

MEDIA RELEASE

MENTAL HEALTH BOOST FOR MID MURRAY

Mental health is set to be given a huge boost across the Mid Murray Council area – with the district also shortlisted for a chance to secure a phenomenal 10-year, \$3 million package of mental health funding and support.

The district is one of five towns (or clusters of towns) finalists in the Fay Fuller Foundation's *Our Town* initiative. The foundation will ultimately select two successful communities from those shortlisted to receive a 10-year funding and support package worth an estimated \$3 million each. This package aims to assist these towns to develop and deliver long-term improvements to mental health.

As a finalist, Mid Murray Council will receive \$45,000 during 2020 for on-ground and online assistance with mentoring, coaching, communication and other practical support measures over the next 6-12 months.

Mid Murray Mayor Dave Burgess welcomed the announcement.

“Mental health is something that will affect many of us over our lifetime, but while it’s a well-recognised challenge nationally, we also know that it’s one that hits especially hard in rural areas and especially during drought periods,” he says.

“Compounding factors such as isolation, mental health stigma within some communities, difficulty accessing specialised health services and disasters such as the recent bushfires and drought make it much harder to proactively manage our mental health across the region.

“We are incredibly fortunate that our district already has some dedicated organisations and community groups in place that are actively supporting our communities in identifying and combating mental health issues.

“The *Our Town* program will help to strengthen those connections, increase local skills and knowledge and plan for a district-wide approach to mental health, that will further enhance the existing services and assistance our district can offer to those who need it most.”

Part of the immediate work will focus on engaging, empowering and activating communities in the area of mental health; building local mental health understanding and skills; encouraging and supporting cultural change; reducing stigma around mental health; and building collaboration between groups and organisations.

Mid Murray Director of Community Services Amy Loechel has been driving the application process and said the *Our Town* program would help strengthen existing initiatives, networks and services already operating in the district, but also provide resources which allow community groups and services to be more innovative and work smarter.

“*Our Town* has a strong focus on activating and empowering communities to increase the strengths, skills and talents of people locally to help find solutions to their area’s unique mental health challenges,” she says.

“It’s not about adding new services, but about improving what’s already here and combating issues such as stigma within the community around mental health.

“This approach will complement the fantastic work already being done by so many groups and organisations in our district, including our Suicide Prevention Network, local mental health practitioners and key community agencies.”

The Council will act as the backbone organisation for the project, and partner with existing groups including non-government and government agencies and community groups across the Primary Health Network areas of Mannum, Blanchetown, Truro and Swan Reach.

“One of our key aims at this stage of the project will be to engage with our community to identify the local mental health needs, understand and upskill various agencies and community members on how they can play a part in increasing positive mental health, and formulate a plan for the entire community,” Ms Loechel says.

The project will be driven by the Mid Murray community, and has already received broad support from health providers, community groups and key organisations throughout the application process.

Mannum Medical Centre GP Stephen Napoli said he and his team at the centre strongly supported the initiative’s whole of community approach to improving mental health in the Mid Murray district while addressing the area’s unique challenges.

“This population of some 8,500 is spread over a large area including 16 townships and three regions, creating additional difficulties with access to and delivery of services,” he says.

“Having worked in this community over two decades, these [mental health issues] have been persistent and endemic challenges.”

Silent Ripples suicide support group founder and Palmer resident Janet Kuys said assistance through the Our Town project would have a “colossal” impact on those facing mental health challenges in the district.

“If people can get the right kind of support that they’re looking for right from the beginning then they’re going to deal with it all a lot better,” she says.

The *Our Town* program is only open to towns or clusters of towns with 10,000 residents or less within its Primary Health Network.

Other towns shortlisted for the Our Town initiative include Kimba, Berri, Ceduna and Cummins. Kangaroo Island was also initially shortlisted. However, following the devastating recent bushfires, the Fay Fuller Foundation created a third 10-year funding package to grant immediately to the disaster-hit island community.

The remaining two successful towns will be announced in late 2020.

For more information on the Fay Fuller Foundation and the Our Town initiative visit www.fayfullerfoundation.com.au.

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