

Keeping Cool in Summer - Loddon subregion

Background

Heat is the deadliest of all climate-related disasters, and in the past decade 50% of all heat-related deaths occurred in Victoria. Heatwaves can cause serious health impacts, including dehydration, heatstroke and increased mortality, particularly among groups experiencing systemic disadvantage. These include older adults, people with chronic illnesses, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, refugee and migrant communities, people with disability, individuals experiencing homelessness and those without access to adequate cooling.

The Loddon Mallee Public Health Unit (LMPHU), through its climate change and health work, recognises the impact of heat on community mental and physical health. To address this, the LMPHU facilitated cross-sector conversations with a range of organisations on heat health, cool spaces, and energy efficiency and literacy (understanding and reducing electricity and gas bills) across Macedon Ranges, Mount Alexander, Loddon Shires and the City of Greater Bendigo. This collaboration led to the development of resources and the implementation of activities to address gaps in heat health awareness and capacity building.

Collaborative action

Stakeholders who participated in these cross-sector conversations included libraries, neighbourhood houses, and council staff working across emergency management, health and wellbeing, climate change, access and support, and community partnerships. Other participants included primary and community health services, churches, community groups, Women's Health Loddon Mallee (WHLM), and Bendigo Community Health Services (BCHS) through its Refugee and Cultural Diversity program.



Speakers at the summer heat health forum



Castlemaine Library, Mount Alexander Council, Castlemaine Community House and LMPHU representatives planning the summer heat health forum

At a Glance

Outcomes

- Three more cool spaces were made available.
- Improved communication on, and increased use of, available cool spaces.
- Improved information on energy efficiency and literacy.
- Recognition of the need to build capacity in energy efficiency and literacy.

Learnings

- Rough sleepers often fall through service gaps.
- Communications need to use diverse formats to reach communities with varying levels of digital access and English literacy.
- Ongoing barriers remain to the use of cool spaces.

Resources

Heatwave plans for organisations were reviewed, and the LMPHU cool spaces resource was shared. The LMPHU also developed heat health resources and guidance on low or no-cost energy efficiency and strategies for keeping cool in summer. In addition, the City of Greater Bendigo produced a heat health resource for people experiencing rough sleeping, while stakeholders in Macedon Ranges Shire are developing a Help at Hand flyer for those experiencing financial disadvantage. This builds on the Help at Hand resource previously developed in Mount Alexander Shire. All resources are available online and in hard copy and are written in plain language to ensure accessibility for communities with diverse needs, including varying levels of English and digital literacy. Other resources were also shared including WHLM applying a gender lens to smoke and heat and BCHS heat health for refugees. Communications were designed to increase awareness of cool spaces, often promoted alongside events taking place in those venues to help reduce stigma around their use. Mental health and family violence information was also made available within the cool spaces.

Activities

The LMPHU, Castlemaine Community House, Dhelkaya Community Health, Mount Alexander Shire Council and Castlemaine Library co-organised a summer heat health forum and supported a Mount Alexander Shire barbeque and pool party for multicultural communities, funded by Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services (LCMS) and WHLM. These events incorporated health-related topics relevant to the community.

The LMPHU also contributed to the development of the Mount Alexander Shire My Home Network and the West End Resilience initiative, which focused on tenants' rights and supports, climate change and health, and included an energy efficiency and literacy workshop and [video](#).

In addition, the LMPHU delivered a presentation to Mount Alexander Shire Council daily care workers to strengthen their awareness of heat health and low or no-cost ways to help clients improve household energy efficiency.

Outcomes

- Improved awareness of cool spaces, heat health, and energy efficiency.
- Three additional cool spaces were utilised: a church, a neighbourhood house supported by a primary health service and a supermarket.
- Health services included heat health information in discharge packs.
- Increased awareness of the impacts of climate change and energy-inefficient housing on health.
- A mini-pilot program of [energy efficiency and literacy workshops](#) was developed and implemented for target populations.
- Strengthened cross-sector understanding of heat health, cool spaces and energy efficiency.



LCMS and WHLM funded pool party and barbeque on health topics

Stakeholders also raised concerns about community members keeping warm in winter. Cool spaces also function as warm spaces and a [Keeping warm in winter](#) resource was developed.

Learnings

Cool spaces identified included libraries, community houses, churches and supermarkets. However, several barriers to accessing these spaces during heatwaves were reported, including:

- Lack of secure power supply during outages
- Safety concerns for women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, LGBTQIA+ communities, and refugee and migrant communities
- Restrictions on pets (except assistance animals)
- Limited public transport options
- Restricted opening hours
- Low community awareness of available cool spaces
- Inadequate accessibility for people with disability
- Lack of supervision
- Stigma associated with using cool spaces

To address these barriers, strategies were scoped such as extending opening hours, improving communication about cool spaces, and identifying training needs for staff and volunteers to enhance safety and support for community members.

Stakeholders also recognised the importance of using diverse communication mediums, translated versions, delivered through trusted organisations, to reach community members with limited digital skills or English literacy. In addition, the work highlighted that people experiencing rough sleeping often fall through service gaps, pointing to the need for stronger integrated supports.

Next steps

Building on this collective action, recommendations included increasing social housing retrofitting and strengthening minimum energy efficiency standards for rental properties. Stakeholders also considered extending the opening hours of cool spaces and exploring the feasibility of expanding the Goldfields Libraries, BCHS and City of Greater Bendigo Community Connections project to other shires. This project links people using the library as a cool space, particularly those experiencing disadvantage, with the services they need.

Further actions focused on enhancing supports for rough sleepers and people experiencing homelessness to help them stay cool in summer. In addition, thanks to the Violet Vines Marshman Grant through La Trobe University, the LMPHU will continue and expand the implementation of the mini-pilot program of energy efficiency and literacy workshops for target populations.

Sources

Heat health risk | Australian Climate Service
Heatwave fatalities in Australia: a new analysis - Risk Frontiers