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Cost of living crisis deepens

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"Having a train station here as well means that some people will choose to get off here," she said.

Despite growing concerns regarding food affordability during the current cost of living crisis, Ms Wood said health services like NDCH were unable to offer food vouchers but could assist people struggling in other ways.

"We can support people to advocate for their needs around transport, working with local neighborhood houses to get things like food access and things like that," she said.

Ms Wood said they also provided a range of support services, including general counselling and alcohol and other drug counselling.

She said these services could help people who wanted to reduce their substance use due to cost-of-living pressures, quit smoking, or make other lifestyle changes that could lower ongoing expenses.

Led by NDCH, the Gannawarra Local Agency Meeting (GLAM) is a key initiative that aims to assist those doing it tough across the region.

Ms Wood said the partnership included NDCH, Gannawarra Shire Council, Neighbourhood Houses, and a variety of other health or-

ganisations around the Mallee

"Northern District Community Health has been a part of GLAM, which is again a lot of local agency members meeting for longer than I've been here, so probably 20 years," she said.

Across the Mallee, not-for-profit organisations such as Neighbourhood House provide another vital option, offering inclusive, supportive spaces and delivering local education, recreation, and community support services.

Kerang Neighbourhood House manager Claire Fry said over the past year, more people had sought support, and while demand for services usually increased during winter, this year was no exception.

"Over the past 12 months, demand for food relief has grown substantially," she said.

"We are currently supporting an average of 900 to 1000 people each month through a combination of food hampers, emergency relief, specific food requests, community meals, and referrals to other support services.

"We regularly provide 60 to 80 food hampers per week, and demand continues to increase," she said.

Neighbourhood houses don't just look after food relief.

Annie Meadows coordinates the Quambatook Community Resource Centre which doubles as the Quambatook Neighbourhood House, library branch and Centrelink access point.

Unlike the Kerang Neighbourhood House, Ms Meadows said QCRC was unable to provide food support, but could instead refer people to other services that could meet those needs.

"We're not a provider of food services or food vouchers, but we have seen a small increase in community bus service usage with people looking to save money on fuel," she said.

"Many Quambatook people if they're looking for these services probably go to Kerang, just because it's a bigger farming community, there's less renters."

For people who are struggling in the region, the QCRC promotes mental wellbeing through messaging and counselling.

"We try to promote messages from RUOK? and other mental health organisations and we have a counsellor visiting once a month," she said.

Anyone requiring urgent help can call Lifeline: 13 11 14, Beyond Blue: 1300 224 636 or Kids Helpline: on 1800 551 800.

Third spaces in rural towns

Louis Harrison

GROWING evidence suggests places for people to go outside of work and home are essential for community building and personal connectedness.

The Quambatook Community Resource Centre is an access hub for part of the Gannawarra region, housing the library branch, Neighbourhood House and Centrelink as well as offering assistance and referrals to services and information.

Annie Meadows solely coordinates the services hosted by the QCRC and said she sometimes feels like she has "10 plates spinning in the air at once."

She has an important role, as for people in Quambatook the QCRC is one of the last remaining third spaces where they can connect, following the closure of the pub and the end of local football in 2022.

"It's tough, these places aren't always readily available so it means trying to create little connection opportunities," Ms Meadows said.

"We have a jigsaw puzzle set up on the side that people can come in and work on so sometimes people come in and sit for a bit," she said.

In addition to the services and resources offered at the hub, the QCRC can also connect people with local community groups and opportunities to "be noticed".

"People can notice the differences in someone, if someone's not showing up or doesn't seem like themselves, people can wonder if they're okay," she said.

Ms Meadows said there was a craft club that predominantly catered to women, a Men's Shed that runs semi-regularly, and efforts were

underway to revive the community walking group.

Claire Fry from Kerang Neighborhood House said their service has also noticed more people looking for connection with others amid tough times.

"People are looking not only for food assistance but also for social connection and support," she said.

"Programs such as our free Soup and a Roll lunches, Morning Mates breakfast program, Chatty Café, and community groups provide an opportunity for people to come together, share a meal, and reduce feelings of isolation during winter," she said.

Ms Fry said despite ongoing hardship, rural communities were resilient amid the challenges.

"Despite these challenges, the local community continues to show incredible resilience and generosity," she said.

"Support from volunteers, local businesses, community groups and funding partners has been vital in helping us respond to the growing need."



Neighbourhood houses provide a wealth of resources for their communities, not just food relief.

BELOW: The QCRC has a jigsaw puzzle set up for people to enjoy.



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