

Don't beat about the bush! Mental Health in Drought affected communities Initiative

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Nadine is the Program Manager of rural programs in *beyondblue*'s Public Health team. In her current role, Nadine develops and implements programs that endeavour to increase awareness and reduce the stigma associated with, depression, anxiety, and related disorders with the aim of creating sustainable changes in rural communities.

Drought, as with virtually all environmental issues and challenges, requires an informed, sustained and interdisciplinary community preparedness and response program, working in concert with the promotion of community health and well-being, and preventative mental health initiatives.¹

In 2007 after several years of drought the Federal Government funded the *Mental Health in Drought affected communities Initiative* (MHDl). The Initiative heralded collaboration between *beyondblue*, the Australian General Practice Network (AGPN) and 42 Divisions of General Practice in Victoria, South Australia, Queensland and New South Wales as a way of addressing the mental health and wellbeing of these drought affected communities.

The key focus for the partners was to work with rural communities to:

- raise community awareness and provide advice on service pathways and support for community initiatives in order to manage the distress of drought at local levels
- provide education and training for business and community leaders
- provide community outreach and crisis counselling.

In 2010 *beyondblue* commissioned an independent evaluation of MHDl. This paper will explore the key findings from the independent evaluation particularly the cooperative relationship between communities, *beyondblue*, the AGPN and participating Divisions of General Practice.

The model of delivery and the activities facilitated as a result of the partnership have enhanced the accessibility of mental health resources and increased the mental health literacy of those in participating rural communities. This is attributed to the role of a dedicated Community Support Worker (CSW) at Divisional level. This is a unique role in that it has specifically focused on localising mental health and provided a tangible link for national, state and local organisations and government agencies to engage, facilitate and integrate authentically with rural communities.

beyondblue's Depression Monitor² data was examined pre-MHDl 2004/05 to assess changes in rural communities involved in the Initiative. A longitudinal study of Depression Monitor data on rural areas from 2004 to 2010 indicates there has been an increase in mental health awareness in rural areas in States that have participated in the MHDl.

The evaluation paints a positive picture of the MHDl being extremely effective in raising community awareness of depression, anxiety and related substance misuse. Robust data demonstrating increased mental health awareness, community capacity or help-seeking behaviour has been difficult to obtain, but there is evidence in the report which suggest that the MHDl did much to progress these bold aims in drought-affected areas.

A full copy of the Evaluation Report can be obtained from *beyondblue*.

References

1. Morrisey, S.A., Reser, J.P. Natural disasters, climate change and mental health considerations for rural Australia. 2007: *Australian Journal of Rural Health*, 15, 120-125.
2. Hight, N. *beyondblue* Depression Monitor phone survey; 2004-05, 2007-08, 2009-10: Melbourne: beyondblue: the national depression initiative (unpublished).