

Case study Riverstone Neighbourhood Centre & Community Aid Service

Angela Van Dyke, CEO

Riverstone Neighbourhood Centre & Community Aid Service (RNC) is a non-profit community organisation operating since 1977 and has become a community hub for Blacktown and the Northwest of Sydney. National census data has confirmed that Blacktown City is one of the most diverse and fastest-growing council areas in NSW. One in sixty-five Australians call Blacktown City home, making it the largest local Government Area in New South Wales by population.

Riverstone Neighbourhood Centre's vision is to build a strong community through providing high quality services, advocacy, and facilitating local innovative solutions. RNC provides support for vulnerable individuals and families across the lifespan which include emergency relief, child and youth programs and casework services including for victims of domestic violence and people with addictions. It also provides social support services, training and development, and activities to facilitate social connection and enhance the health and wellbeing of older people, people with disabilities, and carers.

Responding: COVID 2020-2022

In March 2020, a client who attended the centre subsequently informed RNC that they had tested positive and would have been infectious while attending the centre. RNC immediately shut down their physical premises and used their WHS management framework to guide their handling of the case and impact on operations. There was little guidance from government regarding pandemic management because Sydney was still in early stages of 2020 COVID outbreak.

Within 48 hours, the Centre's staff had to pivot to working remotely and ensure that all staff, clients and known visitors were contacted to inform them about the incident and need for centre closure. On the first day of closure, their IT consultant worked with RNC to find an affordable platform that they could use in order to deliver services remotely. They trained staff to learn the remote work access mode, mobile phones were purchased for everybody. All clients who participated in face-to-face groups were contacted. The focus was then to get some programs running in the remote space while giving assurances to anxious clients that services would remain up and running. It was a hard transition but achieved within a very short period of time. RNC remained in lockdown for a long time, staff continuing to work remotely because they were unable to return to the service's council-owned buildings.

From April 2020, RNC ran about eleven regular online programs every week which included two online exercise classes per week for seniors, youth groups and Story Time for preschool aged children. Their focus was on offering opportunities for free activities through working with different partner specialist agencies as many of the programs offered by for-profit companies

were too expensive for their clients. They offered online family boot camps, craft activities, wellness programs, parenting programs, connected with services like Headspace and Like Mind that offered programs for mental health and wellbeing.

As well as transitioning their usual services online, RNC began to focus on the more vulnerable members of their communities, particularly the elderly who became significantly more isolated during the pandemic. They organised shopping for people who didn't have access to online mechanisms and were being left at home without essential supplies or medicine. They worked with the local chemist to make sure there could be deliveries for those who needed it.

RNC was crucial in supporting people on the COVID safe journey. For their community, particularly those who weren't in the online space, RNC developed promotional material, a "COVID Safe Plan" and a checklist about how to prepare for a two-week lockdown if they came into close contact with a positive case.

Blacktown City has the largest urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population in Australia. In 2020, during NAIDOC week - which is an important event in the community – RNC, along with indigenous community members, hosted a week-long event with an online activity held every day of the week. 32,000 people participated via social media during that week. Packs of resources were sent to local families, so that they could participate, for example with Aboriginal artists or Aboriginal storytelling. RNC won a Blacktown City Council Australia Day Award for that event.

Floods: March 2022 & June-July 2022

The March floods had some impact but the June-July floods had an even more significant impact on the community with RNC's buildings being flooded despite the sandbags in place.

The CEO, Angela Van Dyke describes the flood risk of the Blacktown North West region: "ours is a community that's often forgotten in the flood response on the Hawkesbury-Nepean floodplain" as most of the flood activity and investment is in the Hawkesbury LGA. SES crews were shipped to Northern NSW to assist with flood response there. North Western Sydney was not on the radar regarding risk of flooding and impact of floods.

Residents reported not being able to get through to SES or the local police patrol 000. SES crews coming out on the street were told who's been impacted, what streets were flooded, what streets needed to be closed. The North West Business Chamber was critical in this collaboration for the flood response. The Chamber and the Neighbourhood Centre and their volunteers were out in community on the ground helping with the clean-up.

In June/July floods, there was a realisation from public agencies that the community needed more than the short recovery pop-up provided after the March flood. The RNC focus was to work with the SES, Resilience NSW, Police, Council, and a whole range of public agencies. RNC were able to

get issues on the agenda with Blacktown City Council. They set up meetings to make sure that they heard about what was going on in the community and what support was needed.

RNC set up a pop-up centre for two weeks to provide emergency supplies and to provide face-to-face contact so that community members could ask questions and understand their entitlements. This collaboration, with Council and the Chamber, was critical as people had lost so much and it was wintertime. Council gave RNC a shopfront for free and they then distributed clothing, school supplies, shoes, as well as providing kitchenware, electrical, whitegoods and bedding.

Cross-sector collaboration

What was evident through both disasters was RNC's capacity to work together with key partners to learn from each other and problem-solve in a very complex system. Angela acknowledged it was inspiring to be in an environment where the Business Chamber, SES, key government agencies and other NGOs were all there together trying to get better outcomes for community. However, what was crucial was the recognition that organisations like RNC are the heart of a community and that the trust they have earned with community takes time. The key message is for government to look to local organisations who know their communities and resource and fund them to work with their communities at times of crises.