

17 July 2023

Flood Affected Communities Get on the Ground Mental Health Support

Wentworth Healthcare, provider of the Primary Health Network, has funded two Wellbeing Workers to provide mental health support on the ground in flood affected communities.

Wentworth Healthcare's Flood Needs Assessment 2023 reports that between 2019 and 2022 approximately 1,500 homes were damaged by flood waters across the region. The cumulative effects of multiple disasters of drought, bushfires, COVID-19, and numerous floods have been difficult, particularly for rural communities in the Hawkesbury who were cut off for considerable periods of time not only due to flood waters but devastated roads.

The Wellbeing Workers are part of the Peppercorn Services team, which is the designated lead disaster recovery service providing individualised assistance across the Nepean Blue Mountains region.

Wentworth Healthcare CEO, Lizz Reay said some residents have experienced long periods of displacement from their homes, work, and schools.

"Separation from family members and regular life has left many residents with increased anxiety levels, heightened by the impacts of COVID-19 and continual bad weather. Increased anxiety surrounding weather and enduring mental health issues relating to the effects of flooding has seen an increase in the uptake of our free Psychological Therapy Services. But this service is still underutilised, and rates of mental health issues are a lot higher as trauma affected individuals don't always identify with having 'traditional' mental health issues, so do not seek out 'traditional' support," she said.

The service was established in response to feedback that reported many of these areas have limited mental health services and involve travel to the bigger towns. Residents wanted a service with workers who provided outreach by going to affected communities to talk to people in more informal settings, such as at a café or in their homes.

"Providing one on one and group support in people's homes, parks and local cafes allows the Wellbeing Practitioners to tailor their efforts to suit the needs of the people they are helping. It recognises that mental health support should be individualised to fit the needs of disaster impacted areas," said Ms Reay.

The Wellbeing Practitioners service builds on the model used to support bushfire affected communities following the Black Summer bushfires, where Wentworth Healthcare funded qualified mental health workers to enhance the Step-by-Step bushfire support service.

"When floods started to devastate the Hawkesbury and Penrith areas, the bushfire funded Wellbeing Practitioners were able to pivot immediately to provide flood support. This was crucial in ensuring people had immediate access to wellbeing support on the ground."

"Peppercorn Services have the primary role of assisting residents after the floods and are uniquely positioned to be able to add mental health support to their array of services. Case managers can



introduce people that need someone who can listen and refer into other services if necessary. People can also contact the Wellbeing Workers directly as no referral is needed,” she said.

Peppercorn Resilience and Support Services Manager, Trish Glover, said they are excited to be able to continue supporting the community with this vital service.

“Working with the Step-by-Step counsellors when the floods impacted the area, over and over, the need for someone to talk to was so important. We are looking forward to maintaining this level of support and flexibility to meet people where they are most comfortable and to be able to assist them on their recovery journey,” said Ms Glover.

The Peppercorn Wellbeing Practitioners are funded until June 2024. Community members can contact **Nicole on 0490 038 122** or **Megan on 0490 033 992** to make an appointment, email **wellbeing@peppercorn.org.au** or visit **www.nbmphn.com.au/localservices** for more information.