

# Respite South West

## Improving coordination of respite services

The South West Respite Network is a group of service providers funded under Australian Government and state government carer respite strategies. It is part of the Respite Coordination Project overseen by regional Primary Care Partnerships.

The Network was developed in 2001 to coordinate service delivery in the south-western region of Victoria. It is a focal point for interagency collaboration, and has led to continuous improvements in the quality, accessibility and availability of respite services.

South West Respite Network decided that, with service providers spread over such a broad region and knowledge of available services inadequate, an online network was the solution. It developed an intranet site as a dynamic information sharing and learning environment for all.

### Intranet to improve communications and respite services

Respite care supports and maintains the relationship between primary care-givers and recipients by providing short-term breaks for the carer and positive experiences for the care recipient. About 577 000 people, or some 13 per cent of Victorians, are carers.

About 25 service providers in south west Victoria offer some respite services. The South West Respite Network was established in response to a review by

the Victorian Department of Human Services (DHS) which found that respite services need to coordinate better.

The Network provides a focal point for interagency collaboration, planning for and developing respite services equitably across the aged care, mental health and disability sectors. It employs a coordinator to provide specialist advice and administrative support to all stakeholders, to promote its activities and aspirations, and to develop and maintain a body of current information and resources.

The Network recognised that improved communications were the key to success. As face-to-face meetings were not viable, some form of online network was needed, and research and experience suggested that the most cost-effective way to involve everyone was to develop a website.

It established its intranet in 2001, and ICT has been central to its operations since then. Infoexchange, a nonprofit organisation, was chosen to develop the site as it had not only the technical capacity but also a philosophy that was in sympathy with the aims of the Network.



Some Network members have limited access to computers and the Internet while others have access to reasonable administrative capabilities. Built to allow access via a standard web browser, the Respite South West intranet provides a mix of content and applications. Some features have been particularly well received:

- The newspaper is an immediate form of sharing information which can be updated directly by the network coordinator and member respite services staff. It is also the basis of a monthly electronic newsletter.
- There is an equipment database through which service providers can list surplus equipment and details of its availability. It is well used.
- The respite planner, which links to the Infochange service, the Accommodation Vacancy Respite Register (AVRR), is an essential feature. It allows carers and support services to directly identify suitable vacancies. AVRR benefits service providers by helping them to use the available

accommodation more efficiently, enabling demand for accommodation to be tracked, and improving the targeting of resources.

## Benefits

The intranet's basic information services receive between 45 to 50 visitors per day, and this is building steadily.

The intranet has contributed to improved relationships between service providers and created a sense of belonging to a real network.

To get the most out of the accommodation register service providers have had to change work procedures and work culture so they could share information and be involved in a common process—and so share in the overall benefits.

The improved relationships between service providers is illustrated by the increased use of resources between service providers based in Warrnambool, the major population centre, and those in more remote areas. Before the intranet, Warrnambool dominated service provision in the region, as it has the largest range of services. By making service providers in the rest of the region real nodes in the network, the intranet has contributed to improved relationships and built on local trust.

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environment, change can be expected to be evolutionary rather than revolutionary.

## Success factors

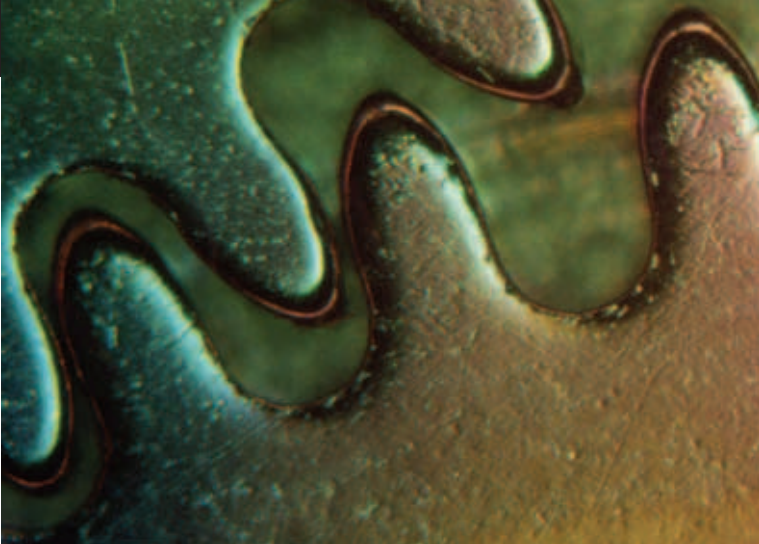
The project succeeded through cooperation across the age, disability and mental health sectors, all of which have a demand for respite. Other key factors that have contributed to the success of the project are:

- **Cooperative working relationships.** The old competitive tendering system had created some problems, but there remained a level of goodwill and cooperative spirit that could be built on.
- **Staffing.** Without the network coordinator the intranet could not have worked. With a coordinator there was time to work with agencies in a sustained way on the use of the technology. The coordinator has contributed to a constant flow of information in an environment where service providers often do not have the time to update their information.
- **Flexibility.** The intranet had to be responsive to the changing needs and understanding of its target audience.
- **Support.** Knowledgeable and prompt technical support is essential to the system, as is effective communication with the support providers.

## Barriers

Government administrative and funding arrangements proved an obstacle to this project. Governments allocate funds to the individual sectors of age, disability and mental health, all of which have a demand for respite.

Competitive tendering in the recent past had tested relationships, while the intranet is based



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on the willingness of the various service providers to collaborate and to share resources. This requires each to trust the other and trust that the network coordinator is not aligned to the interests of any one group. That trust takes time to build.

As the service has developed other projects have demonstrated how important it is for both the Network and the coordinator to be independent of any one service provider, to ensure engagement with all stakeholders.

Cost is an ongoing concern. The Victorian Health Department provided initial set-up funds. While members may be able to meet the ongoing maintenance costs, they could not have funded the start-up costs.

Limited bandwidth and varying ability to access the Internet are significant restraints on networked services in rural and regional Victoria. People living in remote areas not only have limited access to the technology, but their unfamiliarity with it is limiting both in terms of their computing skills and their understanding of what such services can do for them.



In that environment, services must meet real needs, be designed to work well over low quality dial-up lines and ideally must have an educative function that familiarises people with the online world and its possibilities. The network coordinator said that he would have considered bringing the various functions online one at a time, as users were not familiar with navigating websites, and a simpler navigation structure may have provided a better introduction.

### Key lessons

- Successful networks require cooperative working relationships based on trust. This trust is promoted by the Network and coordinators being independent.
- Ensure that someone has the role and time to make the system work with good technical support.

### References

Respite South West [www.respitesouthwest.org.au](http://www.respitesouthwest.org.au)

Infoxchange Australia [www.infoxchange.net.au](http://www.infoxchange.net.au)

## COMMUNITY CONNECTIVITY

### More information

In these case studies, communities, nonprofit organisations and groups share their experiences and lessons they have learnt using ICT: enhancing capability and service delivery; supporting and building communities, networks and connections; and overcoming barriers and challenges.

*Australia's Strategic Framework for the Information Economy 2004–2006* emphasises the need to ensure that all Australians can participate in the benefits of the information economy.

Key strategies in 2004–06 will be to strengthen collaboration and capabilities in nonprofit organisations, facilitate the creative use of ICT for building stronger communities and social cohesion, and develop networks, capabilities and tools to enable participation by people who are facing economic, geographic or social barriers.

**For more information visit the DCITA website [www.dcita.gov.au](http://www.dcita.gov.au) or email [community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au](mailto:community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au).**

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