DIGITAL CONNECTION FOR SENIORS

CENTRAL VICTORIAN PRIMARY CARE PARTNERSHIP CASE STUDY

Digital Connection for Seniors partners

- Central Victorian PCP
- Cobaw Community Health
- Freelance Volunteer (Andrea Darcy)
- Gisborne Men's Shed
- Goldfields Library Corp.
- Kyneton Community House
- Lancefield Neighbourhood House
- Macedon Ranges Health
- Macedon Ranges Shire Council
- Zonta Club of Kyneton

BACKGROUND

Macedon Ranges Shire is a rural local government area in central Victoria with a population of more than 46,000 people. Macedon Ranges Shire has an older population compared to Victoria and it is projected that proportion of MRS residents 65yrs and over will increase by 10.5% [1].

The physical distancing required to slow the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has seen an increase in the reliance on digital platforms that enable people to socially connect, keep updated on government directives, as well as attend medical appointments, online shopping and interact with online hobbies and support groups.

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index shows a digital divide, where older people are falling behind younger people in their capacity to access and make use of the internet. People aged 65 and over are among the least digitally included groups in Australia, particularly if they are women, on lower incomes or not living in a major city[2].

LOCAL NEED PUT INTO ACTION

Through the local pandemic emergency response it was identified that there were a number of local programs to support older people to become digitally connected. It was agreed that this program needed to be adaptable in this new physical distancing environment.

CVPCP brought together all the stakeholders to provide a more coordinated shire-wide approach. This included:

- identifying the funding and program opportunities for Macedon Ranges residents over 65yrs (*Be Connected, My Aged Care, Aurous Plus*)
- understanding the digital need in the community (participant survey)
- a communication strategy to reach those people that are not digitally connected
- setting up an expression of interest and referral process for the community

The Macedon Ranges Shire Council (MRSC) agreed for the *Recovery Operations Centre* (set up for the Covid-19 pandemic) to manage the intake and referral for this project. It was essential for success as the intake needed to be a trusted local organisation for this target group.

> *My family are too quick and impatient to teach me*
>
> *I've purchased a device and have no idea how it works*
>
> *Delighted to read in the paper that there was help*
>
> *Project participants*

- **Central Victorian PCP:** brings together stakeholders and provides the backbone support

- **Be Connected funded partners:** digital mentors and loan devices
  - Goldfields Library Corp
  - Lancefield Neighbourhood House
  - Kyneton Community House

- **Cobaw & Macedon Ranges Health:** health promotion expertise, access to vulnerable older people through the community social support program and pool of volunteers to support project participants with accessing funding sources

- **Gisborne Men's Shed:** expertise in communicating and reaching older men

- **Macedon Ranges Shire Council:** access to vulnerable older people through the home support packages, support programs and seniors focused networks. The Council is the intake and referral point and actively promotes the project through other local COVID-19 inquiries

- **Zonta, Club of Kyneton:** advice and promotion

- **Freelance volunteer (Andrea Darcy):** Background research (funding options, mapping infrastructure) project plan and piloting intake role

Highest response from the advertisement in the local paper - highlighting the importance of print media for this cohort

DEMAND (3 weeks)

- 25 inquiries
- 21 have gone through intake process

UNDERSTANDING THE NEED

There have been requests from residents aged from **65 to 90 years**, with a broad range of digital literacy. The eligible participants, so far have requested digital mentoring and do not require support to purchase or loan a device.

Their reasons for seeking assistance with digital literacy included:

- moving and expanding their business online
- contacting family/friends over online platforms such as Facebook
- Using Zoom for church or online courses eg carers course
- finding and listening to podcasts
- internet banking/shopping
- learning how to use email
- applying for jobs.

*"Many expressed a degree of **loneliness** and social disconnection because of COVID - usual community activities not running and family at a distance. They all wanted to share their challenges outside of [this project] - poor health, caring for a partner with dementia, missing family etc.*

Betty is a local resident who is digitally connected to family, friends and grand-daughter in Canada

Understanding their broader challenges made the discussion around improving digital skills a positive one - it gave them a sense that they could take back some control and they weren't alone in needing digital mentoring." (Andrea Darcy, intake coordinator)

Gaps identified are a lack of brand awareness of the national *Be Connected* program and choice of devices. Most people have received a device from family or purchased an inexpensive phone, without consideration of what is right for them. This project is looking at developing a resource to advise older people on device selection based on ability, needs and affordability.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Council will be able to continue resourcing the intake and referral process through the State Government *Working for Victoria* initiative.

The scope of this project has been contained to over 65+ to align with the funding opportunities. However, we have learnt through the enforced home schooling that there are also young families that do not have access to the internet, either due to economic or geographical barriers.

There are also plans to spread this work across the CVPCP catchment in Mount Alexander and Central Goldfields.

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[1] Victoria in Future, 2016, Department of Environment, Land, Water & Planning
[2] The digital divide: small, social programs can help get seniors online, The Conversation, https://theconversation.com/the-digital-divide-small-social-programs-can-help-get-seniors-online-99082, accessed 23/06/2020