

Our drought stricken rural communities need support

Marcelle Mogg, CEO, Catholic Social Services Australia

Jack, a farmer in western Queensland, has been under financial pressure for many years now, thanks to the drought. The unrelenting stress and anxiety about the future are putting strain on his marriage and his family. He works very long days and is isolated from extended family and friends. Who can he turn to?

Simon, another man on the land, is struggling under the weight of grief following an accident that killed a member of his family. He's having trouble talking to his wife who is also grieving, and the whole situation is making it hard to deal with the daily challenges of running his large dairy farm. Who can help before it gets to a crisis situation?

Up until June 30, both of these men were able to access tailored community mental health, and family and relationship counselling services that were established two years ago to support drought affected communities. Catholic Social Services Australia (CSSA) members are among the providers who have been delivering these services, often one-on-one, usually by visiting people on their properties over a period of time, at their request, or through a community event setting, such as men's sheds, afternoon teas, or stands at agricultural shows. However, in a blow to rural communities, the 2016-17 Federal Budget ended the ongoing funding for these crucial, and successful, services. So, from July 1, these vital, on-the-ground mental health services ceased.

Where will people living in rural and remote communities turn when they are doing it tough? The government has said that from 1 July, they can access traditional mental health services, such as telephone counselling and clinical mental health counselling through Primary Health Networks, but existing evidence shows people in rural and remote areas are reluctant to seek support through those channels. This is due to the stigma of accessing mental health services in rural communities, fears around lack of anonymity, or the lack of specialised mental health services. The high rates of depression and suicide in rural communities are clear evidence of the need for counselling support in these areas.

Catholic Social Services Australia has developed a proposal for a Rural Community Resilience Programme to take over the existing services that have been defunded.

The proposed programme will draw on the success of the earlier model, and enable counsellors and community workers to work alongside rural and remote communities and extend mental health, family and relationship support to people in their homes, on their stations and at community events.

Importantly, the Rural Community Resilience Programme recognises that the challenges faced by rural and remote communities are ongoing – not just one-off episodes that can be dealt with and forgotten.

It's a programme that meets farmers and farming communities where they're at and talks their language.

Previously, Catholic Social Services Australia member agencies, such as Centacare Toowoomba and Centacare New England North West, have delivered individual and family relationship support services in 52 of the 69 drought affected local government areas (LGAs) across Australia, at a cost to the Australian Government of around \$290,000 per year for each LGA. Similarly, Centacare Catholic

Family Services, Adelaide has worked with communities in the Adelaide Hills, Alexandrina, Mount Barker and the Coorong LGAs.

Evidence from the past two years clearly shows the effectiveness of a community mental health model, and family and relationship counselling services working in rural and remote settings to complement mainstream service providers. Investing early in preventative measures, such as developing social cohesion, provides a foundation for the community and individuals to cope when times get tough.

Both Jack and Simon, and their wives and families, have received help through individual counselling and support visits at their farm or station, and through community-based discussion groups. All are now doing well and receiving ongoing support.

In Jack's case, the counselling he and his family received in their own home enabled the case worker to engage with the family face to face, over a period of time, building a climate of trust and respect, in a way which may not have been possible in any other setting. The home visits also provided opportunities for the case worker to meet and chat in an informal setting with eight other local people, and to introduce, from a non-invasive and respectful position, information on drought assistance programmes, as well as offer support and referrals to other relevant services, such as financial counselling.

The community mental health model works. It saves lives, saves marriages, saves families and saves communities. It can only keep working if the Federal Government commits to supporting it through the provision of ongoing funding. I urge you to support struggling farmers in your region by joining Catholic Social Services Australia in calling on politicians and political candidates from all sides of politics to commit to this programme and help build a stronger, happier future for our families on the land.

*names have been changed for privacy

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