



## **Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System**

**Youth Live4Life Inc.**

**Submission: 5 July 2019**

### **A Mental Health Education and Suicide Prevention model that is making a difference in rural communities.**

Youth Live4Life advocates for a whole of community approach to mental health education and suicide prevention activities in rural and regional communities. Our work has shown that through mental health education in communities we are able to reduce stigma and increase 'help seeking' and 'help offering' (see evaluation finding details below). We recommend increased investment in secondary school mental health education and community based education (parents, workplaces, sporting clubs, voluntary organisation), alongside **youth-led** mental health promotion activities all of which are offered through the Live4Life model.

Youth Live4Life has nearly a decade of experience to draw upon. We have a model that is having an impact in the rural communities of Benalla, Glenelg and the Macedon Ranges. The Live4Life model is an innovative, local, community driven response to youth mental illness. The Live4Life model aims to ensure that young people, teachers, parents and the wider community are better informed about mental ill health and are proactive in identifying the signs and symptoms of an emerging mental health issue before a crisis occurs and encourages positive help seeking attitudes.

We know the model is having an impact through the evaluation work we have undertaken and the feedback we receive on a regular basis, which we discuss further below. We are looking at activating Live4Life in the shire's of Moira and the Southern Grampians in 2020. We currently have a wait list of over 20 local government areas from the following regions;

- Great South coast
- Gippsland
- Goulburn
- Loddon Campaspe
- Wimmera

### **We are ready to upscale the model and respond to the high demand across rural Victoria.**

These rural communities have come to us seeking a whole of community, evidenced based, prevention model to improve mental health knowledge, reduce stigma and increase 'help seeking' and 'help offering' within their communities.



Equipping key adults in young people's lives with important information, building their knowledge and confidence in supporting a young person who may be developing a mental health problem. The side benefit is this education is applicable to all ages. It familiarizes the participant with support and referral pathways, how to approach a conversation with someone you are concerned about, what to do in a crisis and how to implement self care. Parents are the main participants. Many parents are seeking ways to understand what is going on for their young person and how to best support them. They are learning strategies and building their confidence, which can take a battering as a parent. Live4Life is not just empowering secondary school aged students it empowers their community.

**It is important the Live4Life model is not imposed** on a community, a community needs to want to implement it. Ensuring sustainability and success. Youth Live4Life mentor and assist the Partnership Group to build the model with schools and community. This provides a greater sense of ownership. All three communities speak of the pride they feel with Live4Life. This is a direct result of their hard work and investment. The anecdotal stories that come from the training and young people is testament to its efficacy. Dare we say it, a relief that there is something on the ground that is working for their young people.

The rates of mental health problems and suicide in rural and regional communities are higher than in urban communities and tend to be increasing<sup>1</sup>. A 2016 study by Orygen, the National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health titled *Raising the bar for youth suicide prevention*<sup>2</sup> highlighted that the current Australian suicide prevention policies have identified gaps in evidence-based and young person appropriate, accessible and acceptable programs and services. Responding early to suicide risk and mental ill health **"could provide one of the 'best-bets' for suicide prevention moving forward"** (Robinson, et al., 2016). Mission Australia's 2018 report on the lack of appropriate services in regional Australia highlighted the need for "further investment in evidence based mental health and wellbeing programs delivered through schools [that] can equip and support young people..."<sup>3</sup>. Our experience of working with rural communities is that there is a **lack of face to face youth mental health clinicians**. Schools and parents are struggling to access clinicians to support their students and children and the expense of travel and the emotional and financial impact on families is significant. That services are often limited by client quotas (which they can meet in larger regional cities), short contracts and service requirements that do not put the individual seeking help at the centre (meet the young person where they are at,

<sup>1</sup> State of Victoria, Department of Health and Human Services, 2016, Victorian Suicide Prevention Framework 2016-2025.

<sup>2</sup> Robinson, J, Bailey, E, Browne, V, Cox, G & Hooper, C., 2016, Raising the bar for youth suicide prevention. Melbourne: Orygen, The National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health.

<sup>3</sup> Ivancic, L., Cairns, K., Shuttleworth, L., Welland, L., Fildes, J. and Nicholas, M. (2018), *Lifting the weight: Understanding young people's mental health and service needs in regional and remote Australia*. Sydney: ReachOut Australia and Mission Australia.



responding in a timely manner, offering therapeutic support that meets the young person's needs).

**Live4Life commenced in 2009** in response to a reported increase in anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicide amongst young people in the rural communities of the Macedon Ranges. Building on evidence that young people go to friends and parents before they go to a service (Mission Australia). The Live4Life model focuses on an 'upstream' approach to mental health education and suicide prevention in order to **build resilient young people and communities**. This is achieved by 'wrapping' protective factors around young people such as supportive relationships, support at critical times, positive help seeking attitudes, connection to family, school and community and positive peer role models.

### Essential components of the Live4Life model

There are four essential components of the Live4Life model. It is the combined delivery of these four components that is critical to local success and sustainability of the model. All elements are locally adaptable and flexible depending on the size and capacity of the local rural community. The four essential components have been designed, implemented and independently evaluated over the past nine years.

#### 1. Coordination, support and mentoring by Youth Live4Life Staff

Core support, upskilling, problem solving, mentoring and guidance is provided to Live4Life communities on a regular basis. This consistent support and guidance ensures key deliverables of Live4Life are achieved, within the capabilities and capacity of the local community.

#### 2. School and Community Partnership Group

This essential component requires representation and commitment of senior personnel from local secondary schools, local government, community and health services and key stakeholders. This group drives the implementation of Live4Life in the community and is key to achieving collective impact. The Partnership Group meets at a minimum quarterly and requires administration and coordination support.

#### 3. Evidence based mental health education across all secondary schools and community

Ensuring consistent evidenced-based messages, knowledge and language is essential in reducing stigma and increasing mental health literacy and positive help seeking behaviours. Youth Live4Life utilize the Mental Health First Aid Australia products – teen and Youth Mental Health First Aid. Youth Live4Life's approach has been to invest in local instructors to support local delivery. This has enabled communities to build their capacity through upskilling local people and has meant services have invested in the mental health education of their young people and community by providing courses at low or no cost.



#### 4. Implementation of local youth leadership and participation program

Student representatives from year 9 and 10 from each participating local school are able to express an interest in joining a local Live4Life Crew. The role of the Crew is as youth mental health ambassadors and to assist in the delivery of events and drive key Live4Life messages at their school and in community. The Crew is supported by the local Council (or other relevant organisation with youth participation expertise).

#### Awards, recognition and evidence

As a result of the positive impact of the Live4Life model in the Macedon Ranges Shire and continued interest from other rural communities Youth Live4Life was established in 2015 as a health promotion charity with DGR 1 charitable status and registered with the ACNC. In July 2016 Youth Live4Life received a grant from the Myer Foundation for an 18-month period to trial the Live4Life model in two other rural communities with high youth suicide rates. Through a competitive expression of interest process the two rural communities selected were Benalla Rural City Council and Glenelg Shire Council. Youth Live4Life has seen local government playing a key role in mental health education and prevention through the development of Health and Wellbeing Plans and the implementation of Live4Life.

In 2019 Youth Live4Life continues to work with Benalla and Glenelg communities with the support of the RE Ross Trust. As of July 2019, the Department of Health and Human Services is now supporting Youth Live4Life's work in Benalla and Glenelg.

In 2017 Live4Life Macedon Ranges was the winner of the LiFE Award – Community Development (Organisation) at the National Suicide Prevention Conference. And in 2018 Youth Live4Life and the Live4Life communities of Macedon Ranges, Benalla and Glenelg won VicHealth's **Improving Mental Wellbeing Award** and the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria's **Most Innovative Rural Youth Program**.

In 2017, Orygen, the National Centre of Excellence in Youth Mental Health, undertook an evaluation of the Live4Life model in its two pilot communities of Benalla and Glenelg Shire. The report highlighted that the Live4Life model is aligned with national and state-based strategies and with international and national recommendations for suicide prevention activities. It states, that “the model is consistent with key suicide prevention messages through its endorsement of the belief that suicide is preventable, that a holistic approach to suicide prevention is most effective, and in the mobilization of the community as a resource to provide social support and fight stigma” (Robinson, et al., 2018). In addition, the evaluation highlighted that the model has a **positive impact on communities**; that the partnership approach was highly valued; that the mental health education had a positive impact on attitudes to mental health and was of great benefit to the young people who participated. A summary of the evaluation outcomes can be found at: <http://www.live4life.org.au/live4life-evaluation-reports/>.



With the support of the Victorian Government, Youth Live4Life is undertaking a two-year evaluation (2018-2019) in Glenelg and Benalla. This evaluation is examining the longer-term effectiveness of the model, the transferability of the model and the social return on investment. The early signs of success highlighted by independent evaluators Ludowyk Evaluation include: “ongoing and empathic support for the model; perceived shifts in stigma; **reports of increased help seeking and notifying**; and “**more confident and competent adults**” (Ludowyk, 2018). Executive summary of the report can be found at: <http://www.live4life.org.au/live4life-evaluation-reports/>.

It is important to note that Macedon Ranges Shire Council throughout the development of Live4Life, has undertaken **five years of independent evaluation**. These evaluations have highlighted an increase in knowledge in participants mental health literacy, confidence to help with a mental health crisis and increased knowledge of available mental health services. Macedon Ranges Evaluation Reports can again be found at: <http://www.live4life.org.au/live4life-evaluation-reports/>

In addition, Mental Health First Aid Australia courses, delivered as part of the Live4Life model, are evidenced based and peer reviewed. A recent meta-analysis of 15 evaluations found that it is effective in improving knowledge, attitudes and behaviours related to mental health. (Hadiaczky, G., et al., 2014, referenced in Robinson et al., 2018).

Through our evaluation activities and through our work with communities we continue to hear of **the impact Live4Life is having on communities**.

*“I always see a flow on effect; a spike in enquires immediately after the training. Usually it’s people concerned about a friend. Even if I only get a handful, that’s a sign of success, especially if they’re kids who wouldn’t otherwise have come to me.”* **School Wellbeing worker**

*In 2012 [young person’s name] became really unwell with anorexia. When she was first hospitalised the Live4Life program had run in her school. One of the kids came and knocked on my door and said I understand what is happening for [young person’s name] now how can we help, how can we support you. For me Live4Life saved [young person’s] life.* **Parent**

*“We feel the program is potentially very powerful because it involves such a breadth of stakeholders. Its developing a common language.”* **Partnership Group member**

*“One thing I really like about it is the young people promoting the messages is really helping to breakdown the stigma. And it helps to normalize mental health services”.* **Mental health worker**



In 2018 we had a secondary school Principal at a school where they lost a student to suicide respond to the Mayor's question – "what can we do for you and the school?". The Principal's response: "Please keep investing in Live4Life".

*At the end of the second day training session I was approached by one of the participants who wanted to let me know that her friend, who also participated in the training had experienced a major breakthrough in connecting with her son after applying the skills she learned on day one. She had been concerned about her son's behaviour for some time and in particular whether he was experiencing suicidal thoughts or even contemplating suicide. She felt helpless as to how to raise her concerns and also held back from asking him directly thinking it might make matters worse. After working through the session on depression, suicide and direct questioning, she began to feel more confident and secure in her ability to share her concerns with her son. She went home that evening and asked him directly if he was thinking about suicide, to which he answered, "yes mum". She and her son spent the next few hours talking and coming up with a plan to keep him safe and get help. **Live4Life Coordinator and Mental Health First Aid Instructor.***

*Benalla is a rural town in North East Victoria that has had its fair share of adolescent and youth suicides over the years. In late 2016 the Benalla Rural City Council, FCJ College and Benalla P -12 College put together a joint submission for the school/ community model to be rolled out in our community, thanks to a grant from the Myer Foundation to take the successful Macedon Ranges model out to other rural communities. We were keen to get on board, as we knew this program showed how a highly successful school and community partnership engaging local Council, schools and community organisations with suicide prevention as its core purpose was impacting positively on the mental health outcomes of young people in the Macedon Ranges area. We were ecstatic to be one of the successful applicants and commenced the planning of the program, the selection and training of the facilitators in preparation for the program to roll out in 2017.*

*This is our third year of delivering the Live4Life program which incorporates the Teen Mental Health First Aid being explicitly taught to our Year 8 and 11 students. We have seen a willingness of our young people to open up and talk around the topic of mental health, and a definite increase in help seeking behaviour; for themselves and their friends. Students now have the language and ability to talk about mental health issues that are impacting on those around them and they know where and how to seek help. We have also been able to train staff and parents in Youth Mental Health First Aid, which has enabled conversations between our young people and their parents to be informed and somewhat easier to enter into. Students in Year 9 and 10 facilitate the launch and the celebration events that bookend the program, and they themselves are actively engaging further with the program content.*



*We will continue to prioritise this program in our school as we believe it is providing our young people with accurate, age appropriate content that they can refer back to and build on over their time at FCJ College. Principal FCJ College*

### **Live4Life is not just mental health education in schools**

The success of Live4Life in rural communities is a result of a whole of community approach to understanding and supporting youth mental health. Communities are coming together and pooling resources and skills to implement the model. Drawing on service clubs, local community, health and hospital services and working collaboratively with schools. Macedon Ranges Live4Life cannot keep up with the demand from residents wanting to do the 14 hour Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) course. Currently they have football and netball clubs, dads only YMHFA training at the local pub, Men's sheds and full courses booked for parents, grandparents and interested residents. In addition, Live4Life Macedon Ranges roll out MHFA training to their council staff, who assist in relief and recovery operations in the event of a bushfire. Building community resilience in the light of a crisis.

We ask that the Royal Commission advocate for evidence-based models, such as Live4Life, as **part** of the solution to improving the mental health and wellbeing of our rural communities by upscaling the model across rural Victoria. We would welcome any opportunity to speak with the Commission about our work.

***“Live4Life is not the total solution in preventing suicide, but it's a bloody good start”!***

Pauline Neil Co-founder of Live4Life.