MANNING VALLEY NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES INC.

40th Annual Report 2021

Manning Valley Neighbourhood Services Inc.

Our Vision

Our vision is an active, diverse and inclusive community that celebrates its uniqueness and strengths.

Our Mission

MVNS is a community development organisationthat resources and empowers individuals, grouos and the community in the Manning Valley and surrounding LGA's, to address issues that affect them.

MVNS Activities Umbrella

Neighbourhood Centre

- Information & Referral
- Advocacy
- Community Development
- Resume writing
- Cheap use of phone, computer and photocopier
- Support for community members who need to talk
- promotion and assistance for community groups
- Tax Help: July to October. Free assistance with tax returns for low income earners
- Groups and courses

CONTACT: Staff and Volunteers
6553 5121

Manning Valley Women's Group

Aims to promote, support and empower women in the community

CONTACT:
Mary
6592 9315

Midcoast Renewal Committee

A group formed to lead community based recovery after the Black Summer Bushfires 2019-20
Drought affested communities are also part of the targeted response given the integral nature and effect of the drought prior to the fires.

CONTACT:
Caron
6553 5121

Cooperative Legal Service Delivery

Building cooperative & strategic networks of key legal services and community organisations

CONTACT:
Jane
Project Officer
6592 9315

Manning Cultural Connections Committee

To promote social inclusion and provide an engaging intercultural platform in the Manning Valley

Garden Kitchen

A kitchen resource that provides support toward self-reliance to disadvantaged clients in a purposeful approach which provides a meal, advocacy, education and opportunities to commune.

Contact
Caron
6553 5121

Manning Valley Cooperative Living Program

Financial assistance and case work for individuals & families in crisis.

Available to all people living in the Manning Valley who are experiencing financial crisis and/or other misfortune or suffering which is contributing to poverty or helplessness.

CONTACT:
6553 5121

Manning Suicide Prevention Network

Aims to:

- Provide information in respect to mental health support services in our community
- Raise awareness of the incidence of suicide in our community
- Provided education to the community on how they can help within their own family and friendship groups
- Advocate to improve services and improve ease of access to services
- Coordinate local events to promote suicide awareness and share relevant information

CONTACT:
6553 5121

The Validation Project

The objective is to validate womens experience of the fires. In doing so we can aim to reduce isolation, increase health, resilience and quality of life and social cohesion by instigating regular get togethers. We would expect that these women will develop stronger networks and offer support to other women.

CONTACT:
Lisa

Manning River Turtle Conservation Group

Aims to promote awareness of the Manning river Turtle as well as preserve their habitat for their ongoing survival.

CONTACT:
Clare
0427 655 051

Manning Valley Community Gardens

Development and maintenance of a sustainable garden for the community by the community

CONTACT:
6553 5121

Migrant Settlement Project Worker

Information & referral for migrants and NESB residents of the Mid North Coast.

CONTACT:
Jane
6553 5121

Chairperson's Report

MVNS Management Committee once again recognises the difficulties that the organisation has faced in the last 12 months. Ongoing impacts from COVID on service delivery and the requirement to find other ways and avenues to continue service delivery throughout COVID has been challenging. The floods also challenged our need to continue to be available to the broader community while adapting to new target groups and client outcomes.

While many services closed their doors during COVID, MVNS has remained open to the community throughout, providing much needed support and hope to a community that has been affected harder than many over the last two years.

MVNS has been committed to the refocus required by the Department of Communities and Justice under the Targeted Earlier Intervention funding (TEI). We were able to achieve many of the Milestones required by DCJ as a part of our new contracting.

This year saw the finalisation of the PHN funded Empowering Communities Program. What a much needed project! Once again affected by COVID but many fantastic outcomes (see separate report).

We also received funds this year from the Bendigo Bank to continue to work with women affected by the fires. The floods meant that this project didn't really get underway until July 2021.

This year we also received funds from the Department of Communities and Justice to provide a much needed overhaul and update of our technology, capacity and associated monitoring.

Securing insurance provides a dilemma for small organisations at the moment with the level of excess making it almost unaffordable. However, with a bit of hunting around we were able to secure appropriate insurance this year.

Please read the staff reports as they show all that has been done, challenges faced and many successes. They are also a reminder of the wide range of activities that happen at MVNS and the commitment we felt compelled to sustain through these difficult times.

The uncertainties of COVID forced many of our volunteers into considered isolation but we are grateful to them all for their commitment to MVNS.

Thank you to the Management Committee and staff who continue to oversee MVNS programs and the many other great things that we do. This is a voluntary role and is much appreciated.

MVNS Management Committee

Treasurer's Report

I am pleased to be able to present the Treasurer's report for the financial year 2020-2021.

Essential Assurance Services Pty Ltd audited the financial accounts. Rhonda Futterleib and her staff are professional and thorough in the audit process. We thank Rhonda for her comprehensive, well explained report to the Management Committee for the MVNS.

I am happy to report that they have concluded that MVNS is an going concern and they will be issuing an unqualified audit opinion.

MVNS has
o Positive balance between current assets and liabilities, cashflow and confirmation of funding for 2022.

The tabled audited financial statements demonstrate last year's financial position. Some things to note:
• MVNS had a surplus of $24,516
• MVNS received a grants - ATO $14,274 / DCJ SSTF $40,000 / Community Enterprise Foundation $44,500
• MVNS has carried through funding from 2020-2021 of $164,000 and will carry through funding into 2022 due to the impact of Bushfires/ COVID/ Floods on implementation of programs (called JOBS in the Financial report).

MVNS Inc's financial administration and account record keeping are professionally managed and administrated by our Manager, Caron Watkins and Office Administrator, Kerrie McTaggart. I would like to thank them for their on-going excellent financial administration. Their dedication and commitment is immeasurable.

Susan Ballard
Treasurer

Manager's Report-TEI/MVNS Inc.

Manning Valley Neighbourhood Services Inc

MVNS has continued to fulfil its' mission this year; empowering individuals and communities through community development and direct service delivery.

While our core funding body has changed our target groups, we still see an overwhelming need for support and services by the broader and disadvantaged community members who are reaching out in so many ways. This indicates to us that there are gaps developing which aren't being met by any other services. As much as possible we are addressing these gaps through various other funding channels.

I'm proud to say that we were one of very few community services that have remained open non-stop throughout the last 2 years and the various disasters.

While there is a report enclosed regarding the funding received for post fire recovery activities which was successful through the Mid Coast Renewal Committee, it was moving to see how much those impacted wanted to start gathering again. All credit to Taycee and Lucinda who rolled out this funding and the activities to so many people.

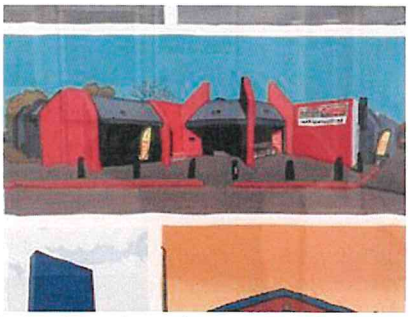
After the initial COVID lockdowns in 2020 we realised that we weren't seeing as many fire impacted residents as we had been, while still knowing that many had not rebuilt and were living in tents or caravans. This indicated to us that there was still much needed support required. In particular we felt that womens' role in the fires and the ongoing recovery had not really been acknowledged. We applied for funding to establish the Validation Project. We received funds for a 12 month project through the Bendigo Bank. Due to COVID and floods it only got underway in May 2021, but the initial response to the project has been amazing and we look forward to great opportunities and outcomes.

The fires and floods showed us how generous communities can be when things go wrong. It would be great if this continued every day. We were involved in many community and community services events which helped to support outlying communities in engaging with services, accessing grants and general support..

Technology and data proved to be major challenges again this year. Coincidentally, DCJ have provided some funds to ensure their funded organisations can upgrade their technology in this new world of COVID and working from home.

The Manning Suicide Prevention Network was initiated and they asked to come under an auspicing arrangement with us. The need for awareness around suicide and prevention is a vital need in our community and we look forward to working with them in the future.

This year we have self funded a Volunteer Program Coordinator to assist in ensuring our protocols and procedures are up to standard, and that the little things don't get forgotten. I would like to thank each and every volunteer for the time, enthusiasm and love that they give to MVNS and our staff.



(A painting of our old cafe in Bushland made it to an exhibition!)

Targeted Earlier Intervention

The Manning Valley Neighbourhood Centre receives funding through the NSW Department of Communities and Justice – Targeted Earlier Intervention Program (TEI). TEI aims to 'improve the wellbeing of children, young people and families at a population level and requires flexible and responsive systems that are equipped to respond effectively and early to emerging issues and challenges1. Target groups are:

- 0-5 year olds
- Young parents
- Young people
- Aboriginal communities

This has been our first full year operating under the Targeted Earlier Intervention model. TEI will require a stronger focus on delivering responsive and flexible prevention and interventions that meet the needs of children, young people, families and communities experiencing or at risk of vulnerability. The change in focus and associated development of appropriate activities has been challenging. However, as usual, we made as much happen as possible between lockdowns and floods.

OUTPUTS

This year required us to think differently in terms of our outputs and outcomes. This will be an ongoing process as we become more familiar and confident about our new target groups and data collection processes. We can see that we need to take some time to adapt and settle into a very focussed subsector from what we have previously been working with.

Despite a planning day held specifically to focus on identification of activities under the TEI, we may have been overly ambitious given the size of our budget and capacity. Given that in the past we have always over delivered we may need to review

Once again the stopping and starting of activities due to COVID provided very frustrating, especially for facilitators, and it was difficult to offer many face to face services. Partnerships with other services were once again difficult to uphold due to many having stringent lockdown processes.

In between lockdowns we were able to achieve most of our outcomes in our first activity (Develop Community Connections) by holding various events eg Harmony Day, a child protection week event, a mural event for fire affected community members, a volunteer week event, and some preschool visits from Girrawong and Wingham and District.

Our second activity (Provide a Community Centres) is the core of what we do and we were able to continue to provide information/advice/referral, community lunches, distribute food to those in need, use of facilities, etc.

And our third activity under our new contract (Provide Community Support) was the most impacted by COVID and therefore difficult to get traction. However, we did get to facilitate a number of cooking workshops, some skills development activities for young people affected by the fires, a number of social playgroups and science activity for preschoolers. We also provided numerous volunteering opportunities.
Thank you to Rachel, Shelley and Jen who facilitated many of these activities.

CHALLENGES
The endless red tape, reporting and capacity to deal with such a broad range of governance issues is always a challenge and time consuming for small organisations. The ongoing and constantly changing COVID environment is one of our biggest stresses.
Attending meetings this last year has been very time consuming. Even though they are mostly online (and therefore saving travel time), this seems to encourage more meetings. But also, given the lack of fact to face contact with other services, zoom meetings have somewhat filled the gap for discussing the various issues service providers are facing due to COVID.
Data collection and reporting for the TEI has been testing during the establishment phase. But even so, the level of ongoing data collection and reporting required feels like it is counterproductive to achieving the deliverables given the amount of time it is taking.
The amount of work involved in transitioning our service delivery under the TEI has involved an incredible amount of work and this is continuing.

FUTURE PLANS
This year we are continuing to transition our activities through the TEI to ensure we are providing the best possible services to our target groups. This will necessarily involve looking at internet technology and ways to use this for delivering services and activities to difficult to engage target groups.

FINALLY
MVNS is lucky to have a committed and supportive Management Committee.
Thanks to Kerrie and the front office volunteers, mainly Katherine at the moment, who take the time to ascertain the needs of our clients, collect the data and cope with never ending changes in the delivery of this program!
Thanks you to Jane and Arwen and Lisa who do their jobs so thoroughly and passionately and under often trying circumstances. This year has thrown just about everything at us and we have survived!

Caron Watkins
Manager

Migrant Settlement Service

The Migrant Settlement Service (MSS) aims to equip and empower humanitarian entrants, other eligible permanent migrants and their communities to address their settlement needs, in order to improve social participation, economic well-being, independence, personal well-being and community connectedness to all eligible clients in the Mid North Coast regions, including Kempsey, Port Macquarie, Taree, Forster and Gloucester. This is achieved through casework, referrals, information and advocacy and by supporting other services to do the same.

SETS - Settlement Engagement and Transition Support
DHA – Department of Home Affairs
NSP – NSW Settlement Partnership

Key Objectives

The objectives of the project over the last year include:

1. Provision of casework, information, advocacy and referral to address settlement needs.
2. Conduct group information sessions to multicultural residents.
3. Promotion and provision of service to local and outreach areas.
4. Provide community advocacy and developing and maintaining networks with agencies.

Outputs

Like all services, operating throughout the COVID pandemic it has been challenging. For this service it has impacted capacity to have regular contact with TAFE ESL students, deliver information sessions and restricted delivery of face to face services during lockdown periods. While we adjust to a new way of doing business there is nothing like face to face contact.

As an example of the outcomes of the service I have provided a case study that highlights the ongoing nature of people's settlement and how community development activities cross over with case work services.

Case study: Mary joined the Introduction to Individual Support employment program delivered by our service (FIG funds) that ran from July 2019 to June 2020. Mary completed the course then independently continued her studies achieving a Certificate in Aged Care and is now working 4 days/week in an aged care facility. I met Mary prior to the program at TAFE English class and built a relationship over the course of the program. Towards the end of the program Mary approached me for assistance with relationship issues. Since then I have supported Mary with DFV issues and related legal proceedings, understanding law around divorce and settlement, tax, general support and most recently for citizenship. With opportunity and support when needed Mary has moved forwards on her settlement journey developing her independence both socially and economically.

Key Achievements

Despite the unique challenges of the year there have been a number of key achievements including:

• March 2021: Harmony Day video project in partnership with Taree TAFE and Mid Coast Council. The project based on the ABC show 'You can't ask that' where multicultural community developed questions that were posed to Australian born community members. The event aimed to provide local cultural information to the multicultural community, raise awareness and build relationships across the community. The video titled 'I've always wanted to know' can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cOOYQB04sQ

• March 2021 in partnership with Immigration Advice and Rights Centre (IARC), face to face sessions were delivered on DFV and immigration law for community workers and citizenship information sessions for community in Taree and Port Macquarie. Also a general information session on IARC to Port Macquarie TAFE ESL class.

• 'Insights into Regional Settlement in Practice' paper was finalised. The paper aims to showcase key settlement insights from the experience of on the ground workers in a regional context. The paper written by the regional NSP partners was development over 12 months was finalised in February 2021. The launch was originally planned to be a half day face to face event in Newcastle in August 2021. This has been postponed due to COVID lockdown.

• Volunteer Conversational English Program commenced in May 2021. This program was developed in response to the needs of a new community of Congolese people unable to attend TAFE ESL classes due to work commitments. Over the preceding months a group of volunteers with ESL training were assembled by Margaret Gardiner who is mentor and guide to our volunteers. Volunteers have undergone orientation and training for this cohort and program aims. While the program has been slow to gain momentum attendance is increasing. Participants are improving English for general conversation, driving and school assessments. This program is providing huge benefits and would not be able to run without the volunteers. Thank you to the Manning Uniting Church for providing a venue each Saturday.

Challenges

As always worker capacity in a part-time role continues to be the biggest challenge covering such a large geographical area. It goes without saying COVID is an ongoing challenge.

Future Plans

The 2021-22 sees a funding reduction and loss of SACS supplement impacting the budget. Fortunately this has been offset by additional DFV funds to be delivered as part of the settlement service with additional work plan requirements.

I would like to thank the many partners who continue to be supportive, collaborative and reliable year after year, NSP colleagues, our fabulous volunteers in the centre, committee members and Caron, Kerrie, Arwen, Rachel and Lisa who continue to provide much needed laughs and support. This year also sees a fond farewell to Ruben.

Jane O'Dwyer
Migrant Settlement Service Worker

Cooperative Legal Service Delivery- Taree/Forster

The Cooperative Legal Service Delivery (CLSD) program partnership is one of 12 regional justice partnerships in NSW that aim to improve legal outcomes for socially and economically disadvantaged people. The partnership is guided by an action plan that provides a framework for priorities based on local unmet and emerging legal needs.

Taree Forster region priorities:

1. Improved engagement with Aboriginal communities.
2. Improved access to legal information and legal services for Aboriginal people, people with a disability and socially and economically disadvantaged people.
3. Assisting people in financial hardship.
4. Keep community workers up to date with changes to the law.

Outputs

Throughout 2020-21 the CLSD partnership has delivered projects in line with the current Action Plan and identified ongoing, unmet and emerging legal needs of the Taree and Forster communities. The priorities of the current Action Plan are:

1. Continued engagement with Aboriginal people.
2. Debt and financial hardship.
3. Enhanced legal services and legal awareness for young people.
4. Assistance, referrals and triage to appropriate services for people in our region.

The CLSD program continues to have strong involvement from partners enabling the delivery of a range of projects and activities across the region including:

- Mid Coast Council hardship policy project (ongoing). A letter drafted by our legal partners was sent to the General Manager in August 2020, this encouraged MidCoast Council to adopt national guidelines and to publish a hardship policy.
- A Discrimination Law Training online event was offered to Disability Advocates from Disability Advocacy NSW by our pro bono partner Gilbert & Tobin in August 2020.
- The Energy and Water Ombudsman NSW was the lead for a collaborative online event, Mid-Coast Virtual Tennant Support in October 2020.
- Domestic and family violence (DFV) community workers benefited from a 'catch up' event which provided updates and a networking opportunity for key services working with people who have experienced DFV & make local programs available for victims and perpetrators of DFV (December 2020).
- Free legal help days were coordinated at Taree and Forster courts (April 2021).
- A meeting with a focus on young people took place (June 2021) discussing issues related to schools suspension and outlining support now available from Legal Aid.

Other activities included:

• Distribution of Legal Aid ADVO booklet to relevant partners.

• Ongoing promotion of all legal and financial services including online offerings during COVID (2020) and outreach (late 2020 - 2021).

• Ongoing attendance at network and interagency meetings to build and maintain networks in the legal and non-legal sector.

• Regular email distribution to CLSD partners and wider community services sector to share information on upcoming events, changes in the legal sector, service information and to raise the CLSD profile.

Ongoing, Unmet and Emerging Legal Needs

Ongoing, unmet and/or emerging legal issues have regularly been identified during the year. Where appropriate and possible projects will be developed to address them.

These include:

1. Unfair application of hardship policy in the Mid Coast Council area is ongoing.
2. Debt related issues more generally including bankruptcy, pay day lenders, high electricity bills continue.
3. Debt due to unpaid fines through Revenue NSW. Significant number related to failure to vote.
4. Legal and other support for young people.
5. Racial discrimination in the areas of employment, housing, policing and the schooling system (expulsion and back-to-back suspensions)- ongoing from previous years, particularly in respect of policing.
6. Disability discrimination issues similar to above (5), additionally, deficit of support with NDIS, DSP applications and mental health needs arising in legal processes.
7. Disaster recovery related needs (e.g. fines, insurance, hardship and housing).
8. General increase in employment, tenancy, welfare and DFV issues due to COVID. Housing crisis has escalated.

Challenges Encountered

This year the global crises continued with the impacts of COVID-19 ongoing since March 2020. Locally we were able to return to some face-to-face events which provided a boost to the CLSD program from October 2020 to May 2021. Partners were particularly excited to attend in person events and quarterly meetings to reconnect IRL ('in real life'). However, the region was affected by major flooding in March 2021 which was a significant blow. And, most recently with another COVID outbreak in NSW during June 2021, events planned for NAIDOC in July were deferred.

Future Plans

The coming year will see the development of a new action plan which will no doubt see some priorities continuing and some new priorities added. Areas that seem to be attracting momentum and energy include a focus on young people and legal hubs. And, with the Aboriginal Legal Service returning to Taree it is hoped more opportunities for collaboration in supporting our number 1 priority will emerge. Emerging from COVID there's a recognition that face-to-face events are essential to restore the local collaborative services network and maintain a local voice to the program. At the same time, it will be important to retain the involvement of more distant partners and contributors who've been able to join and add value to the conversation.

I would like to thank the CLSD partners for their input and hard work that allow for all our projects to happen. Partner involvement and collaboration is the backbone of the CLSD.

Compiled by Marlo Slavin
Taree/Forster Regional Coordinator

Manning Valley Cooperative Living Program (MVCLP)

The MVCL Program provides financial assistance, information and referrals to community members in the Manning Valley LGA who are experiencing financial crisis. The MVCLP provides a holistic service incorporating three programs run by MVNS: Emergency Relief, Manning Valley Community Gardens and the Food from the Heart Kitchen Project.

The MVCLP attempts to ensure reasonable access to emergency relief for all people within the local area, upholding clients' rights and dignity in a way that maintains and encourages self-reliance within the individual.

Facilitation of the MVCLP includes advocacy, referrals, networking, Work for the Dole and Centrelink hosting, Work and Development Orders, and orientation and training of volunteers involved with ER service, community garden and kitchen programs.

This program has been in overwhelming demand throughout the last 12 months. Additional funds were provided from Department of Social Services to support fire and COVID affected residents. However, there was no additional funding for those affected by the floods. This seemed very unfair. The support for many people was picked up by the community and philanthropic donations. Given that the Department doesn't provide funds for a worker to deliver this service we are truly grateful to Ruben and Annes' voluntary commitment to ensuring our clients are supported and looked after when financial assistance (and other) is required. Kerrie is also at the coal face with the unfortunate role of assessing people for assistance. This is very time consuming given that approx three quarters of people don't get offered an appointment for assistance due to our limited support, it can be very frustrating for all.

This financial year has continued to be one of uncertainty for fire and flood affected, as well as those losing jobs and businesses though COVID.

Thank you to GIVIT and Foodbank for topping up our capacity to stretch our funds further. We were also able to once again provide Target vouchers from FRRR to provide support for resources/clothing etc for children returning to school. We also top this up with garden produce and RSPCA donations for the furry side of emergency relief.

We continue to see more people needing support who are not reliant on Government payments eg in mortgage stress, drought affected etc.

The following table provides a summary of numbers of clients accessing MVCLP service over the last twelve months (2020/2021):

Total funding Provided	ER Assistance 2020/2021	Total client numbers	Totals 2019/2020
Department of Social Services Fuel $26,250 Food $33,700 Food parcels $4,620 Medicine $934 Telephone $120 Other $23,769 TOTAL = $89,431	ER Assistance provided Instances of assistance Aboriginal/ATSI clients Women 26-45 yo No. of ER clients Unable to Assist	318 954 32% 67% 41%	259 514 36% 68% 50% 1350 (approx)
Monday lunches and take aways	Limited due to COVID this FY		Approx 500
Second Bite		Approx 3000	Approx 2250
Electricity Vouchers = $25,300	Assistance provided ... Instances	68 74	70 clients 79 instances
TOTAL ASSISTANCE PROVIDED $114,731	An increase of approx 51% in value compared to 2019/2020		

Food from the Heart

Secondbite Food-rescue program

This year due to COVID and the increasing number of clients seeking SecondBite, we decided to put up a cover at the front entrance so that produce could just be put there without people need to enter the premises. The down side to this is that we don't get to interact with clients face to face. Interactions these days are so limited.

Our SecondBite program has seen numbers probably quadruple. We are not able to say this for sure given that we are not able to see who is coming and going.

Our capacity to provide more food has been made possible by a very hard working volunteer (Tim) who picks up extra food from ALDI and the Faith Family church and delivers it every morning.

Ken, and recently Joe have been our two hard working and reliable volunteers this past year.

Monday lunches

COVID has also impacted on this program, and we made a decision in July to cancel face to face lunches for the rest of the year. Some volunteers still come in and cook up frozen meals for us to hand out.

Thanks again, especially to Julie, Jean, Anne, Kim, and Ken.

Manning Valley Community Gardens

The Manning Valley Community Gardens garden continues to provide an avenue for engagement for community members, clients and other volunteers who wish to contribute something to their community.

Community members are most welcome to come and utilize the space, the pizza oven and make the most of what is available.

Donations for plants continue to be our main source of fund raising.

'Thank yous'

- Thank you to Gary and Cam for their weekly maintenance
- Thanks to Jen and Rachel for their working bees
- Thank you to the multiple members of community for all of their donations of soil, plants books and more!

Caron Watkins
Manager

Manning River Turtle Conservation Group (MRTCG)

Again, 2021 was a year of significant ecological events. Following on from the drought and fires of 2019/20, our region then suffered the effects of the floods of early 2021. The bushfire impacts on the Manning River Turtle were still being investigated, when these floods then affected our rivers. The MRTG has continued to work with community and agencies to promote awareness and understanding of the Manning River turtle.

In the community, COVID-19 has reduced our ability to engage with schools and at public events. However, in May 2021 we assisted the Manning Regional Art Gallery, Mid Coast Council and local artist Shona Wilson, to contribute to the withNature 2020 event, to celebrate the International Day of Biodiversity. A large number of volunteers made up 3000 packs containing simple materials to weave a small hatchling turtle. These were distributed to schools, aged care facilities, Scouts and libraries, for community to create the hatchlings. The finished woven turtles were then laid out next to the Manning River in the shape of a huge Manning River turtle. The drone footage of this incredible event is here: **https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=r8f0YFo6IWQ**

We were able to contribute to an event in May, hosted by Take 3 for the Sea. The focus for this year's forum with local high school students and indigenous community, was protection of our freshwater systems, with the MRT as the iconic representation of healthy waterways leading to our oceans. And in July, the inaugural MRT Beanie Competition was held. Winners are soon to be announced. Again, we thank the MRAG for their amazing support and enthusiasm.

We have continued to represent the local community in meetings of the MRT Steering Committee, which meets every three months to discuss and update agencies with funding, grants, research and opportunities. The most significant result of these collaborations was delivery of a new WaterWatch program, which is now being established in the Nowendoc catchment, as part of a federally funded Bushfire Recovery Grant. A paid coordinator role has meant that the program has been prioritised and funding was made available for the equipment. A fantastic training day was held at Knorrit Flat, led by Sue Lennox from OzGreen Australia. The first tests have been completed with the assistance of Catchment and Engagement officers from Mid Coast Council. Another partnership has been created with researchers at CSU, to commence eDNA trials in our region, with funding provided through the grant for development of the genetic primer. We also thank Aussie Ark for their ongoing captive breeding program, as they now hold 12 adults and 20 hatchlings. These young turtles will be released into the wild when conditions are favourable.

In a few weeks, another exciting workshop will be held, led by Brad Nesbitt who trains dogs to locate turtle nests. He will be showing us how to find and protect MRT nests, and we aim to pass this on to the community as turtle nesting season approaches. There is more opportunity for citizen science next year, with nest predation work.

We thank the MVNS for their assistance in our endeavours, and recognise that we have outstanding support from our local community, to protect our rare and little understood turtle.

Photos: MRT by Bruce Chessman.
Mural at Bobin Public School – Peter Schouten.

MidCoast Renewal Committee

Our vision is a 'Mid Coast Community Renewal Program', to support the well-being of our community during the complex recovery process ahead after the Black Summer Fires. Funds were sought to achieve this
Funded by Primary Health Network

As the COVID-19 pandemic developed, we attempted to think on our feet and adapt however possible to continue to provide support.
A series of DIY kits were put together by local community members that residents could pick up contactless at the front desk of Manning Valley Neighbourhood Services. A support worker was seated a few metres behind the desk which meant that people could still have some socialisation while we could 'check in' on them without posing a health risk. Up to 20 of each kit were made to distribute.

DIY kits included:
Gardening kits; Kids Art Packs; Cross stitch kits ; Card making kits; Bracelet-making for kids; Finger puppet making; Bath/Foot Soak kits; Chest rub kits; 'Happy Days' perfume roller kit.
The kits and chats were well received!

In partnership with The Wholesome Collective we provided interactive and relaxed, small group nutrition and cooking presentations within each community, with the aim to provide joy, opportunities for social interaction and conversation, increase nutrition knowledge , enhance cooking skills , form positive attitudes toward healthy eating and trying new foods using taste testers from the cooking presentation .
And :make education practical via a cooking presentation using a menu that considered:

- Those still living in caravans, tents and freight containers - utilising small bench spaces and considering limited cooking equipment and utensils.
- Water conservation with minimal washing up required.
- Utilising pantry staples and non-perishable food items such as canned legumes, frozen peas and tuna.

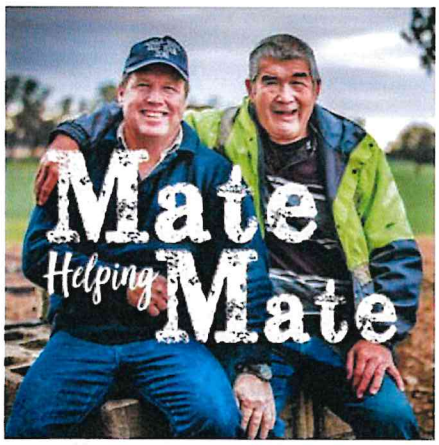
In November of 2020, the MCRC organised a series of talks facilitated by John Harper from the "Mate Helping Mate" non-profit organisation, based in country NSW.

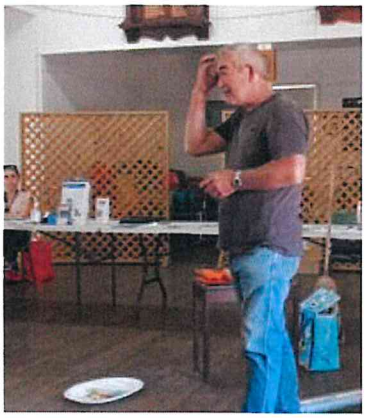
Mate Helping Mate helps provide a "guide to mental health and mateship in the Australian bush".

The reason we were so interested in bringing John to our region was that the success of his program lies in his ability to RELATE with everyday folk using THEIR language, "from farmers, locals and health workers about what works (and what doesn't)". His focus encompasses the struggles that arise for men around mental health, especially during periods of prolonged drought in remote and rural communities.

John spent the week chatting about mental health, depression and anxiety with both our drought and fire-affected residents. We held workshops in several locations across the Manning Valley including Wingham, Killabakh, Marlee, Burrell Creek, Nabiac, Taree and Gloucester. Attendance varied at first, but as the word got around and John featured on NBN news halfway through the week, enquiries and attendance grew. We had especially strong numbers at Marlee, Killabakh and Gloucester (with thanks to Gloucester Rotary).

Attendee's were a mixture of community leaders, hall committee reps, community members, teachers, retirees, farmers and "tradies". We also had reps from MidCoast Council, Land Services, Service NSW, Manning Mental Health and Farmgate. These "leaders" are the ones who are accessed by and feed into our wider community, so by giving them strength and support we hope that they can offer the same to others. Once that support "filters out" the community becomes stronger.





A craft group spontaneously formed. This groups was held regularly each month facilitated by Jennifer Dayment from "Sweet Pea & Mumma". This group was well received, with the conversations being surprisingly open and cathartic. As most of the attendees were fire-affected their stories are shared openly and without judgement. Jennifer has provided a range of activities for them to engage with each month and they are also welcome to bring things from home to work on.

An incredibly successful workshop series was our Pottery classes for drought and fire affected residents with Steve Williams from Dolly's Flat Pottery. These workshops catered to both adults and children. The focus of these workshops has been creating nature-based pieces using local materials, as well as learning both traditional and non-traditional pottery techniques.

Feedback from the days has been overwhelmingly positive, with many participants stating that it was "exactly what I needed" and "it was so good to get away and not have to think about anything else for a few hours". They loved that it was nature based and that Steve uses his surroundings for inspiration.

Steve talked in-depth about the science behind firing the clay in the kiln and explained how things are burnt to a certain temperature, what chemicals break down and what is left. His personal practise is fuelled by his fascination with wood ash, which is all that remains in the kiln after the firing process – it can't be burnt down any further. This interested a lot of the participants and gave them a new respect for the creative power of fire. Steve also allowed participants to return when firing their works, so that they could stay involved in the process of their creations. Each participant made four pieces during the first day, learning basic pottery skills as they went. They went on to create further and more detailed pieces when attending subsequent workshops. Many residents attended more than one workshop.

The final piece that participants created with Steve was a large pot for growing plants in - to symbolise the 'new growth' stage after fires.

We collaborated with "UP&UP" around the idea of a community-driven mural.

UP&UP specialise in working with local communities to bring to life their visions of what they represent and the common themes or motifs from their local areas. They work all around the countryside and are excited to bring a post fire vision of our Manning Valley to life.

We ran a community workshop, which was later followed by the painting of the mural itself, which included community members also. The initial open workshop was a day for the community to come together and work on ideas for the larger mural while creating mini-murals of their own. In this way it was hands-on, engaging and skill building.

They returned in June to complete the mural, to create this on three large timber panels.
The team then worked on a final design drawn from the inspirations of the workshops. Unfortunately the rain prevented it from being finalised and we are awaiting its return.

The final mural will have: One with colours and shapes representing fire (triangular forms, oranges and reds). The middle one is a large fig tree representing the Fig's that are symbolic of our valley - the symbol of continuity, strength and weathering the storms as such. The fig also represents community which is the base that you come back to for support during times of disaster, and 'Endurance' would be the Fig. The final panel is water and rivers, and there are parts of the river system that run through all three panels to connect them together.

We were approached by Manning Mental Health Services about working together on an event for kids to be held in the school holiday period in the Elands/Bobin communities. "Kids Connect" was the answer – a series of workshops including fun activities while also having a casual eye on any mental health issues raised. From all reports, it was a hugely successful sequence of workshops.

Here is some of the feedback from the groups who attended;
"The kids enjoyed themselves, and all delighted in the wonderful catered morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea...We also had many conversations with locals who stopped in, on how to support our community at Elands, and brainstorming ideas on how to develop things further, with a Grant writing workshop being held in Elands. Special appreciation to the workshop facilitators who were amazing!"

A positive for all who attended were the relationships that were formed and new ideas which would ensure that the community stayed together and did activities such as these in the future. The facilitators for the workshops were chosen to give the children a range of different, engaging activities to try. They did pottery with Steve (Dollys Flat Studio), music

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, a painting kit was determined to be the most effective way to try and kick-start the creative component of our program. This allowed us to try and get some creative activities underway even if we could not get participants together in person.
Twenty of these were put together by Donna Rankin from Heart to Heart. All were collected by residents and utilised during those uncertain months as a welcome distraction and artistic outlet. A private Facebook group was created for participants, with video tutorials. This allowed the participants to still have some social contact during COVID-19, and to also follow along and ask questions of Donna where needed.

These kits were then followed up with a face-to-face workshop with Donna once restrictions had eased. Participants brought along their kits and their painting, no matter where they were up to in the process, and received personalised support from Donna and her team. This was also a great opportunity for them to socialise and engage with others in their community who are doing the same project as them.
Participants painted Van Gogh Sunflowers.

The idea for a Book Club was well supported by the board of the Taree Literary Institute and they were happy to use their premises free of charge to hold a monthly meet up.
The book club encouraged socialisation, contemplation of life's larger mysteries, and was a re-integration for some who had experienced the fires and were only just coming back into the community actively following their own personal mental health challenges. There was a great deal of chatting about triggers, especially when seeing things on TV. This served as an informal method of counselling and peer support, as they all have a shared experience of the fires, even if some were not as "directly" affected as others.

Gemma's workshop was successful in offering another type of activity, which appealed to a different audience. Participants made an Australian creature. Doing so served as a way of reconnecting participants to nature and what was lost during the drought and bushfires. The art of Needle work itself is linked to mindfulness and is a calming activity. Like so many of these activities, this one also provided a safe space to share those stories informally.

Lucinda and Taycee

2020/2021 Special Thanks

Volunteers & Supporters

- Our FANTASTIC volunteers - office, garden, Garden Kitchen, Second Bite, Tax Help, Fundraising and Management Committee
- Rhonda Futterleib – Essential Accounting Services
- Wingham RSPCA
- Judy Peach and Mark – Milliways Consulting
- Hunter New England Area Health Service
- Uniting Church Wingham
- Midcoast Council
- Services NSW – Jo Mountney
- Faith Family Church – Jenny Brewer and Tim Willis
- Northern Settlement Services team
- Pauline Smith - MNC Financial Counsellor
- MNC Community Legal Centre
- SecondBite Food Rescue Program in partnership with Coles Wingham
- St Vincent de Paul Wingham
- North Coast Institute TAFE (Kempsey, Port Macquarie, Taree and Tuncurry)
- Manning Regional Art Gallery
- Swags for the Homeless
- Tuesday Craft Group ladies
- Mission Australia – Communities for Children
- Legal Aid MNC
- Quota Taree
- Wingham Rotary

Funding Bodies

Special thanks also to our funding bodies:

- NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ)
- Legal Aid NSW
- Department of Social Services
- Department of Human Services
- Settlement Services International
- Energy NSW – EAPS vouchers
- Telstra, through the Telstra Bill Assistance Certificate (TBAC) Program

Apologies to anyone who has been forgotten – there are so many!