

Community Connector network



Project overview

The Community Connector project in Frankston / Mornington Peninsula assumes that isolated older people may feel disconnected, experience a range of barriers, and need some additional support to get involved in local activities and groups.

The project was led by local government positive ageing staff, together with project leadership groups comprising volunteers and members of community groups and service providers.

Project description

The project uses community volunteers to connect isolated residents with existing programs and activities. Volunteers are managed by local council staff.

Project model

- The key step was engaging a vibrant, location-based project leadership group, hosted by local government, comprising:
 - diverse community volunteers
 - members active clubs and groups such as seniors clubs, U3A, Probus, Lions and sport and recreation groups
 - representatives of service providers including neighbourhood houses, libraries, aged services and volunteering organisations.
- The leadership groups had several meetings to brainstorm ideas, followed by time to implement, then to review the programs, over a 12-month period.
- Promotional material and training sessions were developed for community members interested in responding to social isolation and loneliness. Training topics included barriers to social inclusion and correlations between isolation and gambling. Volunteers were given resource kits and information on the effects of isolation on health.
- Training was provided by Frankston and Mornington Peninsula council project officers.
- The project developed policies and role expectations for volunteers (whether as volunteers in their 'home' club or as part of a 'non-aligned' network supported by the project).
- The project also involved a referral process (tested to ensure sensitivity to the individual and fair expectations of the volunteer), and clear sources of referrals, including council newsletters, walk-ins, internet, promotions at the library and word of mouth.
- Targeted education and awareness programs were conducted for clubs and groups about the importance of being welcoming – which in some cases generated specific arrangements for volunteers who accompany new members (for example, offering free entry to events and facilities for volunteers accompanying isolated community members).



- The project lead actively addressed any issues and re-negotiated the welcome for new members when there were any difficulties.

Budget

Total project cost – each council received project funding of \$80,000 each

Project challenges

A clear, ongoing, well-known point of contact was essential for volunteer retention.

To manage the commitment of busy volunteers, the project used time-limited 'assignments' and regular information on events and opportunities in areas of interest to volunteers.

In Frankston and Mornington Peninsula, a council contact point was organised for the initial interview with a community member, and a follow-up meeting where the volunteer would meet the person at a café or at the activity.

Project outcomes

In Frankston / Mornington Peninsula, senior community members trained as Community Connectors, gaining increased knowledge about social inclusion and social isolation, privacy, confidentiality and boundaries, barriers to social inclusion and building relationships.

Community Connectors engaged an average of three people each and referred them to social activities, including accompanying them and encouraging them to attend.

Connectors valued being given information on the issue of social isolation and loneliness and on current programs: 'I saw a huge difference in a 64-year-old man whom I connected to a volunteer position. I saw a difference in how he dressed and talked, and he said to me that I had no idea what I had done for him and the role has saved his life.'

Project sustainability

Participants in the Mornington Peninsula area indicated an increased understanding of the importance of social inclusion for seniors and how this project aims to promote this.

Thirty-three out of the 39 evaluations (84 per cent) stated they were inspired to make changes following the discussion and presentation of materials at the forum.

U3A Southern Peninsula Tutors are now encouraged to have a class assistant to help welcome new members and manage other position requirements.

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