

Community engagement for suicide prevention in south-western Australia

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Abstract

The **Understanding and Building Resilience (U&BR) Project** is a multi-level suicide prevention project operating in six communities in the rural South West Region of Western Australia. This Project focused on what communities can do to prevent suicide, with community resilience being the central theme. The Project was initiated by concerned community members and service providers in the region after a cluster of suicides occurred in 2003. A South West Suicide Prevention Taskforce was formed and pushed for action on this issue. This began with community consultation through action research (Feb 2005–May 2006) and involved 300 support service providers and community members. The research has informed action for suicide prevention across the region leading to increased funding as part of the National Suicide Prevention Strategy from Feb 2007 to May 2009. Local input was a key to the success of the project. Local Working Groups, established in each of the six communities, utilised key objectives identified by the research to develop Local Action Plans. These plans highlighted areas of need and ways in which group members could work together toward reducing risk factors for suicide. As a result strong partnerships have been formed within the local community and across the six participating communities. The Project provided opportunities for inter-sectoral collaboration, local partnerships and community engagement. The U&BR Project has highlighted the issue of suicide and promoted the importance of awareness, information and skills to be able to address this issue. This is being accomplished through the provision of education, training, partnerships with local agencies to achieve outcomes for community members and collaborating to provide key community activities. Action plans included four key areas: **resilience building** through the provision of education, training and skill development to build the capacity of communities to recognise and respond appropriately to people at risk of suicide; **connecting to community**, identifying and promoting strategies that facilitate opportunities for people to connect with their local community; **service gaps and access issues**, to build capacity of local communities to address service gaps and improve access to existing services; and **referral, networks and help seeking**, to build community capacity for help seeking by increasing awareness and knowledge of referral pathways and support services.

Project origins

The Understanding and Building Resilience (U&BR) Project is managed by the Injury Control Council of Western Australia (ICCWA) and came about as a result of action taken in response to community concern regarding a cluster of suicides that had occurred within the South West of Western Australia. Following a community forum held in Bunbury in 2003 the South West Suicide Prevention Taskforce was formed. Some of the Taskforce members have continued to guide the Project as part of the South West Reference Group. The strength and success of this project lies with the comprehensive consultation process and the engagement of community, and collaboration with the many agencies and service providers across the region.

Community consultation: phase one

The first phase of the U&BR Project took place from February 2005 to May 2006 and produced an evidence based community endorsed report providing recommendations on how to build community resilience and reduce risk factors for suicide in communities in the South West of WA. Community input and participation was vital to this phase of the project, with a total of 179 community members and 119 service providers providing information which contributed to the development of the report. Focus group and individual interviews were conducted in the six selected communities of Bunbury, Busselton, Margaret River, Collie, Bridgetown-Greenbushes and Manjimup. The South West Aboriginal Medical Service interviewed Aboriginal people from Collie, Bunbury and Manjimup.

These communities were selected to ensure best coverage of the south west geographical area by utilising suicide and self inflicted injury statistics, socio-economic indicators, unemployment statistics, industry types, population and location. Along with the resulting final report from this comprehensive consultation process nine community road maps were produced, one for each of the six communities and three specific to the Noongar community. These 'road maps' provided a locally based community picture and formed the basis for the development of community action plans for suicide prevention.

The following list indicates the focus for information collection:

- individual resilience and mental well being
- risk and protective factors for suicide
- community membership
- social participation, belonging, connectedness
- social inclusion/exclusion
- help seeking, availability of support networks
- awareness/availability of services and resources
- opportunity to participate in local decision-making
- levels of trust and safety
- history and ability of a community to address issues
- where to from here, how to get a project off the ground.

Report recommendations

- Form Working Groups to promote community resilience for the South West region and within each of the six communities.
- Investigate strategies to increase opportunities for people to connect with community, particularly for those identified as excluded.
- Build the capacity of the community to recognise and respond to people at risk of suicide by providing and promoting Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention Gatekeeper Training Workshops.
- Increase the community's awareness of referral and support services as identified in the community's road map.

- Early intervention and education programs as identified in the community's road map.
- Address identified service gaps and improve access to services as identified in the community's road map.

Taking action: phase two, February 2007 to May 2009

Action planning

As recommended by community members, local working groups were established in each community to undertake the action planning phase of the project. Three of the communities had existing community networks which met regularly and these groups, or representatives from these groups, became regular members of the working group. In other communities service providers and community members were invited to be a part of their local working group. These groups met regularly until the planning process was completed. Once potential initiatives were identified these were then voted on and prioritised for the final action plan.

Final action plans included four key areas: **resilience building** through the provision of education, training and skill development to build the capacity of communities to recognise and respond appropriately to people at risk of suicide; **connecting to community**, identifying and promoting strategies that facilitate opportunities for people to connect with their local community; **service gaps and access issues**, to build capacity of local communities to address service gaps and improve access to existing services; and **referral, networks and help seeking**, to build community capacity for help seeking by increasing awareness and knowledge of referral pathways and support services.

Suicide prevention activities

The U&BR Project has highlighted the issue of suicide and promoted the importance of awareness, information and skills to be able to address this issue. This has been achieved through the provision of education, training, partnerships with local agencies to deliver outcomes for community members and collaborating to provide key community activities.

Resilience building

With the large area covered by the project, the project team committed to developing awareness and skills with the goal of leaving something real and ongoing in these communities. The key focus of the work became the provision of education, training and skill development to build the capacity of individuals, workplaces and communities to care for themselves and those in their community along with being able to recognise and respond appropriately to people at risk of suicide.

This was addressed by providing opportunities for people from all sections of the community to access various forms of training, education and information, provided across all six communities at little or no cost to participants. An area of need identified in all action plans was the lack of availability of accessible professional development opportunities. This is a significant problem in all rural areas where workers must travel to Perth to access training and education. The added costs of travel and accommodation to the training package are prohibitive for most service providers.

There has also been a committed focus on delivering training, education and information packages that cover a broad section of the community, available and accessible by all members of the communities targeted by the U&BR project. It is believed this provision of skills and training has created a workforce with improved awareness and skills with respect to the issue of suicide and self-harm. It is of particular

importance with respect to supporting and retaining a healthy workforce in rural areas. Along with providing increased awareness and life-skills to various sectors of the community, including schools, workplaces, clubs, community groups, encompassing youth, and men and women of all ages.

Formal training opportunities were made available to all health professionals, including youth workers and emergency service personnel. Other community education and information sessions have been provided in workplaces, to community clubs or groups and also at community forums open to the general public. Below is a summary of the various packages which were made available.

MindFrame

The National MindFrame team visited the South West to conduct media briefings for local journalists and presented three stakeholder workshops regarding safe and sensitive reporting on the issues of suicide and mental illness. There is much evidence to support that fact that safe reporting can, amongst other things, reduce the risk of copycat suicides and prevent normalising suicide. Media quick reference guides and other research and current statistics, all available from the MindFrame web site www.mindframe-media.info/.

“A Way Through” interactive community information sessions

This workshop is an interactive learning session run over one to two hours tailored for presentation to community groups, clubs and workplaces. It is based on the “Map of Loss” developed by Roslyn Snyder for more information visit www.wisdominyourlife.com.au

The Map is a visual tool that has been used successfully to create connections and improve the health and well being of individuals, families and communities. The Map is a means of understanding the process of change and offers a way of dealing with the everyday stresses and emotional ups and downs in life, builds personal resilience, and empowers people to make positive life choices.

Opening closets training

Six full-day workshops were provided by Gay and Lesbian Community Services and designed to improve access to community services for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex or queer people. Comprising six distinct components: A clarification of participants' values and attitudes about the target group and their origin; a critical examination of myths and stereotypes pertaining to the target group; a theoretical understanding of sexuality, gender, and the coming out process; input from people who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual and/or transgender; an understanding of discrimination and the role it plays in increased psycho-social risk; development of a framework for providing appropriate support. For more information visit www.openingclosets.com

Suicide Prevention Gatekeeper Workshops

The “Gatekeeper” workshop conducted by the Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention (MCSP) provides participants with a range of knowledge and skills that aims to improve ability and confidence in responding to people at risk of suicide. The workshop includes information about: the extent of the problem and understanding suicide; mental disorders and suicide; recognising and understanding (repetitive) self-harm; understanding the needs of the suicidal person, their carers and workers; recognising warning signs; how to approach someone at risk of suicide and raise the issue; doing a risk assessment; postvention strategies to help after a suicide. A total of seventeen workshops were held across the region. To ensure sustainable training in this area, ten health and allied health professionals were trained as Gatekeeper instructors. The WA Country Health Service, South West, will coordinate on-going training. For further information visit www.mcsp.org.au

Suicide prevention education

In a unique collaboration with Lifeline WA and the U&BR Project, the Building a Suicide Safe South West initiative was launched on World Suicide Prevention Day 2008. A series of six community information sessions delivered SuicideTALK and A Way Through as a half day program. Lifeline WA has also provided ASIST training. Both packages are suicide prevention education developed by LivingWorks education www.livingworks.org.au

SuicideTALK is a community oriented program exploring issues in suicide prevention. It is designed to play a role in mobilising participants' resolve to work toward the creation of suicide-safer communities. SuicideTALK is suitable for a community audience and assumes no prior knowledge of suicide. ASIST is an opportunity to learn suicide first aid training during a two day highly interactive workshop teaching practical skills to identify someone at risk of suicide and competently and confidently intervene. For more information visit www.lifelinewa.org.au

Other community initiatives

Action plans in some communities included the need to conduct resilience building information sessions for families, teachers, child-care and youth workers. The Manjimup DOVES Domestic Violence Prevention Committee collaborated with a range of agencies and service clubs to engage Dr Andrew Fuller, family psychologist and resilience specialist, to tour the Warren Blackwood region. The presentations attracted 300 participants and raised awareness of how to build resilience in children and adolescents. Family Centres in three communities are now planning for Maggie Dent to visit the region late 2009 to deliver "Ten Building Blocks for Resilience" and "Resilient Adolescents" workshops.

Connecting to community

Many and varied activities were supported, or organised in collaboration with the many agencies involved with U&BR Project to provide opportunities for people to connect with their community. For example, raising the issue of connecting to community in the Manjimup action plan, the Shire's Centenary Committee took on board the idea of a multicultural event as part of their Centenary celebrations and organised an event inclusive of Italian, Macedonian, Pilipino groups, Aboriginal people and youth in community.

In Bunbury, service providers collaborated to plan a full week of activities for Mental Health Week. This proved to be a very successful week which engaged the whole of the community through various activities including Stress Less Day and concluding with a barbeque for mental health consumers. A welcome but unintended outcome of this collaboration has been the establishment of a Mental Health Network. This is an ongoing opportunity for service providers and health professionals to come together on a regular basis to offer support, opportunities for information sharing and discussion of issues.

Aboriginal cross cultural awareness training was provided at Injury Control Council of Western Australia (ICCWA) Conference in Bunbury, a need identified in the action plans. The project has engaged in NAIDOC activities for community members to participate and celebrate and worked with the South West Aboriginal Medical Service to facilitate access to REDRESS for people requiring compensation for past abuses in Government run homes and missions.

Service gaps and access issues

Varying initiatives have been undertaken in local areas to build capacity of local communities to address service gaps and improve access to existing services. The Aboriginal project officers have worked alongside the mental health service to improve awareness of issues faced by Aboriginal people when accessing services. The four Bunbury Rotary Clubs collaborated with the U&BR Project to organise a

Community Mental Health Forum focused on recovery and attended by over 100 people. As part of this forum local service providers set up displays and made themselves available to speak with those attending and provided information packs on available services. The Project has also assisted GP Downsouth Division of General Practice with invites to encourage networking of support service providers with GPs in Collie, Manjimup and Margaret River. There are ongoing discussions and continual networking between services and key stakeholders with respect to addressing other identified gaps in services or access issues.

Referral, networks and help seeking

The project has worked to build community capacity for help seeking by increasing awareness and knowledge of referral pathways and support services. This has been undertaken through the updating and regular distribution of pamphlets and information packs. For example, the Collie Support Service Directory was developed and distributed by Shire Community Development officer. Two thousand MCSP pamphlets— *“Information on Preventing Suicide: When Someone You Know Needs Help”* (including the South West 24 help line number) were distributed. A poster was developed on request from the U&BR project to advertise the availability of the new “Information & Support Packs for those concerned about someone who is distressed or suicidal” from all libraries and community health centres in the six selected communities. Help line numbers and websites were also included on all U&BR Project Fact Sheets, ICCWA newsletter articles and on the ICCWA web site under ‘building community resilience’.

Community engagement in building resilience to prevent suicide

As a result of community concern, commitment and strong partnerships, the U&BR Project has had great success in building community resilience in an effort to reduce the risk factors for suicide in communities in the South West of WA. Community input and participation has been an integral part of this success. The project has provided local workers and community members with opportunities for inter-sectoral collaboration, local partnerships and community engagement. The Project has highlighted the issue of suicide and promoted the importance of awareness, information and skills to be able to address this issue. This has been accomplished through the provision of education, training; partnerships with local agencies to deliver outcomes for community members; and collaborating with varying agencies to provide key community activities. As with all community development projects it has not been without challenges, however, with significant support and cooperation of existing service providers, community groups and of course the commitment of people working within those we have been able to continually strive to deliver on many of the objectives prioritised in the Community Action Plans.

Acknowledgments

- The numerous collaborating agencies, workers and individual community members involved in planning, working with, supporting and/or participating in project initiatives
- Current Project Officers: Marina Johns (Coordinator) Beth Jackson & Shelley O'Brien
- South West Taskforce on Suicide Prevention
- WA Country Health Service—South West
- Project Reference Group
- Past project officers: Greg Little & Cis Narkle

- South West Aboriginal Medical Service
- Rotary Clubs of Bunbury
- Commonwealth Government Department of Health and Ageing—National Suicide Prevention Strategy funding
- ICCWA CEO Deborah Costello and Perth based staff who have provided support, expertise and assistance as required

ICCWA is the peak not for profit organisation involved in injury prevention and community safety promotion in Western Australia. www.iccwa.org.au

Presenter

Marina Johns has a Bachelor of Health Science in Health Promotion and has been working for the Injury Control Council of Western Australia on the Understanding and Building Resilience Project, including the action research phase, since February 2005. Marina previously worked for the South West Population Health Unit and, prior to that, as a registered nurse for WA Country Health Service, South West.