

Stories of active volunteering

Social Support Groups – Case studies

Social Support Groups can operate from the same venue every week, or groups can go on regular outings, or they can be a mix of outings. With the support of volunteers, groups can offer their clients a wide range of activities and options.

Empowering clients

The fifteen Social Support Groups run by the City of Whitehorse are empowering clients to plan activities, ensure affordability and participate in risk assessments for the programs.

This is regardless of the clients' cultural background, their English-language proficiency or whether they are experiencing dementia.

After reviewing their service to see how they could best support a wellness approach in the Social Support Groups, the key recommendation was the desire to respect '*clients' rights to make their own decision and lifestyle choices*'. The team developed and implemented Service Principles that balance risk-management with flexibility and dignity of choice.

Clients are actively involved in planning activities and meet every two months to develop a schedule of activities. They ensure that the activities are affordable, check staff availability, and assess general feasibility. A schedule is then produced for each group, allowing for possible changes in mind, mood or weather.

The Mountain View Cottage where groups meet is bright and beautifully decorated, with fresh flowers, new garden settings and colourful cushions throughout. More importantly, there is no separation between staff and client areas, and few office spaces. Clients can choose between three outdoor areas, a quiet room, an arts room, a domestic kitchen and a commercial kitchen to prepare meals, and meeting areas for activities.

All fifteen groups are now at full capacity and the staff form a cohesive team, dedicated to a person-centred approach that builds on clients' and staffs' strengths and clients' wishes.

While this could seem costly, it has in fact enabled the programs to achieve efficiencies and more importantly, increase client satisfaction and introduced new programs with the same budget.

For more detail see: [Mountainview Cottage - Building culturally inclusive social support groups](#)

Opening up to new partnerships and new ideas

The Manningham Men's Shed embarked on a small project to offer an eight-week experience to a local Chinese group, introducing them to the shed's resources.

Initial reluctance from some of the Men's Shed members, struggling to adjust to the growing Chinese community in the eastern suburbs, quickly dissipated. According to the Men's Shed Coordinator, meeting men from the Chinese community '*definitely changed the dynamic. Now people help each other out, the more able help the less able. And we're learning Chinese as well!*'

After the 8-week program, four of the Chinese men stayed and an asylum seeker from Malaysia also recently joined the group. '*English can be minimal*' the Men's Shed Coordinator explained '*but all like the blokey, sort of 'sheddy' environment*'.

This partnership has provided quantitative and qualitative benefits for all new members and better inter-racial relationships with local residents. The Men's Shed has also formed a partnership with the local secondary school, which has a number of bicultural and bi-lingual students.

The Men's Shed has also reported on the benefits of introducing new activities which allow people to bond and participate without requiring a common language - such as chess: '*Chess has been something that has brought people together in our group. Yesterday an Asian man with very little English was playing chess with a Serbian guy. There is another language that happens between people. That whole chess thing came out of the blue, all of a sudden there was a chess board one day and it happened.*'

Key messages

- > Volunteers can make the difference between a group doing the 'same old, same old' and trying new activities.
- > With volunteers around, staff can have greater confidence that there is support for all clients.
- > Volunteers can support clients who wish to spend time in the garden or different areas of a centre.
- > It can also mean there are more people sharing in the fun!
- > Volunteers can provide the support to allow clients to pursue a range of different interests and activities.