

‘Sowing the Seeds of Hope’—community crime prevention

Gwen Cooke¹

¹Women’s Health Loddon Mallee

Gwen Cooke, project worker and team leader with Women’s Health Loddon Mallee Outreach Service based in Ouyen, has worked in community development in rural communities for over 25 years. For much of that time Gwen has worked on projects to encourage and promote rural women’s self-esteem and personal development. Projects include: the arts, creative writing, personal development, and women’s health and community issues. She is an experienced facilitator of programs for women with depression and or anxiety.

Living in rural communities for most of her life and on farm for the past 25 years has helped Gwen to gain experience in helping small rural communities through community change processes, and through her voluntary and work related involvement in community development, Gwen has become skilled in advocating to the many levels of government on behalf of rural communities.

Since working in the women’s health field Gwen has a greater awareness and is familiar with the complex dynamics of small rural communities where most people wear at least five hats, and where workers can’t get away with only having a ‘professional’ relationship with people in their community.

Gwen was involved in the ‘North West Women’s Expos’ at Walpeup and Birchip; the National Award winning ‘Annual Ouyen Farm Safety Expo’, a three day program for children from 20 schools within a 100 km radius of Ouyen. Other community projects include the Ouyen ‘Naked Rain Dance’; the ‘Annual Mallee Art Show’; The ‘Great Vanilla Slice Triumph’, the ‘Mighty Mallee Music Making Muster’; the ‘Ouyen Vintage Vehicle Rally’; the ‘Mallee Conference’ in Ouyen for women, and rural and remote community capacity building.

... It’s a slow process ... and this is the road we must take to create awareness ... programs that resolve issues of bullying, harassment, sexual assault and violence will be a better outcome for all of us. (Police Sergeant, Victoria Police)

Women’s Health Loddon Mallee (WHLM) Ouyen in north-west Victoria is a non-government organisation working alongside Community Health and other health providers to improve the status of women’s health in the region.

The Loddon Mallee Region consists of 56,965 square kilometres (26% of Victoria), with a population currently reported as 307,405.

Loddon Mallee Region is one of eight rural regions of the Department of Human Services (DHS), and made up of ten Local Government Authorities.

‘Sowing the Seeds of Hope’ (the project) was developed for isolated communities of the Mallee Track, located in North Western Victoria and mainly farming, rural based enterprises. The region is centred on Ouyen (pop. 1061), which is its major service centre, and extends west to the South Australian border. Other towns in this region include Murrayville, Underbool and Walpeup.

The work of WHLM supports women to make choices, promote their social, emotional and physical health, and improve their health and wellbeing.

With offices in Bendigo and Ouyen, 14+ staff and volunteers have a range of skills and expertise across both the health and business sectors, including public health, health promotion, marketing, research, social work, and teaching.

WHLM covers the Loddon Mallee Region of Victoria and contributes to public policy at a local, state and national level to raise awareness of gender equity, facilitate greater understanding of women’s issues and rural issues, and increase opportunities for women.

Eliminating violence against women is one of four key action areas.

Project background

The project was conceived in response to community and professional concerns about violence both in the home and in the schools.

'Sowing the Seeds of Hope' (SSoH) was funded by the National Community Crime Prevention Program—An Australian Government Initiative. The 3-year project was based in the Northern Victorian Mallee and implemented by two part-time workers (1ft.).

The project aimed to work with Mallee Track communities and key stakeholders to facilitate community events, school programs and specific resources to educate about the reality and impacts of family or other violence.

A Reference Group was formed with representatives of Ouyen and Murrayville Police; Mallee Domestic Violence Unit; Country Women's Association; Mallee Sexual Assault Unit; Mallee Track Health and Community Service, Mallee Health Services and Women's Health Loddon Mallee. The reference group developed a comprehensive community education project targeting the Mallee Track communities and addressing 'violence and its impact'.

The drought was having a devastating effect, both financially and emotionally in the communities along the Mallee Track. For some, accessing professional health services in Ouyen is a 120km trip, or a 300km round trip for services in Mildura, further, it is a 5-hour round trip for Murrayville residents.

Ouyen health services consist of Women's Health Loddon Mallee and Mallee Track Health and Community Service, (acute nursing home and hostel care, allied health services, and community based nursing).

The impact of drought was felt across the whole community; farming families, traders and town dwellers. Years of drought layered over the normal vagaries of weather dependent farming fortunes, rural decline and increasingly difficult global market dynamics was exacerbating the stress levels and, coping with the financial insecurity of a farming livelihood increased anxiety and frustration.

In times of drought, uncertainty and insecurity increases, men may turn to alcohol and other drugs in order to cope with their situation which can lead to further family problems including family violence. (Alston 2010)¹

Teachers and parents were observing increased bullying in the school yard and the community.

For people struggling with these issues, living in a family violence situation, not knowing who to turn to or where to go for help, is compounded by living on a farm, isolated from friends, family and neighbours.

Experience from working in rural communities shows that victims of abuse find it difficult to disclose the violence because of fear, embarrassment and shame and are reluctant to talk about their problems, aware of the lack of anonymity in small rural communities.

Family violence does happen. It is hidden and continues within a culture of silence, secrecy and shame.

... Consistent with the literature. all participants shared a common understanding of what they meant by domestic violence. They preferred to call violence in the home 'family violence' describing family violence as any type of abuse towards someone by someone who is known to them, be it physical, sexual, financial, emotional or verbal. Cox et al 2001²

Our way of working

A comprehensive community education program was developed to identify violence in its many guises and the extent of violence at all socioeconomic levels. This method was effective in promoting the message about everybody's rights to be safe; the need for a community effort for cultural change, and support services that are available.

The project design worked within already established cultural and community events and also introduced new experiences and educational opportunities, so there was a sense of the familiar along with additional new

interest. The timeframe allowed for educational themes and tools to be introduced over time in a consistent and holistic way, challenging tacit acceptance of violence in any form.

The project required partnerships with community, business, clubs, schools, service providers and fostered closer linkages between agencies. The participation and commitment for change helped create positive working relationships and a supportive environment for those living with violence, and for those frustrated by elements of acceptance within their community.

Finally, the project encouraged health, welfare and education workers towards more appropriate service responses to disclosure of violence in the community.

The project encouraged a change in attitudes and responses to violence and levels of acceptance of violence; promoted better understanding of what is violence, to lessen the tolerance of violent behaviours, and encouraged respect in the community.

Initially, we planned a focus group to benchmark attitudes of violence and levels of violence. This was unsuccessful due to costs and time associated with travel and the desire for anonymity. Women were reluctant to discuss personal and sensitive subjects of family violence in a group setting. Instead individual interviews were conducted with women.

Promotions

The promotion targeted local pubs, clubs and sporting venues with drink coasters and stubby holders promoting the SSoH messages. However, due to the correlation between alcohol and incidents of family violence it was decided it was inappropriate to continue with these types of promotional products.

We implemented a comprehensive newsletter and media campaign to educate and promote men's family violence programs. Local media were responsive to the articles about issues not often well received in rural communities. Our service was complimented for taking a stand and speaking out about violence.

We engaged men during the White Ribbon campaign. Resources were provided at the Annual Ouyen Farmers Festival Vintage Car Rally where up to 80 cars, tractors, utes and trucks proudly displayed the white ribbons in the Grand Parade. Men wore white ribbons on their chest, hats and their vehicles! The ribbons were handed out throughout the Mallee Track and numerous questions and conversations were had about the meaning of White Ribbon Day.

One unique example of local support was a tradesman who tied white ribbons to his petrol bowsers—and became a 'spokesperson' for the white ribbon campaign. He regularly asks for clean white ribbons—for the bowsers!

It was vital that a slow effective media campaign promoted the community forums held in Ouyen and Murrayville. Although not big crowds, the forums were well attended by men and women keen to work with us towards safer communities.

The 'Silent Witness' display proved to be a highly successful awareness raising tool at all community events, in house programs, and workshops.

This display consists of three life-sized wooden cut-outs of women who have experienced Family Violence. Their actual stories are on the back of the cut-outs. Viewers are deeply affected and often shocked by the women's stories.

400 students at the Ouyen Farm Safety Expo received personal safety information in a show bag, which encouraged an invitation from students for WHLM to visit their school to help issues of bullying.

Children and adolescents

A range of health promotion interventions were implemented, to ensure that the project was inclusive for all ages of children and adolescents living along the Mallee Track. The approach taken to manage the children's, parents and teaching staff's concerns about bullying was modified to best fit the feedback received.

The support of Australia's leading equestrian and horse trainer, Steve Jeffreys and his team were enlisted to visit the northern Mallee with their performance of *'No room for bullies in this Team'*. Steve and his team of riders, horses and dogs demonstrated the benefits of working together, and showed that regardless of the size, shape and breed of his team, their success relies on mutual respect and trust.

Two performances per day at three locations over 100km apart were coordinated and facilitated. That's 3 horses, 2 riders, 2 dogs housed, fed and performing to 1700 students from 17 schools in Ouyen, Mildura and Robinvale!

Children were engaged with to develop, produce and perform a play *'No Bullies Here'* that challenged bullying behaviour and included appropriate messages about assertive and positive behaviours.

PSST (Personal Safety Success Training) is a 6 weekly session program developed by the Mallee Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence Unit. Over the time of the project, 80 young people in Year 5 participated in the personal safety program.

Secondary College art students in Ouyen and Murrayville produced street banners around the theme of saying 'No' to violence.

The issue of self esteem was addressed with girls by facilitating 'SEA Change' a 6 week Self Esteem and Assertiveness Programme for Adolescent Girls.

Lastly, SHARP (Safety Hints for Adolescent Relationships Program) a program provided by the Mallee Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence unit and Mildura police, was facilitated to engage Year 9 boys and girls.

Service providers

Service providers were engaged and connected throughout this project. In particular, service providers working along the Mallee Track, met in order to address united pathways of support for families fleeing domestic violence situations.

WHLM facilitated a video conference 'Skin Deep' for 100 Mallee health professionals, clinicians and teachers to provide insight and skill development into self-harm issues. The conference was provided by Royal Children's Hospital, Centre for Adolescent Health.

Women

160+ women celebrated International Women's Day in Ouyen and Murrayville and were inspired by speakers addressing the underlying message—family violence and community awareness, and were entertained and pampered with massage, sessions for the nails, feet, hands; and belly dancing workshops.

Evaluations from these gatherings indicate a clear increase in community understanding about the definitions of family violence and the services available to assist in family violence issues.

24 women attended '7 Paths to Person Power' an intensive 2-day program covering self esteem, choices, love, forgiveness, competition, guilt, power, integrity, creativity, money, jealousy, truth, control, fear and trust. The workshop outcomes have been positive and life-changing for some.

The Challenges, Choices and Changes program is designed to encourage and improve self esteem through journaling, meditation, understanding anxiety and relaxation strategies. This successful program has led to significant outcomes for 8 of the women involved in the 10 weekly sessions.

'Writing to the Scarecrow' was a weekend journaling workshop at Murrayville. Lead by a skilled writer, the 17 women were encouraged to write for self-discovery, insight and creativity. A number of the women have since had their stories published in the Women's Health magazine *Whealth*.

Over two weekends a creative arts workshop was held in Walpeup. A trained therapist helped women explore self expression, feelings, emotions, conflict and relationship issues, and facilitated workshops throughout the weekend. Using Haiku, a form of poetry designed to convey the essence of an experience in a short format, the

women created unique and energetic evaluations expressing their boosted skills and confidence through visual arts, movement, creative writing and poetry.

A similar program for 8 young people at Ouyen 'Tin Shed' Youth Centre helped them to work through their issues using the creative arts process. The young people were not as outwardly enthusiastic, but some very creative Haiku, poetry and artwork gave expression to the issues they were personally addressing.

We learnt

The most challenging aspect of the program was the development of a range of creative activities and events to illustrate the pervasive nature of violence.

That working on sensitive subjects in small isolated communities—is difficult. Awareness of the desire for anonymity, of not wanting to speak up, created challenges in designing activities that would encourage participation and open contribution.

We learnt that by integrating the events into annual and common experiences it normalised the messages about everyone's right to feel safe, secure and valued in the community and provided opportunity to educate about services available to help.

We learnt that using community engagement to address the impact of violence has long term benefits evident in the heightened public awareness; and attitudes and behaviours of children and adolescents has helped to encourage a culture of peace and harmony in the communities. Sergeant Tony Keely, Victoria Police, Ouyen ³.

A key learning is the value of a variety of activities spreading the message across a broad range of locations. Over the period of the project this was significant in attracting participation across the region. Without a range of locations and workshop designs the project would not have been as successful in sharing the messages about family violence.

Critical to the success of the project were the value of long term relationships and the involvement of trusted community members in the development of a program based on the sensitive matter of family violence. The need to carefully tailor activity evaluations to suit individual communities was emphasised by service providers and reference group. Feedback indicates a strong emphasis on having an enduring and trusted place in the local community in order for people to approach and share personal and sensitive information.

It was clear that incorporating events, using local and trusted community members and a range of locations required different communication approaches to ensure the target groups and most at risk had a high level of participation in the activities.

A Mallee Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence Unit representative said 'Sowing the Seeds of Hope' has helped the community and those affected by family and other violence with improved information and knowledge, the confidence to access suitable services and the appropriate responses to meet their needs for anonymity and safety.

We achieved

A heightened awareness of 'Saying No to Violence', and a culture change of not accepting violence in any form in the community.

A questionnaire survey between May 2006 and May 2008 indicates knowledge of family violence has increased. The proportion of women who think that family violence is 'not common in their community' has decreased significantly, while the proportion of women who think that family violence is 'common' or 'very common in their community' has increased significantly.

Eleven key people from 9 different agencies were interviewed and reported a heightened awareness of family violence in the community. This was based on conversations, observations and an increase in service inquiries plus informal and formal reporting of family violence incidents.

Other significant outcomes include women who have left violent relationships and/or who have made positive changes to their situation through increased knowledge and confidence in utilising support networks.

We have an improved relationship with police through increased support for women in family violence situations. Support is also reflected in their local press police report regularly including messages such as 'violence hurts children too'; or 'controlling' is a form of violence' and other similar type messages.

Police representation on the Reference Group supported significant improvement in information sharing, cooperation, referral and understanding of the different roles, programs and service providers.

Another significant outcome is the success of programs: SHARP; PSST and Sea Change. Schools reported the programs beneficial and noted student behavioural changes.

The most exciting outcome of the project was the development of 'emergency accommodation' for families experiencing family violence. This initiative by WHLM, Ouyen Police and St Joseph's Catholic Church Ouyen was a direct outcome of the seminars, stakeholder and community communication processes.

Comments from community

A Mallee Health worker said:

Overall there's more awareness and willingness to talk about it and health has improved because of the support and the program has reached a broader range of people than you'd normally reach. Because it was over a long time—it's not like a road show that comes in and out of town.

Murrayville police said

people are less tolerant of it now but there are a lot of people still affected—we're in an isolated community here. People have a better understanding of where to go for help and there's a better trust of policemen.

MSA&DV worker:

the SSoH project increased reporting of DV and we've had a lot more people contacting us for information about how to support women in a family violence situation.

A male community member comment:

A few years ago I could walk into the main bar at the pub and hear some fairly derogatory comments—you know the stuff that is about women. There might be a situation where a bloke might make comments about how he 'handles' the missus. In those times I wouldn't 'buy into' the argument, preferring to 'mind my own business'.

From my involvement professionally with the community education project and the project worker I now confidently challenge these negative behaviours. In the pub situation now I will make a point of quietly letting the guy know that his behaviour is not acceptable. Said quietly and with conviction I'm happy to say that when I've had to speak up, the bloke has taken it on board, whereas in the past this would have been quite dicey to say anything.

I reckon that in this community over the past few years I'd say there is definitely less tolerance of bullying behaviour and of family violence.

In men's groups these days I believe they are less likely to give any indication to their mates of unacceptable behaviour and that there are fewer obscure or derogatory comments in the main bar type areas and there's a lot less tolerance of this type of behaviour publicly.

These types of programs must and should be continued. The 'idiots' are definitely being discouraged and I reckon that this type of community education programs help people like me to say 'No! that's unacceptable.'

Sergeant Tony Keely, Victoria Police, Ouyen said:

Generally there is a greater awareness of family violence in the community. Over the past 4 years there has been a marked change in attitudes of not accepting offensive, bullying and violent behaviour.

I believe it's been a combination of good media coverage and community educational programs that has helped increase and strengthen community knowledge in relation to bullying, harassment and sexual assault issues.

I am aware that the Women's Health program has helped a number of women to strengthen their beliefs and knowledge about what is unacceptable behaviour and the program has provided valuable support to women in difficult situations.

The change in public perception is difficult to measure but I believe that media and community education provides a greater understanding and a culture of not accepting violent behaviour in the community.

It's a slow process and this is the road we must take to create awareness. Early intervention and education programs to resolve issues of bullying, harassment, sexual assault and violence will be a better outcome for all of us.

Women's Health Loddon Mallee report increased informal inquiries addressing family violence and an increase in women seeking or receiving family violence related counselling sessions.

Secondary College teacher:

Kids are more aware of their rights, the need to do something, not just sitting back and there are some kids who have definitely benefited—it has brought issues to the surface. A little bit of information is having a ripple effect.

Primary teacher:

What they learnt about boundaries and personal safety and their increased awareness shows through in their daily classroom activities and in the way they interact with each other.

Project worker

'Sowing the Seeds of Hope' has now completed, but the work of saying 'NO' to violence and supporting women continues. My work and involvement in this project has been an insightful journey. I have worked with women along the Mallee Track who have overcome huge obstacles and personal issues while taking control of their lives, so that they can live their life in peace. Being part of their journey has been a privilege for me.

Women's Health Loddon Mallee continues to provide programs for women to build self esteem, confidence health and wellbeing and a counselling and referral service is available.

The school projects are ongoing and integral to the curriculum of the Ouyen Prep-12 College.

Recommendation

Messages about saying 'No' to violence be included in all project activities, events, and common experiences to normalise everyone's right to feel safe, secure and valued.

Who should be responsible for action of recommendation:

Health professionals, service providers, allied health and professionals working with children and adolescents

References

1. Alston, Whittenbury, Haynes (2010). The Social Impacts of Declining Water Availability and Ongoing Drought in the Murray Darling Basin. Short Report.

2. Helen Cox, Penelope Cash, Barbara Hanna, Frances D'Arcy-Tehan and Carol Adams. *Risky Business: Stories from the Field of Rural Community Nurses' Work in Domestic Violence* Aust. J. Rural Health (2001) 9, 280-285
3. Sergeant Tony Keely, Victoria Police, Ouyen: 'Generally there is a greater awareness of family violence in the community. Over the past 4 years there has been a marked change in attitudes of not accepting offensive, bullying and violent behaviour.'