



Strengthening Our Families (Country Health SA & BHP Billiton)



AFTER nearly 10 years in operation, the Strengthening Our Families program in South Australia’s Far North continues to build on its success in recognising and responding to a significant need in the isolated mining community of Roxby Downs and surrounding areas.

The program’s success is a testimony to the value of understanding the cultural and social needs of a population of predominantly young families and involving

the community and key stakeholders in meeting the unique needs of that community.

When established in 2006, the Strengthening Our Families (SOF) program was responding to the town supporting the Olympic Dam mine, Roxby Downs being the fastest growth area in the state. The growing numbers of mine employees came from all around the world and lacked family support networks. Many were of an age where they were starting

What did we do well?

The structured management by Country Health SA builds security, structure, capacity and camaraderie among volunteers who are supported with their own training, events and uniforms. Clients go on to become volunteers and some volunteers have developed confidence to re-enter the workforce or commence formal study.

their families and mothers with new babies had no family and social networks nearby to support them.

Isolation and lack of support from family and social networks were major risk indicators for the onset of post-natal depression and family stress, or simply barriers to the family settling in as quickly as possible.

Recognising the issue, the Roxby Downs Health Service enlisted the support of BHP Billiton and the local council. Both were quick to recognise the community-building value of what became the volunteer-based SOF program and joined the Steering Group.

The volunteer co-ordinator and volunteers are part of the Steering Group, drawing on their own local knowledge and experiences to help develop the program initially and make adaptations and improvements over the past decade. The volunteers receive training in first-aid, child safe environments, mandatory reporting, basic counselling and referrals to other health professionals.

Their support services may include home visiting to allow the primary care giver to rest, physical assistance with excursions, supervision of children to allow the completion of daily tasks such as attending appointments, and social advocacy and support at community activities. The volunteers also support the allied community health service activities such as Toddler Story Time, Coffee Morning, Pram Walking and Dads and Kids providing a valuable connection for SOF clients.

Formal feedback from clients is sought and acted upon to continually improve the program and ensure it is meeting the need.

Over time several new community health programs established in response to community interest have been supported by the SOF volunteers. These include a Beat the Heat program held over December and January and a Winter Warm-Uppers program in the July school holidays. These are activities, play, games and music structured to address fine and gross motor skills in children. The activities encouraged social interaction for anyone staying in town during summer and winter school breaks. Beat the

Heat attracted 163 families and Winter Warm-up 60 families.

The SOF program also took on the complementary “Big Warm Welcome” program to ensure new people received a personalised welcome. This includes a welcome pack and website with up-to-date information about services and facilities, social activities and support networks, as well as the next ‘welcome’ event. An active Facebook page also provides a connecting community service. New residents are contacted within a week of arriving in town.

In its first year of operation the SOF program won an SA Great Regional Community Award, and it has been a finalist 3 times since then. The program was part of the Roxby Downs Health Service submission which was a finalist in the SA Health Awards 2013.

Repeated three-year funding agreements from BHP Billiton have allowed the program to prosper and grow supporting the employment of the part-time volunteer coordinator and funding some of the activities. Formal reporting against Key Performance Indicators required by both Country Health SA and BHP Billiton demonstrate the success of the program.

The numbers of volunteers and clients has fluctuated over time with the program aiming to maintain a core of 10 volunteers. The maximum number has been 29 volunteers with another 4 in training. In the year to 30 June 2015 an estimated 1300* volunteer hours had been provided by SOF volunteers including one-to-one support and participation in other community health activities.

The statistics however can't measure the experience for new families of an enriched life in Roxby Downs from the support network provided through the Strengthening Our Families program.

Anecdotes abound of the special connection that has grown from the volunteer base of the SOF. One is the translating of the storybooks at Toddler Story Time into other languages including Bahasa Indonesian and Afrikaans. Another is the cooking bonanza to provide meals for a family in an emergency, and another is the connecting of a new resident with a 4-wheel drive club. **BT**

What would we do differently?

Be more prescriptive in the early days of data collection so trending of client and volunteer numbers can be tracked against the changing population.