

RE-ENGAGING IN COMMUNITY



FIRST EVALUATION SNAPSHOT 1 April - 31 December 2020

WHAT IS RE-ENGAGING IN COMMUNITY?

Background

Re-engaging in Community (REC) is a pilot program which commenced July 2019, funded through a Lotterywest grant. The program was created to assist people experiencing social isolation and disengagement once housed after a period of homelessness. REC is a collaboration between United Way WA (UWWA) and the Zero Project (Ruah as backbone), formerly known as the 50 Lives 50 Homes Housing First Initiative (50 Lives). A steering group of representatives from community organisations involved in homelessness in the Perth and Fremantle metropolitan areas was established to assist with the program.

What does the program entail?

The program is led and managed by UWWA and provides people with volunteer social support to assist them to re-engage in the community where they are now living. Participants are referred through community organisations, working with people who have experienced homelessness or similar. Recruiting of volunteers is undertaken by UWWA, with their training conducted by Befriend to provide support to participants to help build social connections and involvement in community activities. Participants are carefully matched with a volunteer based on determining factors, such as mutual interests and availability. First meetings between participants and volunteers are coordinated and supervised by a peer support worker provided by UWWA. Participants and volunteers remain in close contact with supervising peer support to ensure progress is being made, expectations can be met and ensuring a 'good fit' is evident between participant and volunteer.

REC PROGRAM PARTNERS

United Way WA
Project Lead
Ruah, Zero Project
Project Support

REC STEERING GROUP MEMBERS

United Way WA
Ruah
Befriend
St Bart's
St Pat's
Passages
Patricia Giles Centre for Non-Violence

REC PROGRAM AIMS



- 1 Support participants to engage in the community and develop strong social networks
- 2 Develop pathways for social engagements and activities participants enjoy
- 3 Support enhanced physical and mental health of participants

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE REC PROGRAM

The REC program was due to commence early 2020, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, full commencement was delayed until July. While the recruitment of volunteers continued, and some participant referrals were received from April, face to face volunteer training and introductions of participants and volunteers could not be undertaken until the emergency lockdown rules were eased. This compelled the organisation to be innovative in their methods of delivery, providing volunteers with training online.

Referrals for participants was reduced due to competing priorities of referring agencies, it was necessary to adjust from face to face meetings with participants to phone support.

Other elements of the program were also delayed due to restrictions of physical distancing placed on attendance in community organisations. Planned social interaction activities, community BBQ's, morning teas and group classes, were not able to be offered.

REFERRALS TO REC

Participants are referred to REC by their referring organisation caseworker. Figure 1. below shows the referrals each participating organisation has forwarded to REC in the first nine months of the pilot. Case workers also provide support to REC coordinators to ensure participants and volunteers are appropriately paired.

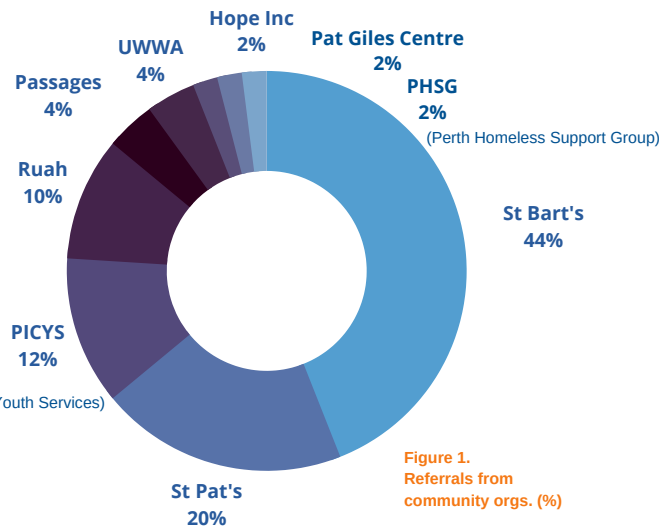


Figure 1. Referrals from community orgs. (%)

"We started this program just as COVID hit. So for our referrers, particularly the steering committee - who make up the majority of our referring organisations - the priority became making sure that people were safe, housed and fed. So I think programs like this (REC) took a backseat...the COVID issue and the subsequent slowdown or the slippage has had lots of knock-on effects...I would like to have seen us by now hosting more group activities, bringing the participants together to see if we could get some more linkage, that kind of thing...I'm really hopeful for next year."

-Kath Snell, CEO UWWA



This snapshot has been prepared as part of the independent UWA evaluation of the Re-engaging in Community project
Home2Health Research Team
School of Population and Global Health



THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

WHO HAS BEEN SUPPORTED BY REC?



A total of 53 participant referrals were received from community organisations between Apr - Dec 2020 with introductions between pairs conducted July - Dec 2020



38% Female - 60% Male - 2% Transgender



Participants are aged between 23 and 90yrs
With an average age of 45 yrs



17% of participants identified as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse



8% of participants identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander



32% of participants are linked to the Zero Project (Formerly known as 50 Lives)

Matching Participants with Volunteers

26 participants and volunteers were successfully matched, including 6 matched female pairs, 3 matched male pairs and 4 matched mixed pairs. Of these, 13 matches are still active, as of 31 Dec 2020. Participants and Volunteers refer to each other as buddies.

"When I've met with volunteers and their buddy, I think - you're chalk and cheese. There's two ladies (who) said, 'We've got so much more in common than (REC Volunteering Officer, UWVA) even realised when she matched us,' and that's gold. That is something we need to unpick from here...because that's what makes it - and I don't know whether it's part of what she does or it's...part of this participant and volunteer coming together and making it work... I met with the two of them and the first thing the participant said was, 'This program has been so good for me.'"

-Wendy, Community Worker UWVA

CASE STUDY - NANCY* & TRISHA*

Background: Nancy* (aged mid 50's) experienced homelessness for 2-3 years prior to being housed mid 2019. Although she is happy to be in her home, she was feeling lonely. Physical and mental health issues impact on her ability to work and on her wellbeing.

Interaction with REC: Nancy was referred to REC in mid 2020 and matched with volunteer Trisha* (of similar age). They meet regularly at a local café or shopping centre and communicate via text. Trisha brings craft, clothes, or household items, from op-shops, which they sort together, often items will prompt memories about positive times from the past. Nancy enjoys sharing photos of her pets with Trisha.

Nancy stated that *"... involvement with my buddy Trisha has increased my confidence in communicating with people,"* and that *"...I feel more comfortable when I'm out in the community."* Trisha recently shared *"I have seen some really positive changes in how Nancy interacts with people when we are out and about- she isn't so defensive anymore and smiles more often...the other day I introduced her as my friend to someone I knew and she just blossomed, it really meant a lot to her to be called my friend."*

CASE STUDY - TOM* & SARA*

Background: Tom* (aged mid-20's) has been cycling in and out of homelessness for 2-3 years. Eligible for the 50 Lives program, he was successful in receiving secure housing in late 2019. Mental health, AOD and justice system issues have impacted his wellbeing.

Interaction with REC: Tom was referred to REC mid 2020 and matched with a female volunteer, Sara* (aged mid 50's). They regularly meet at a local café. The frequency of their catch-ups and conversations during their meetings are determined by Tom's mood and emotional state. Sara checks in on him regularly via txt msg or phone call. Their interactions create space for Tom to discuss his situation, and his hopes and plans for the future. Recently, Tom's caseworker advised that *"...Tom hadn't been travelling too well but Tom felt having his volunteer buddy to have a yarn with, benefitted him as he's usually supported by paid support."* Tom's caseworker stated *"He definitely values Sara's time and appreciates the advice he gets from her."* Tom has said of Sara *"...she gets me."* Recently, Tom described his relationship with Sara as one *"...based on mutual respect."* He described how *"...she often checks up on me, I listen to her point of view and take it on board."* Sara stated recently, *"Tom has come a long way and I am very proud of him. I think having someone like me in the community has really helped him."*

"...one of our most successful volunteer/participant match ups was with a newly housed single dad and graffiti artist, we secured funding for art supplies and our volunteer, also an artist, has been able to mentor our participant to exhibit his art in an art show..."

-Christy, Event and Volunteering Officer UWVA

What's coming next?

Many lessons have been learned during the first year of implementation. Along with adding innovations to overcome the challenges of introducing a new program during a pandemic, the REC team also identified where aspects of the program should be enhanced and will be adjusting with the following in 2021:

- Increase opportunities in training for volunteers including Trauma Informed Practice Training
- Goal to match 60 participants with 60 volunteers by 30 July 2021
- Addressing "What does success look like?" for the REC program
- Consider exit strategy with supports for participants post the end of the program
- Extension of program to compensate for COVID-19 slippage

