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Local Residents Embrace Mental Health Training to Support Communities Affected by Disasters

More than 1,100 residents across the Blue Mountains, Hawkesbury, Lithgow and Penrith areas have received mental health training to support people in crisis.

The training is funded by Wentworth Healthcare, provider of the Nepean Blue Mountains Primary Health Network, as part of the Federal Government's response to the 2019/20 Black Summer bushfires. The skills learnt are helping ordinary community members respond appropriately when they find themselves supporting people in distress or crisis.

Multiple disasters including the bushfires, floods and COVID-19 have meant that many people have found themselves having unplanned difficult conversations with people about their wellbeing.

Wentworth Healthcare CEO, Lizz Reay, said "After the 2019/20 Black Summer Bushfires, we consulted with our community members and stakeholders to understand how to support our communities and our frontline workers. It revealed a great need for further training, particularly in Mental Health First Aid (MHFA), Accidental Counsellor and Trauma Informed Care."

"To address these needs, we engaged Lifeline Central West to deliver Accidental Counsellor Courses across the region, including Yamayamarra Aboriginal Accidental Counsellor, a specialised course to understand how to better support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The courses teach community members and recovery workers appropriate ways to identify and respond to someone who may be experiencing distress or crisis and refer them to additional support," she said.

"Yamayamarra also highlights the importance of understanding cultural backgrounds and beliefs while supporting someone in need."

Lifeline Central West's Recognise, Respond and Refer training focuses on increasing the skills needed to respond effectively to people in their community. This means that the community can continue to support each other, long after recovery workers and disaster support services leave the area.

"There can be some hesitancy in helping when someone discloses their struggles for fear of saying the wrong thing or not knowing how to handle the situation. Over 90% of participants said they wanted to improve their communications skills with people in distress. Almost all said they had achieved this in post-training surveys, including how to ask someone directly about suicide and respond safely regardless of the answer. These workshops combat that hesitancy by empowering people with the knowledge and skills needed to ensure people are supported when they reach out," said Ms Reay.

Since these workshops were rolled out, a total of 1,166 local residents have attended 82 workshops (Accidental Counsellor or MHFA). Participants to date have been from a range of professions and backgrounds, including health professionals, education workers, administration and support staff, community service workers and other diverse jobs including a plumber, kennel attendant, tour guide, Corrections Officers, real estate agents and first responders.



“The workshops are really changing perspectives around mental health, removing some of the stigma that still remains, correcting misinformation, and improving overall mental health literacy,” said Ms Reay.

Lifeline Central West CEO, Stephanie Robinson said that they have been delighted to partner with Wentworth Healthcare to deliver the workshops across the region.

“The workshops have been embraced by community members who are the everyday support on the ground in communities that have been impacted by the events of recent years. Assisting communities to become connected, more resilient and able to continue to be able to recover in a community that has Accidental Counsellors dispersed amongst them multiplies the opportunities for support in people’s moment of need.”

Ms Reay acknowledged that the workshops would not have been possible without the assistance and dedication of local community organisations.

“We would like to thank the Neighbourhood Centres in Springwood, Winmalee, Blackheath, Lithgow and Richmond, Hawkesbury and Lithgow Councils, and other organisations including Peppercorn and Catholic Care, for hosting the workshops and contributing to their success,” said Ms Reay.

Wentworth Healthcare is also supporting other free community Suicide Prevention training in the region through additional funding sources. Nearly 200 people have attended either Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) or SafeTALK Suicide Awareness Training to help people at immediate risk of suicide. For more information about Wentworth Healthcare training opportunities, visit www.nbmphn.com.au/Workshops-Events