

A place of knowledge and connection

Developing a health and wellbeing framework for public libraries

Debra Rosenfeldt, Head of Library Sector Engagement at State Library Victoria and Jane Cowell, CEO, Yarra Plenty Regional Library Corporation are part of a team of library professionals who are developing a Health and Wellbeing Framework for public libraries in Victoria, Australia. The research undertaken demonstrates how libraries, through collaboration with their health and community partners, can deliver in the community health and wellbeing space. Public libraries can increase wellness by facilitating social connection, mental health, digital inclusion and reducing loneliness.



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Public libraries have, for decades, provided resources for learning, community information, entertainment, and engagement. They have gained respect and established a reputation of being a place of opportunity and knowledge. But besides these valuable accolades, the stereotypical view of them can be challenging for contemporary society. Some continue to think of them as dusty places full of books where silence is required. The public library of today, though, is quite different.

Public libraries offer services that enhance health and wellbeing, community engagement and a sense of belonging to a place. While not providing medical health care, they are a source of information on preventative health programmes and on how, where and why to access medical care both locally and online. Libraries have a critical role within the provision of the social and mental components of health through education support, employment support and digital inclusion initiatives.

Debra Rosenfeldt, Head of Library Sector Engagement, State Library of Victoria and Jane Cowell,

CEO, Yarra Plenty Regional Library Corporation describe how the state and public libraries in the State of Victoria, Australia are developing a health and wellbeing framework.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES FOR HEALTH AND WELLBEING IN COMMUNITIES

In July 2019, 48 Victorian Public Library Managers and senior State Library Victoria staff came together for a two-day planning summit. It was agreed that 'Public Libraries for Health and Wellbeing in Communities' would be the focus for their next three years of collaborative action, and that the first initiative would be developing a strategic framework for this work.

A collaborative working party came together to develop the framework in conversation with the community, State and public library staff and health partners. They explored where libraries made their biggest contribution to health and where their maximum impact could be for improved community health and wellbeing.

From October 2020 they undertook an intensive gathering of information through a Victorian Library network survey and a series of focus groups, workshops and interviews. This was to establish how the state's libraries contributed to the health and wellbeing of their communities. The process of engagement was extensive. All the



Libraries are a vital resource for communities – for example, they provide access to digital services and foster social connection.

findings were brought together to develop the draft framework for health and wellbeing provision.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Libraries were identified as having three main areas of impact: Social connection, Mental wellbeing, and Physical health. Social connection is achieved through supporting the local community to foster meaningful relationships with others and to develop a sense of belonging. Libraries support mental health by empowering people to cope with the ups and downs in their lives, connecting them to curated resources and programmes as well as providing access to local support and services. Libraries also offer programmes and services that support communities to understand and manage their physical health and improve their health outcomes. Examples include healthy eating programmes, story walks and walking book clubs to get people moving.

The team identified five roles for libraries in health and wellbeing: to collaborate with partners, build skills, provide resources, make connections, and amplify voices. Libraries could work collaboratively with other organisations providing health and wellbeing services to drive benefits for their communities. They can build skills such as strengthening digital and health literacies along with

with one another, with library staff and with other services. Libraries can also amplify local voices. By sharing health and wellbeing experiences and needs of their communities, library team members and partners allow them to be heard at decision-making forums.

The Library sector in Victoria is now coming together to finalise the Victorian Libraries for Health and Wellbeing

Framework and to determine the three-year action plan. Key priorities identified for this plan include:

- Communities are empowered through skills and habits.
- Communities are supported through resources and information.
- Communities are connected through belonging and participation.

Libraries have always been a resource for their communities, but the contemporary library can also support health and wellbeing by provision of physical spaces, digital access, information, and library programmes.

CASE STUDY: YARRA PLENTY REGIONAL LIBRARY

Yarra Plenty Regional Library 'Caring Calls' is an example of the role public



During the Covid-19 lockdowns, library staff in Yarra Plenty reached out to their older members, offering support and a chat.

libraries play to improve the community, in particular regarding seniors' health and wellbeing. The Framework will enable libraries to measure this type of programme and advocate for their role in improving the health and wellbeing of the community at the local level. This example shows libraries do deliver in the community health and wellbeing space.

Due to Covid-19, a hard lockdown was imposed across the Australian State of Victoria. People had to adhere to only being allowed to leave home under four major conditions. They could leave home for one hour of exercise daily, food shopping, essential work and for caregiving or medical reasons. Those over 70 were advised to have shopping delivered, further reducing their social contact, exercise and their mental wellbeing.

The libraries along with other public facilities were closed, and the library staff in Yarra Plenty were required to work from home. They were concerned for their many older members, who had more limited technical skills, which

restricted their ability to access library resources online and led to the risk of increased isolation. Isolation is a known factor in reduced mental wellbeing and a risk factor for ongoing ill health.

The library staff chose to ring those over 60 years of age. Their message was despite the library being physically closed they could still use the library resources and programmes online. Library staff rang over 8000 of their library members to check in with them. The staff offered support with four important areas: Technical help, Access

to library online services, Access to emergency food services, and local health and wellbeing information. Guidance on how to connect with the library eBooks and eAudio resources was offered as well as simply having a chat.

Technical Help was the major assistance that staff gave over the phone to guide their members on how to access the

eLibrary, set up their iPads and access other digital events. The members were overwhelmingly grateful for this service. They were glad to talk to someone new and have a different conversation as anxiety levels were high with all the unknowns about this virus.

THERE'S MORE TO COME

The Victorian Libraries for Health and Wellbeing Framework is still in development, but the key elements have been identified through extensive research and collaboration: Impact (social connection, mental wellbeing and physical health), their roles (to collaborate with partners, build skills, provide resources, make connections, and amplify voices) and their priorities

(empower, support and connect). The Yarra Plenty case study offers an example of how the framework will be able to be used to structure and evaluate the role of libraries in health and wellbeing.

As the study progresses, the team recommend to those interested in the developing framework: watch this space!

During the Covid-19 lockdowns, the Yarra Plenty library staff rang over 8000 of their library members to check in with them.

Behind the Research



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Research Objectives

Rosenfeldt and Cowell are part of a team of library professionals who are developing a framework to define, shape, articulate and evaluate the contribution of Victorian public libraries in the delivery of community health and wellbeing outcomes.

Detail

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Bio
Debra Rosenfeldt is an experienced senior library professional in both public and State Libraries and is currently Head of Library Sector Engagement at State Library of Victoria. She leads projects that support development of Victoria's public library network. These include training, advocacy, research and strategic planning initiatives such as

Libraries for Health and Wellbeing.

Jane Cowell is an experienced leader and passionate advocate for public libraries. She is currently the CEO of Yarra Plenty Regional Libraries Corporation, and Secretary for the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) - Public Library Section committee and has previously served on the Board of Directors of Australian Library Information Association (ALIA).

Funding

• State Government of Victoria, through State Library Victoria, is allocating approximately A\$1 million to the Libraries for Health and

Wellbeing programme over three years.

- Local Governments of Victoria provide over 85% of operational funding for public libraries.
- Public Libraries funding in Victoria in 2019-2020 equated to A\$39.34 per capita (Operations and Collections) - source: <https://www.nsla.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/nsla-publibstats-2019-20.pdf>

Collaborators

- State Library Victoria: <https://www.slv.vic.gov.au/about-us/collaborations-affiliations/public-libraries>
- Public Libraries Victoria: <https://www.plv.org.au/>

References

Cowell, J. (2020). Yarra Plenty Regional Library's Caring Calls Project. *Public Library Quarterly*, 39(6), 487-492. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2020.1816156>

Personal Response

What inspired you to develop this framework?

Reflecting on the changing nature of the public library's role in communities led to an in-depth conversation of the recognition that libraries increasingly play an essential role in local health and wellbeing outcomes. The Framework will allow the evidence of this role to be gathered, quantified, and articulated.

