



Daughters of the West 2020

A rural case study with women in Horsham

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Evaluation of the DOTW Horsham Pilot program was completed by Victoria University Alumni in December 2020.

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The Western Bulldogs Community Foundation acknowledge, recognise and respect the Elders, families and forebears of the traditional lands of the Wotjobaluk, Jaadwa, Jadawadjali, Wergaia and Jupagulk people, and pay respects to their elders, both past and present.

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Daughters of the West Horsham 2020 Evaluation

Introduction

The Western Bulldogs Community Foundation (WBCF) delivers community programs across western Victoria to promote and strengthen community health and wellbeing, social inclusion and diversity, youth leadership and development, community advocacy and positive social change. Daughters of the West (DOTW) is a health promotion program developed for women in the west using a gender-sensitised, place-based, and strengths-focussed framework. This framework incorporates a focus on gender-specific content and delivery whilst identifying and utilising the strengths and assets that can be contributed by participants and their communities as intended to increase engagement, lessen stigma, increase community ownership, and maximise program outcomes.

DOTW is delivered in partnership with local councils and community health services. In past years, the program has been offered across a number of metropolitan and regional locations in the west of Melbourne and greater Victoria, and program evaluations have found substantial improvement in the target outcomes (see below) for these populations.



In 2020, DOTW was delivered in Horsham as a pilot of the DOTW rural package, in partnership with Wimmera Primary Care Partnership (PCP), Horsham Rural City Council, and local organisations and services. The 10-week program began in early 2020 as a weekly face-to-face program, however due to restrictions relating to the COVID-19 pandemic the program was postponed after 5 weeks. The program then recommenced in October 2020 and was delivered in full through an online platform over 8 weeks. The DOTW rural package aimed to promote positive health outcomes and community connection in response to the need identified in recent Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plans (Victorian Government, 2015, 2019) to prioritise place-based approaches for regional and rural communities, due to health and wellbeing disparities experienced by people living in these areas.

The adaptation of DOTW for a rural area and for delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions are explored in relation to these target outcomes. Findings are intended to inform potential future iterations of the DOTW rural package. Information for this program evaluation was gathered through pre-program and post-program surveys and through interviews with key staff members and with participants who attended both the face-to-face and online program. All information provided from these sources was considered in this evaluation, with the exception of one response to the post-program survey for the face-to-face program which was discarded due to inconsistent and unusual responses indicating contradictory answers to similar questions. As the responses were anonymous, it was not possible to seek clarification.

Participant Information

Demographic information for participants of the initial face-to-face program show that the women registered to participate were primarily Australian-born (94.9%) and non-Indigenous (90.7%), consistent with demographic information for online participants (93.3% Australian-born, 86.7% use English as a primary language, 93.3% non-Indigenous). This reflects the Horsham community demographics as ascertained through similar statistics from the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016 census (86.9% Australian-born, 89.8% primarily English speaking, and 98.2% non-Indigenous). Participants were from a wide age range (19-80 years old), with an average age of 50 years for the face-to-face program and 48 years for the online delivery.

Of the 5 sessions delivered face-to-face in early 2020, 30.2% of participants attended all 5 sessions and 61.4% of participants attended 4 or more sessions. Of the 8-week full program delivered online in late 2020, 11.8% attended all 8 sessions and 35.3% attended 6 or more sessions. The face-to-face program also showed a higher registration rate, with 52 women registering to attend; compared to 25 women registering to attend online with 17 attending Zoom sessions. Of the online participants, almost all (93.3%) indicated confidence in using an online platform to access the program with a minority (6.6%) requesting assistance for technology support.

Key Findings in Target Outcomes

Sustained Participation in Physical Activity

A major objective of DOTW is to facilitate sustained participation in physical activity, incorporating increased knowledge, enjoyment, opportunity, and self-efficacy around exercise and related health benefits. DOTW Horsham approached this through engaging a local exercise instructor to facilitate weekly exercise activities and the program was held at the local gym and aquatic centre or the face-to-face program. The strategies to engage online participants in physical activity included; engaging a local personal trainer and gym owner to facilitate the weekly online sessions, creating weekly challenges, and incorporating electronic resources such as Facebook live events and sharing local opportunities for physical activity via the weekly emails to participants. As COVID-19 restrictions eased, the Horsham online participants met in person for group exercise facilitated by the local personal trainer/DOTW facilitator. It was noted that while many of these worked well to facilitate the program and its outcomes, that due to the wide range of physical abilities and exercise comfort levels among participants there would be substantial benefit in having 2-3 exercise instructors so that exercise could be tailored to different groups. This is the approach that is generally implemented in the DOTW program and confirms that in a rural setting, offering exercise variations is important.

A prominent theme in survey responses and in interviews with participants was an increase in physical activity because of DOTW. A more positive attitude toward physical activity was also evident, as women spoke to finding value in the judgement-free opportunities and the challenge of the exercise portion of DOTW. This was found for participants who entered the program from a wide range of initial physical activity levels. The welcoming environment was noted to be a major contributor to this, as was the skills of the Horsham facilitator (as reiterated by staff members). Several participants reported planning to continue their physical activity in an exercise and social group coordinated by the program facilitator after conclusion of DOTW at the local gym. After the online program, the majority of respondents rated their physical activity levels as 'about the same' or 'more active' than the beginning of the program, with 50% increasing their activity. The online physical activity challenges were reported to be motivating by the majority of respondents.

"We're all meeting ... we're doing half an hour of exercise and then having lunch together. I think from that, perhaps a lot of the people out of our group might take up exercise more regularly" –

Horsham DOTW participant

Connection to Community

Social isolation and loneliness are associated with poor health and wellbeing in many aspects, including but not limited to mental health concerns, greater stress, cognitive concerns, reduced health behaviours, and premature mortality (Fried et al., 2020). DOTW aims to help women mitigate this health risk and improve their quality of life by fostering increased social connection, celebration of diversity, and an increase in knowledge and opportunity for local community programs and organisations.

“Human beings, we’re not meant to be alone. We were tribes, . . . we’re meant to be in groups.” – Horsham DOTW participant

Prominent themes in feedback from participants in this area included the benefits of the social opportunities of the program and feelings of connectedness. Whilst pre-program experiences of isolation and loneliness were varied in severity and impact (e.g. exacerbated by disability), a common theme among participants interviewed was value in the way that DOTW **‘brought women together from all walks of life’** who they felt they wouldn’t have had the opportunity to meet otherwise. The DOTW program t-shirt given to women as part of the program was prominent in discussions about feeling connected to other participants through a shared purpose in joining DOTW. In relation to this social opportunity of DOTW, the majority of survey respondents after the online program indicated that they had made new friends as a result of DOTW, suggesting that this connection will be fostered beyond the conclusion of the program.

[I] was ever so socially isolated ... this literally keeps me alive!” – Horsham DOTW participant

In relation to connection to Horsham and its services, organisations, and opportunities, the majority of participants shared that they knew more about local health services and support available to them as a result of DOTW. After the face-to-face program, 100% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they’re more aware of how to connect with others in their community, and 80% indicated they were more aware of different types of community activity in Horsham. Survey responses indicated that online participants had not developed as strong of a connection to their community and local council, with most responses related to feeling ‘not sure’ about whether they knew of opportunities to be involved in their local community, and disagreeing that they had increased knowledge about their council area. It is noted that this is gathered from a small data set, and that in the interviews some shared they felt very knowledgeable about their community before the program commenced, which may give possible context to the results about local council area knowledge. It is also important to acknowledge that whilst the program was being delivered online, both metropolitan and regional Victoria were facing lockdown restrictions impacting on community activities, which may have affected the promotion of local options for community engagement.

“The link was that we committed ourselves to do something. And everyone did it.” – Horsham DOTW participant

Mental Wellbeing

Fostering good mental wellbeing is another core aspect of the DOTW program, which aims to reduce stigma, encourage literacy in mental health, and to learn strategies to improve one’s own mental health as well as having skills to support others. Education sessions on mental health and alcohol use were delivered as part of the education portion of DOTW Horsham.

After the face-to-face program, all survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their knowledge of mental fitness increased through their participation in DOTW. Women shared that DOTW contributed to a more holistic

and intentional approach to mental wellbeing, in which mental wellbeing became a higher priority and nutrition, exercise, and social connection were all recognised for the important roles that they play. Alcohol use was also discussed as a common maladaptive coping strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how the education session on alcohol habits helped to reframe drinking and cut down on total consumption related to this.

An evaluation on the DOTW program 2020 (including participant responses from the seven local government areas involved) has been produced in collaboration with Victoria University and further exploration of the overall cohort data has been reported via a K-10 scale pre/post. Due to smaller sample numbers in each LGA and not matching data sets pre/post, the individual data for DOTW Horsham is not available.

Positive Health Behaviours

DOTW encourages sustained positive health behaviours, aiming to facilitate this through increases in participants' health knowledge, confidence to engage in healthy behaviours, and local opportunities for program and service engagement and uptake of recommended screenings. This outcome is targeted by the cumulative effect of the DOTW education sessions, physical activity sessions and opportunities, and environment designed to foster confidence in this area.

The perceptions of one's own health knowledge held by participants was found to substantially increase as a result of DOTW. 100% agreed or strongly agreed that DOTW was relevant for health needs of women in rural communities, and 100% agreed or strongly agreed that their knowledge of mental fitness and a healthy balanced diet increased through their participation in DOTW at the conclusion of the face-to-face program. All women interviewed shared sustained positive health behaviour changes in the intermediate term (4 weeks post program). These changes were primarily in improvements to exercise and diet, as is aligned with survey responses collected. The opportunity to continue to participate in a group exercise program after conclusion of the program was welcomed by many participants, though it is important to note that some women were reportedly reluctant for DOTW to end and were unsure of the best option for them to proceed with a program after this, indicating that promoting sustainable pathways into the local community is important for the rural context. Many women discussed changes that they have made at home, such as eating vegetarian food some nights per week for greater variety in meals and ensuring that they engaged in daily exercise.

"I thought all of the subjects covered in it were fantastic and really broad. It really covered a lot of different health and wellbeing aspects in our lives, which I thought was really beneficial. I think that this program should be available to everyone, all year round." – Horsham DOTW participant

Confidence and Empowerment

DOTW takes a gender-sensitised approach in the aim to enhance the confidence and feelings of empowerment for women in the community. The DOTW program facilitates this by intentionally focusing on a safe, welcoming environment to encourage engagement with program content and opportunities. Gender equity content is also incorporated into the program in an accessible way, primarily focused on gendered stereotypes and the opportunities for individuals and communities when these stereotypes are identified and challenged, in the celebration of diversity, and with an 'inspirational woman' sharing her story as the guest speaker for a weekly session. 96% found the gender equity session useful and 91% learnt something because of the session.

After the face-to-face program, 100% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they had a better understanding of cultural awareness and the value of diversity as a result of DOTW, reflecting a shift in knowledge and perspective in this space. This also relates to the aim of DOTW to allow women of all backgrounds to feel valued by their community, which was discussed in the interviews as a significant result of the program.

"You felt unashamedly accepted" – Horsham DOTW participant

In relation to individual self-confidence and empowerment, participants reported feeling more empowered to try new things throughout the interviews, further evidenced through discussion of the new health and social behaviours commenced during and after DOTW. However, surveys after the online program reflected that respondents were primarily 'unsure' whether they felt more confident. This discrepancy might be attributed to different understandings of what 'confidence' entails, different individual experiences of DOTW, or further consideration given to changes in confidence throughout the interview experience. Intergenerational connection was also noted by participants and staff to be present and valued throughout the participants' social experience, with one woman summarising, ***"A lot of the younger people were interested in what us oldies had to say, because no one had ever said it to them before"***. Having DOTW as a space designed and tailored for women was noted to be important in helping participants feel safe, welcome, and free from judgement, noted explicitly in feedback for the online portion as being a major factor in assisting women to speak with confidence.

"It really has been life-changing" – Horsham DOTW participant

Considerations for a Rural Context

This pilot allowed for many considerations, adaptations, and learnings for the DOTW rural package, to adapt the metropolitan and regional DOTW program for a unique rural community. Interviews with key staff members from WBCF and Wimmera PCP and feedback from participants of the face-to-face and online program were also used to explore these aspects of the pilot program. Major themes from this data included the importance of strong partnerships, responsiveness to community needs, and the benefits of face-to-face delivery.

Strong Partnerships

Staff members shared the benefits that they saw in the presence of strong partnerships throughout the program, which facilitated the planning and delivery of DOTW for Horsham. These partnerships were characterised by skilled and knowledgeable staff members and key contact points, effective communication, and strong relationships with key community venues. Staff from both the WBCF and from Wimmera PCP spoke about the contributions of each facet of the partnership as utilising existing strengths. In these interviews, it was acknowledged that major contributions from WBCF could be offered through the solid foundation, knowledge, and resources relating to delivering DOTW as developed through past successes with DOTW and similar community programs, as well as the strong brand of the Western Bulldogs. The advantages provided by Wimmera PCP's involvement in DOTW Horsham were discussed as the strength of the skills and knowledge of staff and their established community knowledge and relationships. These strengths were used to promote the program through local health services, engage community groups and organisations, arrange for relevant and skilled local speakers, and provide Horsham-specific information relating to the health education session each week. It was noted that some organisations were more uncertain about becoming involved or contributing to DOTW, which was attributed to the challenges associated with a pilot program and was anticipated would be eased with subsequent iterations.

"It's been one of the best projects I've worked on" – DOTW Horsham Program Coordinator

Community Responsiveness

Adapting DOTW to be responsive to community needs was established as a crucial factor in facilitating a successful program. DOTW Horsham was developed and implemented using a place-based approach in collaboration with community leaders and stakeholders from a range of contexts (including from a sports club, an Aboriginal cooperative, and women's support organisations) to allow it to best meet community needs and to be as accessible as possible for local women. Relationships with community groups served to promote the program and engage traditionally 'hard-to-reach' or vulnerable populations, as they could participate alongside trusted community workers who also registered for the program.

Benefits of Face-to-Face Delivery

A prominent theme in the findings was that DOTW Horsham was held in very high regard, with participants and staff sharing great pride in a program that was valued greatly. Whilst this was evident for both delivery forms, it was particularly so for the face-to-face program, which was reported in interviews and surveys to have benefits of: stronger community context, varied social opportunities, and greater accessibility. Feedback indicated that the in-person discussion of the week's topic, and the information given by local speakers each week (as opposed to the speakers for the online program who were not able to participate in this place-based framework) facilitated a stronger connection to the local community context. Participants also indicated that the face-to-face program also offered opportunities for motivation and incidental social connection that could not be provided through an online medium, though online delivery still allowed for social connections and friendships to develop over the length of the program. Staff worked to maintain community connectedness through DOTW Horsham by having 'breakout rooms' for DOTW Horsham participants to connect in small groups after each general education session, which were noted to provide a benefit in creating a small and welcoming space for each participant to speak with confidence. Participants and staff shared their appreciation that the online adaptation allowed for DOTW to safely recommence when the face-to-face program could no longer continue due to the pandemic.

"I think the community really embraced it" – DOTW Horsham participant

Face-to-face delivery was also considered in relation to accessibility of the program as compared to the online delivery required due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. Whilst in some respects online delivery removes barriers (such as the requirement for transport and travel time), it also creates different barriers (such as uncertainty and reluctance to use an online platform, factors of privacy, and the need for IT skills and equipment such as laptops and reliable WiFi) which were discussed as contributing factors in non-registration from a participant's perspective. WBCF offered IT support to potential participants to reduce these barriers to participation. It was indicated that, around 25-30% of face-to-face participants felt able to participate in an online program after being offered IT support, which suggests that in this context face-to-face delivery is preferred when possible.

"When we had the opportunity to come back online, I was really excited. It was something to look forward to each week because we were so isolated, so it gave you that little light at the end of the tunnel each week to know that at least you're going to be connecting with people on a screen" – DOTW Horsham participant

Conclusions and Recommendations

There is clear evidence that DOTW Horsham delivered significant benefits and opportunities to participants and their community in the five target outcome areas: sustained participation in physical activity, connection to community, good mental wellbeing, sustained positive health behaviours, and enhanced self-confidence and feelings of empowerment. It did so in a place-based framework for a rural context, whilst navigating the COVID-19 pandemic and resultant disruption to the planned program.

Participants reported an increase in physical activity, and a more positive attitude towards exercise which may facilitate long-term and sustained change in this area. Many participants planned to continue beyond the conclusion of DOTW with a local exercise and social group.

Feedback showed that participants developed a stronger connection with their community and increased their community knowledge most effectively in the face-to-face delivery of the program. Knowledge of local health services and support was increased through the online delivery of DOTW. In all respects, participants found immense value in the social connection and diversity of DOTW whilst feeling united with a common purpose (and by the Western Bulldogs jersey). The majority of women reported making new friends, suggesting a sustained reduction in social isolation.

All respondents saw an increase in their knowledge of mental health, discussing a shift toward a greater understanding of the interconnectedness of physical activity, diet, social connection, and mental wellbeing. Women also reported health behaviour changes related to mental wellbeing, stress management, and alcohol use.

Women reported significantly higher levels of health knowledge than at commencement of the program, including greater knowledge of local health services and support. Positive health behaviour changes were reported by women as relating to dietary changes, increases in physical activity, greater awareness and prioritisation of mental health, alcohol use reduction, and social connection. Many of these had been reported to be incorporated into the women's regular routine, indicating greater likelihood that these will be sustained over time.

A better understanding of cultural awareness and the value of diversity was reported by all participants. Intergenerational connections were evident and were valued by women in the program. Whilst survey findings suggested that participants were 'unsure' about a change to their level of confidence, interview information suggested that women did feel safe, welcomed, and empowered to try new things during and after the program.

The place-based approach used to adapt DOTW to a rural context allowed for many factors that facilitated these benefits. Key aspects were found to include: strong partnerships in which skills, knowledge, and community relationships could be applied effectively; responsiveness to community needs as established through comprehensive community consultation; and benefits of face-to-face delivery as applicable to greater community context, incidental socialisation opportunities, and increased accessibility.

Following these conclusions, recommendations for future iterations of the DOTW rural package are made as follows:

Program Structure and Participant Information

- Delivering the program face-to-face was indicated as a clear preference by participants and staff, with the understanding that this is dependent on health and safety considerations around COVID-19.
- If delivering the program online, further accommodation for accessibility issues may increase the inclusion of vulnerable women in DOTW as aligned with the WBCF aims. This particularly relates to material and financial barriers, which could be addressed by considering loan devices, sharing information about publicly accessible WiFi, partnering with local organisations to offer well-equipped spaces, etc.
- If delivering the program online, promotion of the program through community organisations, health services, and local media may increase registration rates and participation from women in the community.
- It is recommended that for future programs, comprehensive community consultation with a range of community leaders should be repeated to ensure the program is effectively tailored for the community setting.
- Locally-based speakers were greatly valued and appreciated in the program due to their links to the community and their skills and knowledge of community relevant information. They were noted to have substantial potential to reduce barriers to services due to their accessibility and the potential for informal discussion to reduce uncertainty and increase knowledge. It's recommended that locally-based speakers and facilitators continue to be sought where possible.
- Some women were unsure about how to best translate their health behaviours and community engagement after the conclusion of DOTW, and reported their desire for a more ongoing group to continue and build upon the momentum of DOTW. To this end, it is recommended that the transition out of DOTW be considered and discussed with participants, with community-based opportunities (e.g. an exercise class or a walking group) to be clearly presented for continued engagement with positive health behaviours.

Sustained Participation in Physical Activity

- The skills of the DOTW Horsham facilitator in creating a welcoming and motivating environment whilst linking participants with further opportunities in the community was found to be a major factor in fostering positive thinking and behaviour change around physical activity. It is recommended that experienced and local facilitators continue to be sought where possible.

- It is recommended that 2-3 exercise instructors be used for the exercise portion of the face-to-face program to allow the exercises to be tailored to different groups of varying physical ability and confidence.

Connection to Community

- It is recommended that the merchandise containing the branding of the Western Bulldogs and their partners continue to be provided due to the clear evidence that this facilitates engagement and connection with the program, other participants, and by extension, the community.
- It is recommended that if DOTW is delivered online, that further consideration be given to methods of maintaining and strengthening the place-based framework. It is recommended that the community-specific 'breakout rooms' continue to be used and the weekly emails with community-relevant information continue to be sent, with potential for further strategies such as engaging local speakers for the education portion of the program.

Mental Wellbeing

- The holistic framework of mental wellbeing incorporating diet, physical activity, and social connection was valued and applied by participants. It is recommended that this continue to be used without change.

Positive Health Behaviours

- It is recommended that development and delivery of DOTW continue the strong focus on a welcoming atmosphere and a community-responsive program, as these were found to contribute to increased health knowledge and confidence to apply this knowledge.

Confidence and Empowerment

- No recommendations for change were identified, though it is again recommended that the focus on a welcoming atmosphere be maintained due to the influence of this on participants' engagement and confidence.



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