

COMMUNITY EFFORT TO CHANGE MID MURRAY CHILDREN'S LIVES WINS STATE RECOGNITION

A project that has helped cut the number of developmentally vulnerable children in the Mid Murray district, from one in three to one in 10 within six years, has won State recognition.

The Mid Murray Family Connections (MMFC) Collective Impact initiative won the *Community Partnerships and Collaboration Award* at the Local Government Professionals Australia SA 18th Annual Leadership Excellence Awards Gala Dinner in Adelaide on Friday, 17 May.

The award recognises six years of work by up to 60 community partner organisations, spearheaded by the Mid Murray Council, to dramatically improve the quality of life and future opportunities for local children from birth to age eight.

After the alarming result of the 2012 Australian Early Development Census showed that Mid Murray children were some of the most developmentally vulnerable in Australia, the MMFC was established to create significant change.

Federal, State and Local Government bodies worked alongside schools, kindergartens, churches, businesses and community groups to drive improvements to children's health, emotional wellbeing, education and safety.

The results have been outstanding. In 2012 the AEDC found 32.4% of local children were developmentally vulnerable in multiple areas. Thanks to the MMFC initiative, that fell to 18.8% in 2015. The recently released 2018 figures show a further drop to 10.7% - one-third of the original rate - compared to the SA average of 13% and the national average of 11%.

Mid Murray Council Mayor Dave Burgess said the Local Government Professionals Australia SA award was further recognition of the effort and dedication of hundreds of people in the community to significant change.

"Council and our partners have been heavily focused on addressing the challenges within our community affecting children's development and to see the substantial results of this project is rewarding for all parties involved," he says.

"We want our region to be a great place for families to live and for their children to grow up in, so we are committed to ensuring they have access to the support services and education they need to give them the best start to life.

"This project is delivering on our vision to create strong, resilient, healthy and connected communities across the Mid Murray district by giving our youngest residents the opportunities and quality of life they deserve."

Among its efforts, MMFC delivered wellbeing sessions to over 150 participants, created online educational resources for families, trained community members in resilience and wellbeing, introduced localised play groups and family events, set up the *Mid Murray Mums* Facebook community page, raised awareness and money to combat domestic violence, ran children's

mental health workshops and established links with Aboriginal leaders to support health initiatives.



Mid Murray Community Services Director Amy Loechel said the project’s diverse activities and outreach initiatives had been key to its success.

“Combating the vulnerability rate was a huge challenge because it was a multifaceted problem,” Ms Loechel says.

“There were concerns around health, mental wellbeing, physical activity, education and safety and all of these issues needed individual, tailored solutions.

“Through the commitment and support of our 60 project partners, we have built one of the biggest coalitions of child development advocates in regional Australia to target each of these concerns and to deliver truly amazing improvements to the lives of children in our district.”

The MMFC project is ongoing, with a focus now on the possibility of establishing a Children’s Wellbeing Centre. A feasibility study is currently underway, thanks to \$32,500 in funding contributions from the Council, Department for Education, Mannum Community College, Murray Mallee General Practice Network, Regional Development Australia Murraylands and Riverland, Dusseldorp Forum, AC Care, Baptist Care SA, Mannum Baptist Church, Mannum Lions Club and private donors.

The team has also recently secured the Mobile Dental Care SA Initiative to bring its mobile dental care program to schools within the Mid Murray district to ensure children can access free dental care.

The Local Government Professionals Australia SA Leadership Excellence Awards recognises excellence in the services and programs Councils deliver each year to their communities. Almost 500 local government professionals attended last week’s Gala Dinner to honour the winners.

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