

Banding together to build strength

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- JAMIE CHUBB

It was during a year when the Rural City of Wangaratta was feeling the enormous impact of several local suicides that community leaders began to examine how action could be taken to halt such tragedies.

An outpouring of grief, and a desire to act before more loss was felt, led to the development in 2019 of a program which is now making major headway in building strength, courage and connection among the district's residents.

While it is supported by \$1.2 million in Federal Government funding, the Grit and Resilience Program is being shaped by the community, for the community.

With a consortium of nine local agencies and services working together with four community partners, the program aims to make long-term change by working to understand what drives positive health and wellbeing.

Jaime Chubb, the Rural City of Wangaratta representative on the consortium, stressed that Grit and Resilience was not a council project, but one designed to involve and be led by the entire community.

“Projects like Grit and Resilience can make a difference when locals know that if something happens, there are people who notice, care and check-in - that is a really significant thing,”

she said.

“What we found a few years ago during that period when we had had a number of deaths by suicide was that people were expressing a need to do something.

“People were reaching out, saying, ‘How can we stop this happening?’, and saying they were concerned for a couple of people, but didn’t know what to do with that worry; they didn’t feel equipped to help.

“It wasn’t just service providers, it was the whole community saying: ‘We want to be well’.

“So, as devastating as that time was for us as a community, we felt that trauma and despair people were feeling could be turned into a community approach.

“We have lived through the worst, we know what that looks like, so that made us focus on what could happen in the future.”

On the back of a council youth survey which found that a large number of local young people felt isolated and had no significant adult they could talk to, Ms Chubb said there was a feeling of disconnection within the community.

She said it was important to ensure people in all areas of the municipality could form those important connections to sustain their mental health, so that when they faced challenges they were prepared.

Soon after the project started, the community was confronted by bushfires, and then COVID-19.

“We’ve still managed to maintain momentum in the project, and this is just the start – but the project is only going to work if the community gets involved,” Ms Chubb said.

The Grit and Resilience Program, which continues through to mid-2023 to establish those vital links, is governed by four community partners

– Caz Sammon, John Davis, Ruby Sait and Chelsea Wilson – as part of a consortium which also includes the Rural City of Wangaratta, Albury Wodonga Health, Northeast Health Wangaratta, Gateway Health, Victoria Police, the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, headspace Wangaratta, and the Albury Wodonga Aboriginal Health Service.

Consortium chair Jacki Eckert, who represents Gateway Health, said while the restrictions enforced by COVID-19 had posed some obstacles, it was important for the program to connect with the whole community, including its most vulnerable members.

She said the consortium had made a conscious decision to shift the focus from suicide prevention to mental health and wellbeing.

“It’s taking the illness perspective out of it to focus the community on the wellness aspect,” she said.

Ms Eckert said the key was to create different ways of connecting and including people.

“We want people to feel engaged and welcome to go to events and have an understanding that by participating in that, they build their capacity,” she said.

Ms Chubb agreed: “We know the more connected you are, the more resilient you are.

“This is not just about making sure the services are there – because there will always be a need for them – but helping to ensure more people do not need them.”

It is rare for a community-led program to be granted four years of government funding, but Ms Chubb said it had been demonstrated through the Grit and Resilience Program featuring as a case study in the final report by the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System that such programs should be the way of the future.

Ms Eckert agreed: "Each community is different, and no one organisation or agency or council can do this on their own.

"We need a shared way of moving forward, and that takes everybody, including our community partners and the wider community, to have a finger in the pie," she said.

"Everything involved in health and wellbeing is everybody's business."

Ms Eckert and Ms Chubb encouraged the community to become involved in the program, follow its progress on social media and help ensure everyone was included.

Community groups and sporting clubs wishing to be involved in the program or find out more can contact the team via email - gritandresilience@wangeratta.vic.gov.au

"We don't want to duplicate if people already have some great stuff happening, so we can make sure there's a place for everyone," Ms Eckert said.

* If this media article causes you any distress, phone Lifeline on 131 114 or the Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467.