

STORIES FROM THE

PAY IT FORWARD PLAN

GIVING YOUR SUPPORT GROUP A HAND TO CONNECT TO BETTER MENTAL HEALTH



ConnectGroups
helping support groups & individuals



**Government of Western Australia
Mental Health Commission**



"The intricacies of founding a Support Group or Not for Profit come in varying shapes, sizes and levels of priority. When Alongside founded, it presented programs and services that were the first of its kind in Australia, filling a vital gap in support for Defence and Emergency Services personnel by supporting the wellbeing of partners and families that stood beside them. A main priority was being

able to showcase our service delivery to the immediate community but also across WA and beyond. Working with the ConnectGroups team, Pay It Forward supported the establishment of our online presence with a website housing not only who we are and how to reach us but an integral part of our service enabling reach to remote areas of WA and Australia, and growing Alongside from a grassroots organisation to a nationally operating not for profit. More than just a financial contribution, the support and backing from the ConnectGroups team has nurtured us from infancy to now a national, growing and thriving organisation."

Sarah Yates and Paige Hobbs Alongside co-founders

Kudos: ConnectGroups Support Groups Association WA Inc. was a finalist in the WACOSS 2016 Community Services Excellence Awards for its small grants programs: Pay it Forward, Dream it Forward, and Live it Forward together.



CONTENTS

2		Introduction to the Pay it Forward Plan
4	Story 1	MRWAPOA – Medically Retired WA Police Association
6	Story 2	Alongside
8	Story 3	angelhands
10	Story 4	Depression Support Network of Albany
12	Story 5	Perth and Lyme Disease Support Network
14	Story 6	Retina Australia
16	Story 7	The Grief Centre of WA
18	Story 8	TransFolk of WA
20	Story 9	Mankind Project of WA
22	Story 10	Endometriosis Perth Sisterhood of Support
24	Story 11	LAA – Langford Aboriginal Association
26	Story 12	Older Women's Network
28	Story 13	Recovery Rocks Community
30	Story 14	SWAN – South West Autism Network
32	Beyond the Stories – Investing In Our Members' Strengths:	
		• Workforce Development/Cert IV in Community Services
		• Mental Health Week – Stories from the Field
		• 2017 Support Groups Recognition and Good Practice Awards



ConnectGroups
is a Mental
Health First Aid
Gold Skilled
Workplace.

Thank You

The Mental Health Commission's Sarah Greene, Anya Statham, and Michael Lenney for their support.

ConnectGroups Support Groups Association WA Inc.

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Introduction to the Pay it Forward Plan

The *Pay it Forward Plan* has been an effective ConnectGroups initiative supporting the sustainability and community-based service provision of Self Help and Support Groups in WA since 2011.

Project planning and delivery is informed by 'The Western Australian Mental Health, Alcohol and Other Drug Services Plan 2015-2025', 'Suicide Prevention 2020', and 'Prevention First – A Prevention and Promotion Framework for Mental Health'.

PIF targets Self Help and Support Groups (SHSG) with a focus on mental health; project proposals needed to clearly demonstrate:

1. Prevention and early intervention of mental distress, and a recovery approach methodology;
2. Increased awareness, learning and sustainability of mental health;
3. Relationship building and community belonging.

Relationship building was a critical component to stakeholder engagement within the *Pay it Forward Plan* optimising SHSG access to the program, creating confidence in the collaborative approach to the submission process, and encouraging projects to further the PIF Plan's goals to positively impact mental health across WA.

Within the last two years, mental health literacy was also identified as a key priority. Skilling and empowering Group membership is a community protective factor, and builds capacity to both positively impact mental health in the community and resilience in the individual.

Each successful project was subject to impact evaluation and service outcome measurement through application of the Results Based Accountability (RBA) evaluation tool. RBA generates the quantitative data needed to demonstrate the *Pay it Forward Plan* as evidence-based and a good practice model.

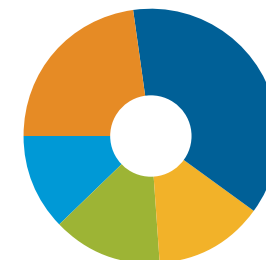
The *Pay it Forward Plan* also prioritised a workforce development initiative to capacity build the Community Services sector. Earning units of competency toward a Cert IV in Community Services recognised existing skillsets and empowered facilitators to demonstrate leadership within their Support Group.

One of the outcomes of the Cert IV scholarship program was increased capacity in the wider community services sector contributing to workforce opportunities for peer Support Group leaders and facilitators. ConnectGroups recognised the value in continuing to support training of Group facilitators and leaders, both to improve leadership within Support Groups and as a meaningful workforce development initiative.

Grants Awarded 2015-16 and 2016-17

1. 70 submissions received across three funding rounds
2. 43 grants approved
3. \$571,037.00 total amount requested from 70 submissions
4. \$167,252.00 funds allocated to 43 grants
5. Community members directly impacted: 5,730
6. \$ 27,742.00 allocated to 20 Cert IV scholarships

Capacity Building and Sustainability	37%
Information Technology	14%
Marketing and Promotion	14%
Customised Project	12%
Multiple Categories	23%



The *Pay it Forward Plan* remains a unique opportunity for mental health-focused peer Support Groups to seek small grants funding to ensure their long-term sustainability and to support the mental health journey of their members. Further, the program facilitates brokerage of funding to community-based groups unable to access traditional forms of funding. By promoting best practice at every stage, the *Pay it Forward Plan* demonstrates that limited funds can lead to exceptional outcomes.

The projects reflected in the following pages represent those awarded during the 2015-16 and 2016-17 years and completed in 2017.

These are some of their stories.

Story 1

Medically Retired Western Australian Police Officers Association



Impact:

- Prevention/early Intervention of mental health problems and/or illness
- A recovery approach
- Promotion of mental health
- Increased awareness and sustainability of mental health
- Relationship building and community belonging

The Medically Retired Western Australian Police Officers Association (MRWAPOA) emerged in 2008 as an internet chat site for police officers forced to retire due to ongoing distress, mental ill-health or physical issues resulting from exposure to violence and trauma. Members share their sense of isolation by the force, and provide peer support and outreach. The Association promotes mental health recovery, encourages prevention activities and the early intervention for officers exposed to an accumulation of trauma.

The MRWAPOA is working to shed light on the impact of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) on police and other frontline responders, and their advocacy is critical to building awareness, and promoting change in the duty of care necessary to support the mental health wellbeing of serving members, and in addressing the mental



health recovery of medically-retired members. Membership is currently estimated to be approximately 180.

Pay it Forward funded awareness raising activities, and capacity-building for MRWAPOA. Improved branding, marketing and promotional materials were developed, consultation was provided to realign the Association as a deductible gift recipient (DGR status), and their website was redesigned to support online donations. Additionally, public liability insurance was sourced so the Association could continue to hold Support Group meetings, and conduct outreach.

Capacity building the MRWAPOA increased awareness in the importance of mental health care of Police Officers in WA. Organisational recognition was improved, and there was an increase in referrals from government agencies including the Office of the Minister for Police, the Police Union, and WAPOL.



MRWAPOA was the recipient of ConnectGroups' Community and Support Tribute Awards 2015 "New and Emerging Self Help and Support Group" Award

Story 2

Alongside

Impact:

- Prevention/early Intervention of mental health problems and/or illness
- Promotion of mental health
- Relationship building and community belonging

Alongside is a not for profit organisation providing proactive education programs, mental wellbeing support and a strong sense of community for the partners and families of Defence and Emergency Services personnel, from recruitment through to discharge and beyond.

Alongside implements education across frontline specifically tailored to the needs of the partners and families. One of the key identified gaps was the challenges that can come with the transient nature of frontline life and in order to offset this, the Alongside Community Program was developed. An integral part of the program was the online reach to remote and rural areas via monthly wellbeing programs made available on the Alongside website.

Pay it Forward funded the development of the website to enable the implementation of the Community Program, to track membership, and allow for donations. In addition to the Community Program, the website offers information about Alongside, stories from frontline, a PTSD on-line library and ways to connect. The Alongside Community Program meant partners and families along with personnel could participate in online events from yoga to mindfulness, cooking classes to



alongside



writing workshops. Alongside encourages partners and families to take ownership of their mental health within a supported environment.

The improved social connection meant people in remote areas felt less isolated and lonely (factors that significantly affect mental health), and led to a better sense of community and self. The website has enabled a greater reach to Alongside target publics and resulted in a significant rise in uptake of Alongside programs.

Pay it Forward also funded short-term administration support to build the databases and systems for outreach to ensure members receive tailored support for their needs and were linked into social events in their area.

alongside

Alongside was a finalist for the ConnectGroups' 2017 Support Group Recognition and Good Practice Awards "Pay it Forward" Award

Story 3

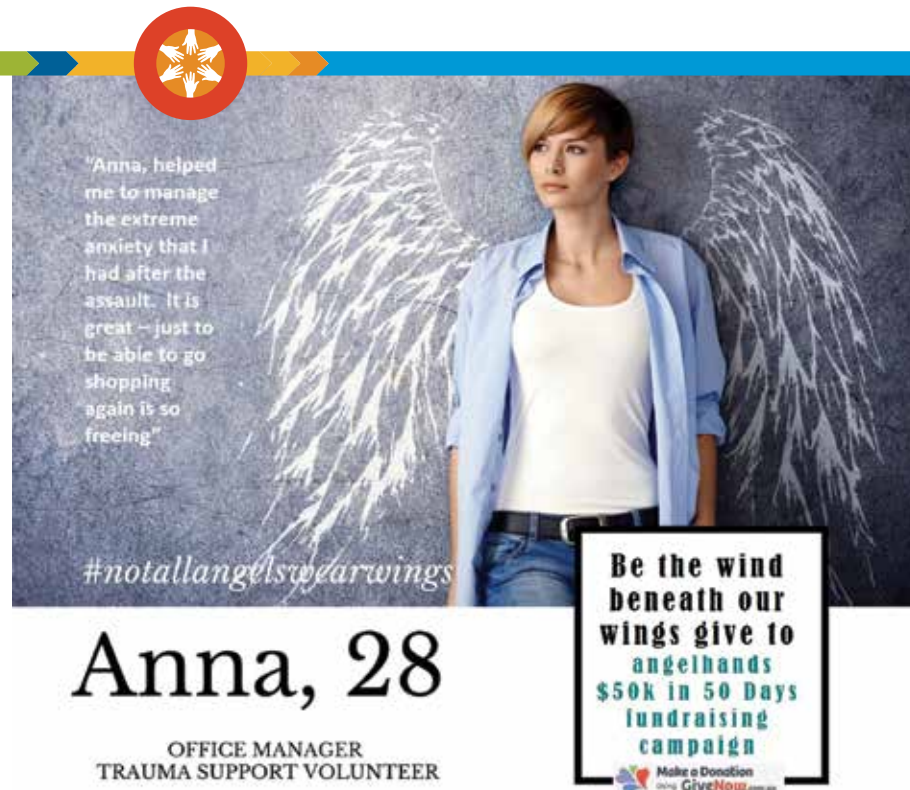
angelhands

Impact:

- A recovery approach

angelhands supports people to journey to recovery from extreme trauma, through professional counselling, peer support and other relevant services to rebuild their self-confidence, and to regain their place in the community.

Pay it Forward funded angelhands to run the facilitated healing and recovery Support Group "CREW" (Creative Recovery Emergence Workshops) for people seeking help with mental health issues, including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and anxiety. The program



"The workshop assisted in giving me tools and strategies needed to overcome personal struggles in my life."

empowered participants with the skills to engage more positively with others and to listen and communicate effectively. The program incorporated therapeutic art therapy, breathing and relaxation techniques, trauma support, and training to practice

recovery techniques without external guidance outside of the group.

Additional funding supported the establishment of angelhands' peer support program, "Befriend". Befrienders were matched to clients based on a range of factors including age and circumstances. Trained Befrienders engaged individuals who have experienced trauma as a one-on-one peer and focused on methods to cope with trauma-related mental health distress. 191 clients accessed the Befriending services, and the program increased angelhands' capacity to provide individualised client services.

"My friends keep telling me I'm looking much better... this is definitely down to the support I've been receiving this last month."

In both programs, participants were empowered to engage with their own recovery, manage their trauma symptoms, and recognise when external help was needed. As a result, angelhands has been able to build hope and resilience in members and provide access to angelhands' services to more individuals.



angelhands was the recipient of ConnectGroups' 2017 Support Group Recognition and Good Practice Awards "Pay it Forward" Award

Story 4

Depression Support Network Albany Inc

Impact:

- Prevention/early Intervention of mental health problems and/or illness
- A recovery approach
- Promotion of mental health
- Increased awareness and sustainability of mental health
- Relationship building and community belonging



Depression Support Network Albany Inc (DSN) is a peer support organisation advocating, supporting, and educating people in Albany and the Great Southern region about depression and coinciding mental illness. DSN provide members with a safe and supportive place, and structured activities where individuals living with depression can work on their recovery without experiencing stigma.

Pay It Forward funded audio-visual and IT equipment as part of an IT Centre in order to encourage people to participate in discussion, educational sessions and social activities, and to have better access to resources outside of Albany. The equipment expanded DSN's service delivery by providing needed access to online courses, mental health-related websites, webinars, TEDtalks, and presentations, encouraging learning, self-management and coping skills. Additionally, the IT Centre facilitated delivery of group activities including mindfulness, meditation, and movie nights.



"It's handy for internet resources and uplifting entertainment, which makes me feel good about attending DSN."

Pay It Forward also funded structured sessions for DSN members including meditation and lawn bowls to build membership, encourage members to become more active, and to socialise and participate in activities that support their recovery. The structured sessions have evolved into ongoing community engagement. Individuals gained a sense of empowerment, confidence, acceptance and increased self-esteem by learning new life and social skills.

Many participants now practice self-management skills regularly in order to find their moment of peace to help them get through their day without feeling agitated. They have learned to drop into a moment of meditation before facing situations that may cause stress or panic attacks such as going shopping, entering the bank, or being around large groups of people. Finding moments of peace is important in order to manage mental distress without anxiety getting in the way of clear thinking.



Depression Support Network Albany was the recipient of ConnectGroups' 2017 Support Group Recognition and Good Practice Awards "Most Innovative Self Help and Support Group" Award

Story 5

Perth and WA Lyme Disease Support Network

Impact:

- Prevention/early Intervention of mental health problems and/or illness
- A recovery approach
- Promotion of mental health
- Increased awareness and sustainability of mental health
- Relationship building and community belonging

The Perth and WA Lyme Disease Support Network is an online Support Group for patients and their families affected by tick-borne and tick infection related illnesses.

The Network provides information and resources to members on all aspects of tick-borne illness including the connection of mental distress and illness to physical symptoms. The Network provides



mental health support, raises awareness and recognition of tick-related illnesses, and actively seeks connection with relevant, related Support Groups to expand service delivery. Members are encouraged to connect with the Network as early intervention against mental distress.

Pay it Forward funded promotional material, and a website domain to improve and expand community awareness of the mental health risk of tick-borne and tick infection related illnesses, and of available services and support. Two Group facilitators received Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training to improve their mental health literacy in order to identify signs of mental distress in the membership, and promptly engage. Early intervention is essential for reducing the incidence and severity of mental health illness.

The Perth and WA Lyme Disease Support Network motivate wellness on a psychological level in order to allow for recovery on a physical level. Members report that engaging with the Network has made them more positive with respect to their mental health and personal journey. There were also no emergency situations reported during the grant cycle which was an improvement in contrast with previous years' experience.

"I joined the group in 2012, and since then I have used the group as a source of information for both my physical and mental wellbeing. It has been an insightful page for information regarding tick-borne diseases and their links to mental health. The promotional flyers given out at events have been very good for a quick overview on tick-borne diseases and related conditions. Most importantly the information has allowed me to find a suitable treatment from my doctor which has had positive results."

Oliver



Story 6

Retina Australia WA Inc.

Impact:

- Prevention/early Intervention of mental health problems and/or illness
- Promotion of mental health
- Relationship building and community belonging

Retina Australia WA runs fundraising events and campaigns for research into the prevention and cure of inherited retinal diseases, and provides support services for affected individuals engaging members through social media, newsletters, their website and other activities.

Members meet monthly at various locations around Perth for peer support. These Meetups are designed to create opportunities to socialise and connect with peers as well as to engage with researchers and health professionals. Participation in Meetups builds confidence and reduces the isolation that commonly occurs with vision impairment and blindness often leading to mental distress. Retina Australia WA encourages its members to access the support services provided by social workers, counsellors and a clinical psychologist.

Pay it Forward funded raising awareness among ophthalmic professionals about the challenges and mental health risk faced by patients with vision loss and blindness through resource production and presentations. Approximately 40 ophthalmic specialists received educational packs containing information about the mental health impact following a diagnosis of incurable eye disease or blindness, and available support services including Retina Australia WA's Meetups.

Retina Australia WA's has since noticed an increased number of members attending Meetup Groups, as well as increased engagement by members via email, telephone contact, and participation at events.

Members expressed feelings of belonging and safety following engagement with the Group. Admitting that blindness makes life



difficult brought empowerment and less shame in seeking support when things 'got tough'. Members expressed increased confidence to engage in activities within the community.



Story 7

The Grief Centre of Western Australia



Impact:

- A recovery approach
- Relationship building and community belonging

The Grief Centre of Western Australia is an organisation formed to offer understanding, support, and a pathway to recovery through grief, after the loss of a loved one. The Centre was founded by two women who when dealing with their own grief, identified the lack of services available to those in bereavement.

It is acknowledged that early support and education can prevent many of the issues that arise from unresolved grief and, when managed well, can profoundly affect a person's ability to heal and resume their place within relationships, employment and community.

The mission of the Centre is to provide services including individual and family counselling, group meetings, youth, young people and children's workshops and community education programs and workshops. The Grief Centre of Western Australia's services have at their core, the belief that it is possible to grieve well and recover from loss.

Pay It Forward funded the Centre to raise awareness of their work within the wider community

"I didn't go straight home after the first meeting, not because I didn't want to go home to an empty house, as in the past, but because I was content to stay out, I was seeing my world a little differently..." Jim



through the purchase of marketing materials including banners, flags, flyers, and other collateral used to promote their service provision. A few years ago, the Centre was invited to attend a community festival but hesitated because of a lack of marketing resources. However the organiser, who had lost her teenage brother, commented that "grief is part of every community"; the Centre did participate but with limited resources. Now, many of the people benefiting from the Centre's services were referred through the resources provided by the grant.

"I had a feeling... that grieving is a painful... but necessary process... not an end (but) the beginning of a new stage in your life and given time and support you can get through it."

Story 8

Transmen of WA/TransFolk of WA

Impact:

- Prevention/early Intervention of mental health problems and/or illness
- A recovery approach
- Promotion of mental health
- Increased awareness and sustainability of mental health
- Relationship building and community belonging

TransFolk of WA was founded in 2012 as Transmen of WA to connect transgender men for friendship. The group grew quickly due to the absence of services for transgender adults in WA. Requests for information and support rose steadily with many new members at high risk of suicide. Parents, teachers and doctors began seeking advice from the group.

“At the point that I made contact with Transmen of WA I was suicidal and attempting to overdose. My gender incongruence was debilitating, every day felt like a chore and every time I woke up I wished I had not.”.....” If it were not for Transmen of WA, I would not be here. My son would have lost a parent, my mother would have lost a child and my sisters would have lost me. I have gained social and personal independence from the connections made here. I have a life now. I have my life now. I am living my most authentic self, a man, strong, content and proud.”

Since its founding, other gender diverse people approached the group for help and support. In response, Transmen built its capacity to support transwomen (individuals assigned the male sex at birth who identify as female) and non-binary people (individuals with gender identities that are not exclusively masculine or feminine) as well as gender diverse teenagers. In 2016, Transmen of WA re-branded to “TransFolk of WA”, and extra volunteers were trained in counselling and suicide intervention.



TransFolk of WA manages six online spaces, four monthly Support Groups and other various events and programs throughout the year providing support and information to nearly 500 individuals including the families and partners of their members.

Pay it Forward funded the group in 2015 for Public Liability Insurance enabling facilitated Support Groups and stall hire at major LGBTI events. This exposure resulted in increased collaboration with established LGBTI organisations.

Pay it Forward funded the group in 2016 to engage with a consultant to prepare for incorporation and assist with the development of their strategic plan. With the credibility of incorporation and an excellent reputation, the number of referrals from medical professionals significantly increased. Members are thriving in the city areas and Support Groups are expanding into the regions. TransFolk’s capacity and membership has increased, and members reported feeling empowered, more positive and a having reduced sense of isolation.



TransFolk of WA’s founder, Nick Lawrence, was the recipient of ConnectGroups’ 2017 Support Group Recognition and Good Practice Awards “Champion” Award

Story 9

ManKind Project



Impact:

- Prevention/early Intervention of mental health problems and/or illness
- Promotion of mental health
- Increased awareness and sustainability of mental health
- Relationship building and community belonging

The ManKind Project (MKP) is a non-profit training and education organisation with over three decades of proven success hosting life-changing experiential personal development programs for men. MKP supports a global network of free peer facilitated men's groups and supports men in leading lives of integrity, accountability, authenticity and service.

“As one of the coordinators of the Fremantle i-group I can reflect that the materials generated have been easily incorporated into the operation of the group. Forging clearer, written agreements with new participants and methodical capture of their contact details is very useful. Our members are also aware that there is written guidance available to us in the event of difficulty being experienced with a participant.”

Dennis Beros

Run by local men, volunteers, MKP strives to be inclusive and culturally aware while providing training programs to support men from all walks and stages of life, to face their challenges.

In Western Australia, MKP WA has been active since 2006, delivering men's educational/ training weekends and managing five Support Groups in Perth



and two in regional areas (South West). MKP WA has 60-80 active members participating in Group activities each week.

Pay it Forward funded engagement with a consultant to build MKP WA's capacity. Specifically, protocols were developed for intake and mental health assessment of new men entering Groups. Additionally a code of conduct, a group guideline 'behaviours of concern' protocol with associated processes and training were developed for containment of inappropriate conduct and/or where men can share and support each other confidentially and ethically.

Development of the protocols and processes have contributed to the group development and good governance of MKP WA across all Groups, and an increased understanding of the value of the new and consistent practices. The improved governance promotes the organisation as a good practice model in the area of men's health and wellbeing at a community level.

Story 10

Endometriosis Perth Sisterhood of Support

Impact:

- Prevention/early Intervention of mental health problems and/or illness
- A recovery approach
- Promotion of mental health
- Increased awareness and sustainability of mental health
- Relationship building and community belonging

Endometriosis Perth Sisterhood of Support (EPSS) provides education, information, support and a voice to women living with endometriosis. The Group engages its members in metropolitan and regional areas of Western Australia online as a Facebook Group as well as through monthly Group meetings and social events. The Group also use their social media platform to raise awareness of endometriosis and to provide members with a platform to share their stories and experiences publically.

The Group organises presentations from guest speakers, workshops, and provides peer support to encourage self-management strategies for coping with endometriosis and its mental health impact, and to empower women with the skills, social interaction, and education to empower themselves.

Pay it Forward funded EPSS's engagement with a psychologist to plan and deliver two x four-hour workshops around coping with the issues and mental health risk of living with endometriosis. Participants interacted with the psychologist, participated in group activities, were

"Well facilitated. Addressed some of my mental health issues. Was able to be open and felt supported."

"Natalia was very good, she listened to everyone and treated us all with respect. The guided meditation was very relaxing."



provided with tools to assist with improving and managing mental wellbeing, shared their stories with peers and received information about mental health support services.

Funds from the grant were also used to purchase public liability insurance to support social activities and events to raise awareness of EPSS within the community, and to increase membership.

An important outcome was the development of a more positive and safe environment where members engaged with peers, shared their experiences, and learned to incorporate self-care principles into their lives to support their mental wellbeing. Additionally, EPSS's membership has increased significantly and the group has implemented a 'Wellness Wednesday' mental wellbeing social media campaign that continues to engage members on-line.



Endometriosis Perth Sisterhood of Support was the recipient of ConnectGroups' 2017 Support Group Recognition and Good Practice Awards "New and Emerging Self help and Support Group" Award

Story 11

Langford Aboriginal Association

Impact:

- Prevention/early Intervention of mental health problems and/or illness
- Promotion of mental health
- Relationship building and community belonging

Langford Aboriginal Association Inc (LAA) is a not for profit Aboriginal community-managed organisation based in Langford in the City of Gosnells. LAA delivers programs that raise awareness of health and wellbeing, encourages social interaction, delivers adult community education, and promotes positive social and emotional wellbeing to build community resilience, and protective factors against psychological distress and suicide. Attending LAA gives participants access to resources, programs, services including outreach, and community.

Pay it Forward funded LAA to deliver three workshops for participants of their Art and Yarning program, and Moorditj Yoka women's group.

"Well worth attending. Recommend to anyone."

"Very well prepared and facilitated workshop."



LAA's Art and Yarning program is an art therapy group that targets Aboriginal disabled youth with learning difficulties at school, and supports healing and strength of culture in a culturally-safe environment. The Moorditj Yoka women's group provides a yarning space for support and healing. Workshop participants included Elders to support and mentor those experiencing stressors or other issues.



"I found the section on lateral violence to be very interesting."

The workshops focussed on strengthening social and emotional wellbeing through topics that included grief and loss, stress, anger, and family violence. The workshops inspired

participants to be more positive and hopeful about their future, with most affirming the workshops supported them to experience optimism about their mental health. Additionally, workshop tools increased the capacity of participants to better emotionally support themselves, their family, and the wider community.

Post-workshop delivery, LAA experienced increased participation and membership in each of the groups as well as better interaction by participants with other LAA programs.

"We need more of these workshops."

Story 12

Older Women's Network (WA) Inc.

Impact:

- Prevention/early Intervention of mental health problems and/or illness
- Promotion of mental health
- Relationship building and community belonging

The Older Women's Network (WA) Inc (OWN) is group for older women (55yrs +) with a core aim of reaching out to women in the community who may be socially isolated and disconnected, encouraging them

to participate in the groups' activities, build relationships with each other, advocate, and support each other.

The Network operates two Support Groups: a theatre Group, which has been part of the Gosnells community for 20+ years. Members perform and are involved in set and costume design. Each new performance challenges members to develop new skills, seek advice and network with other likeminded groups. The Network also has a Friendship/Community Advocacy Group in Gosnells which provides a range of activities, guest speakers, outings and support of local charities including knitting blankets, beanies and bears to support local children's charities.



"My mate and I (both mid-sixties males) ... talked with one of your very helpful volunteers. The reality is that our wives may be alone one day and both are interested in the information we gave them. Thank you volunteers and OWN Group for being there."

Ned Jordan and John Fletcher



Members are encouraged and supported to find their voice and assume leadership roles within the Network. In addition to working to eradicate isolation in the community, OWN advocates on behalf of older women at all levels of government, local, state and federal ensuring that issues affecting older women are kept on the agenda.

Pay it Forward funded OWN to upgrade their promotional and marketing materials and develop a digitised logo. Marketing collateral supported efforts to increase community awareness and membership, re-engage existing members, and more effectively outreach to older women in the community. The materials allowed the Network to be more active and visible in multiple community events including co-hosting a domestic violence forum, and to be perceived as progressive and relevant. As a result of the increased engagement and renewed enthusiasm, OWN meetings have become more animated and lively.

Story 13

Recovery Rocks Community Inc.

Impact:

- Prevention/early Intervention of mental health problems and/or illness
- A recovery approach
- Promotion of mental health
- Increased awareness and sustainability of mental health
- Relationship building and community belonging

Recovery Rocks Community is a peer-led and peer-run recovery-focused community. Members either have a lived experience of mental health recovery or support persons living lives of recovery. The community support each other through informal peer support, sharing ideas, experiences, information, and learnings on the recovery journey.

The community operate a weekly Recovery Education and Support Group and a fortnightly Creative Recovery Support Group where members explore and learn recovery coping strategies from trained peer facilitators. They also run a monthly community social gathering, bringing members together over a shared lunch to connect, support each other, and share recovery experiences.

Recovery Rocks Community has successfully run a yearly, live in retreat for the last five years, where peers have valued the opportunity to get away and have some respite from the day to day routines.



Pay it Forward funded the Community to engage an external consultant to develop a sustainable volunteer service structure that included development of policies and processes for engagement and retention of skilled volunteers, induction processes, and risk management. This project required extensive consultation with Community membership and the Board of Management, a gap analysis, and recruitment, training, and mentoring.

The volunteer service structure will support the Community to build its capacity to deliver intentional peer support, and transform existing connections into formal participating members, empowering

“Recovery Rocks has helped me feel like I belong to a family who tries it’s best to support me in my good days and not so good. I have hope for a better future with a community of support in my recovery that values me as an equal.” Chris E

and upskilling members. Additionally, the project helped build sustainability through access to skilled grant writing and fundraising volunteers, improved communications, marketing and awareness-raising activities, and expanded service provision.

Story 14

South West Autism Network Inc

Impact:

- Prevention/early Intervention of mental health problems and/or illness
- Promotion of mental health
- Increased awareness and sustainability of mental health
- Relationship building and community belonging

The South West Autism Network Inc (SWAN) is based in Busselton and provides support across the South West. SWAN provides information, resources, advocacy and support to individuals living with autism Spectrum Disorders and their families through their public Facebook page and very active closed Facebook Peer Support Group. The Facebook Group has the benefit of providing immediate support and information to members, especially for families isolated by geography or disability. SWAN supports more than 450 families and has over 1100 members.



SWAN hosts community events, respite weekends, WA NDIS support, and six social and friendship groups for children and young adults in Busselton and Bunbury. SWAN also houses a well-stocked resource library of issues related to autism, free to loan for members.

Pay it Forward funded SWAN for the delivery of two workshops to empower members with the practical skills and knowledge for carers to meet the needs of their loved ones. Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) equipped parents with an understanding of signs and symptoms of mental illness and mental health support services available. Carers were upskilled to recognise a mental health crisis and to support someone experiencing mental health distress.

Pay it Forward also funded a Positive Behaviour Support workshop that improved the capacity of families coping with difficult, aggressive and/or inappropriate behaviours including understanding the importance of behavioural triggers and consequences, and de-escalation strategies.

Many families in the South West did not have access to suitable education or capacity building to support the needs of loved ones. The project helped bridge the gap, improving local knowledge, capacity, and attitudes to autism and mental health.

“Introducing positive mental health discussions into the community.”



Beyond the Stories - Investing In Our Members Strengths

ConnectGroups is committed to demonstrating best practice and continuous improvement in order to best serve its stakeholders and ensure that the *Pay it Forward Plan* remains relevant, effective, and evidence-based. Innovative approaches to specific needs and mental health promotion remain **key** PIF objectives.

The following three initiatives represent strengths-based approaches that positively impacted positive mental health in peer Support Groups, their members, their facilitators/leaders, and the wider community.

Workforce Development/Cert IV in Community Services

ConnectGroups funds a scholarship program of units of competency toward a Cert IV in Community Services and focuses on units supporting group facilitation and leadership. The program launched in 2012/13, and has completed five cycles; funds are allocated from the *Pay it Forward Plan*. More than fifty (50) participants have benefited from the training.

The original intent of the ConnectGroups' partnership with North Metropolitan TAFE and development of the scholarship program was to upskill volunteer peer Support Group facilitators through acquisition of relevant tertiary units. The concept recognised existing skillsets and empowered facilitators to build capacity and leadership within their Support Group.

One of the outcomes of the Cert IV scholarship program was increased capacity in the wider Community Services sector contributing to workforce opportunities for peer Support Group leaders and facilitators. ConnectGroups recognises the value in continuing to support training of Group facilitators and leaders, both to improve leadership within Support Groups and as a meaningful workforce development initiative. The scholarships builds capacity in the sector, and contributes to employment opportunities as peer support and community service workers.



In February 2017, ConnectGroups launched its fifth cycle of students participating to earn seven units toward a Cert IV in Community Services – ten Support Group facilitators/leaders engaged during that cycle. Additional funding was allocated during this cycle to offer scholarships to complete the qualification to all ten participants.

The model is tailored to the needs of scholarship recipients and is extensively supported by ConnectGroups and North Metropolitan TAFE to ensure a safe, relevant and successful experience, and participant retention.

Mental Health Week 2016 – Stories from the Field

As part of 2016 Mental Health Week, in October, ConnectGroups hosted 'Stories from the Field', an event centred on storytelling as a tool to improving one's own mental health.

Three Support Group members (and past **Pay it Forward** grant recipients) shared their stories of hope and recovery: Mauz Kay from Recovery Rocks Community, Corrine Maslin from Even Keel Support Association, and David Bentley from the Medically Retired WA Police Officers Association.



The value of storytelling allows people to connect to their history, to grow beyond it, and to transcend the experience. In the case of mental health, the lived experience is a transformative model for others. It builds connections and an understanding that one is not alone in their experience. Sharing one's journey through storytelling is a means to help others on theirs. Resilience is strengthened by recognising that we are all experts in our own lives and that we all have something to share with others.¹

'Stories from the Field' was an opportunity for Support Group members to connect and network with their peers, and to be inspired and strengthened by others' journeys.

¹ Resilience and Benefits to Sharing Your Story, Psychology Today: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-web-violence/201309/resilience-and-4-benefits-sharing-your-story>

2017 Support Groups Recognition and Good Practice Awards

In October 2017, ConnectGroups hosted its biennial Support Groups Recognition and Good Practice Awards night. This event recognised the important role that Self Help and Support Groups play in the intervention, prevention and recovery of individuals and families through innovative and creative practices.

This event was an important opportunity to celebrate the under-recognised and under-resourced Self Help and Support Group sector, and acknowledge their important work in the community. Awards were given out in seven categories. Five of seven recipients were *Pay it Forward* grant recipients past or present.

The Recognition and Good Practice Awards come from the simple concept of valuing the work of Self Help and Support Groups – that each individual and Support Group is appreciated for their work done in the service of others.

Most Innovative Self Help and Support Group:

Winner: Depression Support Network Albany

Finalist: Pulmonary Hypertension Network Australia

New and Emerging Self Help and Support Group:

Winner: Endometriosis Perth Sisterhood of Support

Finalist: Perth Active Depression Support Group

Excellence in Regional and Rural WA:

Winner: Doors Wide Open

Finalist: Wongan Hills Therapy Group

Pay it Forward Plan:

Winner: angelhands

Finalist: Alongside

Dream it Forward:

Winner: Lilman Saints Football Club

Finalist: Tambellup Aboriginal Progress Association

Live it Forward together:

Winner: Lung Information and Friendship for Everyone

Finalist: GAIN Inc. Pelvic Pain Support Group

Self Help and Support Group Champion:

Winner: Nick Lawrence – TransFolk of WA

Finalist: Ron Love – Tuart Place



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