

NORTH EAST RIVERINA RURAL COUNSELLING SERVICE Inc.

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"Working with communities for communities"

To whom it may concern;

RE: Drought Support Review

Members of the North East Riverina Rural Counselling Service Inc. (NERRCS), and Riverina Communities Rural Network wish to express our concern about the potential loss of knowledge and expertise should a number of funded programs and positions cease on June 30, 2009, as is currently expected. NERRCS and the Riverina Communities Rural Network met recently in Weethalle for our scheduled regional network meeting. There increasing concern was raised that a great number of the providers working within this network indicated that their current funding/ contracts would cease in 2009.

The list included

NERRCS Riverina Communities Project Officer
Centrelink Murray Darling Basin Unit Professionals and Rural Service Officers
DPI Drought Support Workers
Relationships Australia - Family Support Drought Response Team
Riverina Division of General Practice - Community Support Workers
Riverina Division of General Practice - Primary Health Care Workers (Sept 09)
GSAHS - Rural Mental Health Drought Project
Rural Financial Counselling Service will be reviewed in June 09

Loss of funding for these agencies and providers effectively means the service withdrawal to a number of communities at risk will need to commence in early 2009 due to requirements to effectively cease existing services and report on outcomes and expenditure, as required by funding agencies, by 30 June 2009..

It is our view that withdrawal of funding for the services in these communities will result in charitable organizations being left to respond to a number of significant and in some cases, overwhelming, issues. We note that many church and charitable organizations in this area are operated largely by elderly volunteers, who are unlikely to have either the professional expertise or resources to provide an appropriate response to affected families and communities. This situation would also result in responses being limited to predominantly emergency care, with no real opportunity for referrals to organizations which could also offer

intervention strategies, counselling or other assistance for connection with Government services.

It is the reality for the people of the communities within this region that they will continue to struggle with a range of issues, even if they can continue to maintain their businesses and community connections through this current drought system. In our view, the issues which require ongoing attention from Government include:

- Increasing debt and financial pressures, including terms of trade issues;
- Environmental challenges related to climate change, including the potential costs to communities of carbon trading etc;
- Increased transport costs for travel to appropriate health care;
- Increased costs of education and training for young people and those seeking to learn new skills, including women in rural communities and farmers seeking to leave a farming enterprise, or participate in part time off-farm employment;
- Continuing decline of small rural communities, resulting in farm aggregation and centralization of services in larger areas;
- Increasing social impacts resulting from the drought, including fatigue among community workers dealing with these issues over a lengthy period of time, reduction in the number of voluntary workers available within communities, and increasing social isolation for families unable to participate in community activities due to cost or the increasing impact of mental illness in rural communities;
- Increasing impact on family and personal relationships. The breakdown of relationship communities, continues to rise unabated and is likely to continue to do so, without significant intervention strategies being available to these communities.

While the drought has remained, the flow-on effects to individuals and local communities has largely exhausted their capacity to think laterally and respond proactively. The speed at which this decline is happening demands a more intensive and far-reaching response.

These issues and needs will extend well beyond the end of this current period of drought and the Government must acknowledge that services should remain in place for a period beyond the end of the current drought to enable communities a reasonable period of recovery, so that individuals, families and communities can rebuild strong and more resilient communities for the future. This approach would be consistent with existing disaster recovery programs which provide for assistance to continue beyond the period of immediate disaster response.

The North East Riverina Rural Counselling Service (NERRCS) has been servicing the Riverina for 18 years. It is a grassroots, not for profit, local community based organization currently delivering the **Riverina Communities' Building a Future Together Project**. This project commenced in June 2007 with initial federal funding provided through the **Local Answers Program (FAHCSIA)** and has continued with in-kind community contributions and increasing support from local business, government departments and community organisations.

NERRCS also facilitates and coordinates the **Riverina Communities Rural Network** which is a cross-agency of approximately 30 organisations (government, non-government and community) to ensure a coordinated approach to service delivery. The group has a strong

commitment to promoting strength and resilience within communities affected by drought, by providing knowledge and assistance to the communities with whom we work

Through this project **NERRCS and Riverina Communities Rural Network** aim to deliver services to all members of the community under the following framework and encompasses the belief that:

1. The future belongs to those who plan and prepare for today
2. Community members are the best people to identify and action their own needs.
3. Programs are socially inclusive
4. In delivery of evidenced based best practice models
5. Holistic and collaborative planning and delivery of services

NERRCS in conjunction with the **Riverina Communities Rural Network** is a recognized asset based model being delivered within the Riverina with over 30 representatives including Government, Non Government and community organisations. Our response differs to that of many other regions as our approach is based on Appreciative enquiry rather than the deficit based analysis.

The underlying assumption of appreciative enquiry is that people and organizations are full of assets, capabilities resources and strengths that can be located affirmed and leveraged and encouraged whereas deficit based analysis, while powerful in diagnosis tends to undermine human organizing and motivation, because it creates a sense of threat, fear, comparison, defensiveness and deference to expert hierarchies. Problem solving as a means of inspiring and sustaining human system changes is therefore limited) *Reference: Blissett & Browne*

The future prosperity of rural and regional Australia is clearly dependent on retaining its people. Skilled communities will be best placed to maximize opportunities and to look ahead with confidence and, in turn, will be able to respond to their own needs. Given this, it is therefore imperative that continuations of positions currently funded be extended beyond June 09 to ensure the proactive, professional, evidenced based programs can continue the valuable and important work already being undertaken.

As these short contracts and funding rounds continue, the cost to the professional response deteriorates ie a less professional evidence based approach. This is largely occurring because of the need to structure programs and assistance on a short term basis only, when many communities would benefit from longer term programs, which may run for periods of up to three years.

With no surety beyond June 2009, professionals will leave seeking more permanent options for employment and resigning their positions. With the likelihood of further economic downturn, many professionals are already seeking to secure more permanent employment to safeguard themselves and their families from potentially difficult economic conditions in the next two years. As a result, large amounts of knowledge, expertise and networking opportunities may be lost to rural and regional areas, where it is already difficult to attract skilled professionals in required areas.

Our experiences and successes to date encourage us to believe that communities involved in these activities are looking for options and are becoming increasingly self-reliant, cohesive and determinant of their own future

"Barellan has been brought back to life. The community has been transformed with the help of NERRCS's network of service providers who've helped the town prepare for its upcoming centenary celebrations" *Leanne Hawker- Extract ABC radio Country*

Should funding opportunities continue NERRCS and the Riverina Communities Rural Network are well placed to launch further proactive service delivery. Stepping over crisis and challenges, harnessing the communities' assets and enabling them to face reality and adapt to changing circumstances with confidence. Embracing the future whatever that may bring.

The Way Forward – A model for everyone everywhere

It is the strong view of NERRCS and the Riverina Communities rural network that the most appropriate way forward is to actively engage with communities to enhance the capacity and ability of individuals, families and communities to respond positively to their identified needs in a proactive manner.

Consideration should be given to establishing programs which are funded to operate on a medium term basis of at least three years, so that programs have a reasonable period of time to become established and to encourage the retention of suitably qualified professional staff. In our view, the current funding arrangements, which operate over 12 months do not give programs an effective operational period, due to the time required to recruit and develop programs at the beginning of a funding period, as well as the period required at the end of the funding period to evaluate and report on program outcomes. A minimum of three year funding period would enable programs to gain some 'traction' in rural communities and could include funding arrangements which monitored milestone achievements, as well as total program outcomes, to minimise the risk to taxpayer funds.

In order for rural communities to make lasting and sustainable changes NERRCS believes that

- A continued and sustained investment in human capital is essential – rural communities play a valuable role in Australia and have the capacity to contribute significantly to our economic growth over time.
- Options for renewal, including development of options for new industry to sustain rural and regional growth are critical
- Programs should have a focus on enhancing community and individual resilience to enable communities to become self-sustaining over long periods and during periods of economic uncertainty in rural and regional areas due to climate change
- Programs should have a positive and proactive approach, ultimately – stepping away from a 'recovery' model to an ongoing community development approach, which can create enduring opportunities for rural and regional areas

Whilst drought is the reality at present, "human and social" programs that focused on "transition" would generally be viewed as more socially inclusive and positive than that of the current drought relief model which is seen in many communities as exclusive to the farming community

Recommendation

Work with local providers and communities to become more collegiate

Use of local community based providers

Allow the community to develop opportunities for themselves

Do not recreate the wheel. Use existing "tried and tested models that are currently working
 Longer term funding in order to initiate sustained responses
 Acknowledge drought as a reality but invest in transition "terms in of human and social
 capacity programs
 Maintain maximum flexibility and adaptability given the ever changing circumstances
 Ensure evidenced based best practice models
 Adequate supervision of providers

In order to do this Governments need to make a commitment to fund a range of Government
 and community based organizations for periods greater than 12 months. In reality any thing
 less than that taking into the account the set up and wind down requirements, organisations
 are only able to provide direct assistance for 6 – 8 months in a year. This surely creates a false
 economy. We also note that it is imperative that adequate measures including a diverse range
 of skilled services providers are available to help deliver changes in order to meet and achieve
 any planned outcomes as a result of this review. We also note that in our view any programs
 should be run on a whole of community basis because of the reliance on local community
 assets to farming productivity

On this basis NERRCS makes the following recommendations

1. Longer funding terms – no less than 3 years acknowledging a period of adjustment will be needed
2. Give priority funding to organizations which are able to develop self sustaining multidisciplinary teams within their community. Multidisciplinary teams should include providers for
 - Health
 - Welfare and Pastoral Care
 - Business Support
 - Education and Training
 - Information Provision
 - Financial Servicing
3. Funding should be given priority to organisations which focus on human capital rather than economic performance. Funding should be linked to the achievement of milestones.
4. Funded programs should have a strong focus on preparing communities for future economic conditions and climate change and should therefore have a strong focus on education training and readjustment programs. Programs must be focused on renewal and be socially inclusive and be available to all members of the rural community.

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