shows that this is an area that needs attention and can utilise the fantastic equestrian facilities within the Shire. The ‘Gem of an Idea’ grant enabled a group otherwise not represented to be drawn together to provide support and information that previously was not available in this form. Being able to bring this group together was great and it fitted in with the Health and Wellbeing theme very neatly, as it covered the areas of mental health, physical activity and information delivery to better ones self. Catherine Ross, MARES 2008

- Ross Creek Community Welcome Pack. Ross Creek Community Co-ordinators developed a welcome pack for new residents that was more community specific than the Shire kit. It contains information about local groups, the primary school, tourism, community groups and the local environment. The pack was launched at a community barbecue to help further welcome new residents.

- Garibaldi Community Coordinators, Cards & Curry Night, Social Evening—community members got together to enjoy a variety of healthy food & card playing. The aim was to produce a database to form the back-bone for many projects and enable more effective communication for events, projects and information. This function also increased social interaction during winter.

- OM:Ni Men’s Group; organised men’s day trip to the Lake Goldsmith Steam Rally.

Our group was wonderfully assisted by a $500 Health and Wellbeing Grant arranged through the Shire with great help from Jaclyn Reriti, the Health and Wellbeing Coordinator. This support enabled us to hire a 25-seat bus and invite members of other men’s groups to participate. We were delighted that six members of ‘G Men’ (Geelong Miniature Engineering Network) were able to join us on this Lake Goldsmith trip. Two of their members are locals and the other members are scattered around a wide area. Keith Evans, Bannockburn OM:Ni Men’s Group, June 2008.

Since 2005 the Gem of an Idea Grants have contributed an over $70,000 to more than 80 community based projects.

The Gem of an Idea Grants were reviewed in 2008 to ensure that they continued to meet community group needs and are accessible and easy to undertake. As a result of the evaluation the application forms have been streamlined and more publicity generated to ensure all communities across Golden Plains are aware of this funding opportunity.

Health promoting at the local level: Telling Change, Dereel to De’Reel Town!

Dereel is a small rural community in excess of 700 residents, located in the geographic centre of Golden Plains Shire. The central part of the shire is somewhat isolated with limited access to health and community services and economic opportunities.¹

The problems associated with the lack of services and infrastructure in Dereel is exacerbated by the community’s demographics characteristics. For example, at the 2006 ABS Census, a higher proportion of Dereel residents were unemployed than the proportion for all of Australia, and a higher number of people were separated or divorced. The median age of persons in Dereel was 45 years, compared with 37 years for persons in Australia. In the Central West region of Golden Plains Shire, which incorporates Dereel, 4.6% of the population state they need assistance to conduct core activities, compared to 3.4% for Victoria as a whole.¹
Bennita Hough commenced working in Dereel during 2006 with the Health & Wellbeing Program through a partnership arrangement with Ballarat District Nursing and Healthcare. Bennita is located at the community hall two day per week and has driven the evolution of the community over the last three years:

The small community of Dereel has long been identified as a disparate community. There was a great deal of surprise at one community gathering I attended when the population numbers produced (in some recent research) were discussed. “Where do these people hide” was one comment overheard. In 2006 a group of local women with support from the program began have gathered around the community centre seeing it as a place where they felt comfortable to share their issues and concerns. There is a focus on mental wellbeing and an understanding that not everyone within the group has had a comfortable journey through life. It is also a place of learning about themselves in terms of health and wellbeing. The women have now expanded to walking groups, craft sessions, outings and much much more.

Not so the men. Through the centre, local men have been encouraged to organise fishing trips and a men’s shed, but after many years what has brought them together is food and conversation. A community kitchen for men only, has been a great attraction to a small number of men who are now taking it on themselves to bring other men along. The men they are encouraging are those who are alone and who possibly would benefit from a few ‘home’ cooked meals. While we prepare the food and even while eating, there is a wealth of conversation which ranges from the price of fuel to issues around paedophilia and domestic violence.

Over the past twelve months the community hall in Dereel, once empty and under utilised has seen a Seniors Debutante Ball, where seven couples were proudly presented to over 80 family friends and local counsellors’. These women had not been debutante before. The reasons for not doing their debut included not feeling worth it, not being provided the opportunity, not enough money and being the eldest of seven having to stay at home to help. The night provided confidence, pride and a fantastic celebration of community spirit.

2008 also saw the first community end of year BBQ. The BBQ was driven by the men’s community kitchen with support from the health and wellbeing program. Over 150 locals were drawn to the celebration and the community comments speak for themselves:

- It’s great to see the town people get together and have a BBQ and talk.
- Great day—brings back many happy memories—great to catch up with people.
- Fantastic event for all ages.
- Excellent day, well organised, good Christmas spirit.
- We had a great time. Can’t wait for the ‘ho-down’.
- Keep it going—a great turn out.
- Great day, very good idea, hope they have more.
- Great community spirit, will be great to have more.
- I hope this is the beginning of many similar events—a great way to bring the community together. Well done”
- What a fantastic event, the organisers did a brilliant job with catering should be an annual event.
- Just to say, fresh from America relocating to Dereel with my wife (previously from Dereel), this has been a lovely event to get to know the residents of Dereel. The food and warm friendly atmosphere was very
appreciative! The group sponsoring the event did an excellent job, and provided and environment that felt very much of a loving community!! Good job!!

Our first introduction to Dereel hospitality was really great. So happy to be part of this community. Marvellous meal!!

A great day, great organisation—well done.

Wonderful community event with good (great!) food, people and terrifically put together. I look forward to being part of it next year!

The food was fantastic, lovely atmosphere; love to see more of these! Great to see so many ‘Dereelians’ come out and enjoy a great family day.

So what is next for Dereel? The opportunities now seem endless with the community supported by the health and wellbeing program to investigate the possibility of a community garden, or a men’s shed and who knows maybe one day a community house.

As one local woman recently stated “My husband and I moved here to retire and without the centre and the community health nurse I would have moved out long ago. There was just the two of us and we had no social connection to the community. Now it is just fantastic, we have walks, events, health support and have made great friends within our community; the future is looking bright for Dereel.”

Where to from here

With the 2009–2012 Health and Wellbeing Strategy in development it is envisaged that the Shire will continue to build upon the relationships that exist with a wide range of stakeholders in the Ballarat and Geelong regions. There is also a strong commitment to further develop the service hubs across the south, centre and north of the shire to provide a ‘one stop shop’ for community health service provision. This will continue to be achieved by focusing on the Strategic Direction, Community Group Support and Health Promotion/Service Delivery along with our program partners Ballarat District Nursing and Healthcare, Barwon Health and Ballarat Community Health Centre.

In order to continue to move in a positive direction the Health and Wellbeing Program will also look back further, to review the efforts and achievements to date and ensure the personal stories are captured and not just the numbers.

Conclusion

Whilst it can be challenging to work with different organisations due to politics, strategic directions or geographic locations and the invisible lines on the landscape the time and effort invested in partnership development with the support of the Victorian Department of Human Services has been a key to the success of the Golden Plains Health and Wellbeing Program to date.

References

Presenter

Jaclyn Reriti is Health and Wellbeing Coordinator at Golden Plains Shire in Victoria. The program is framed around three Health and Wellbeing Hubs and utilises a community development approach to health promotion. Jaclyn has over eight years’ experience in public health/community development in local government, firstly in a metropolitan council and now a rural shire. Jaclyn has qualifications in natural resource management, community development and management.