

2011

# WOMEN GATHERING AFTER FIRES EVALUATION REPORT



WOMEN'S HEALTH  
GOULBURN NORTH EAST



Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) was established in July 2000. Previously known as NEWomen, Women's Health Goulburn North East is the government funded, specialist women's health service for the Goulburn Valley and north east Victoria.

Further copies of this report are available from:

Women's Health Goulburn North East

PO Box 853 Wangaratta 3677

Phone: 03 5722 3009

Fax: 03 5722 3020

Email: [whealth@whealth.com.au](mailto:whealth@whealth.com.au)

Web: [www.whealth.com.au](http://www.whealth.com.au)

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## INTRODUCTION

*Women Gathering* is an initiative of WHGNE that has encouraged women throughout the Hume region to get together regularly for friendship, support and fun in order to respectfully hear each others' stories.

Women Gathering is based on the premise that 'together, women do better'.

This health promotion program aimed to improve the health and wellbeing of women by strengthening community capacity and connectedness.

*Women Gathering After Fires* is an extension of this program.

WGAF aimed to provide women affected by the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires a forum to share their experiences, grow stronger and develop friendships with other women to support them through the healing process.

The simple, but vital ingredients to making and maintaining women's friendships-trust – confidentiality and inclusion – are the cornerstone of the *Women Gathering After Fires Project*.

### **The Process**

Women who were interested in running a Women Gathering group attended a workshop where they learnt skills, shared wisdom and gained confidence.

After attending the workshop these women were eligible to apply for seed funding to support them to gather a group of women to meet together regularly.

Groups met together for a minimum of six sessions; they chose their own activities, structure and where and when they met.

### **The Outcome**

Women Gathering After Fires met its aims; women who were ready came, connected and reconnected with other women from their community. Those who were able to take up this opportunity reported an increase in belonging and wellbeing. As a model based on individual and community empowerment – Women Gathering After Fires, met, and in some cases, exceeded our expectations.

## EVALUATION METHODS

Evaluation for the WGAF project investigated if the project achieved its objectives (see below).

Evaluation methodology included:

- Evaluation surveys distributed to participants who attended a WGAF workshop with five simple open ended questions regarding the workshop.
- Pre and post evaluation of the participants' expectations of the workshop.
- Process evaluation was collected by facilitators who continuously observed participants' involvement, understanding and comfort levels at the workshops.
- Attendance lists from workshops were collected and applications for funding collated.
- At the completion of each group's first six sessions, data was collected, including a Short Term Social Connection Tool<sup>1</sup>, a survey for group leaders and a survey for women. Ideally, a baseline survey would have been conducted to enable a comparison. Logistically, this was difficult as at the time women were already burdened with paperwork and other recovery related issues.
- Throughout the project, qualitative data was collected and recorded by way of conversations and via email with workers and group leaders.
- Phone surveys were conducted with groups who had not made contact to collect information about the possible barriers to program implementation.
- Reflective discussion was conducted by facilitators around project implementation and learnings.

### Goal:

To bring women together for friendship, fun and support, while providing these women with an opportunity to reconnect in a safe environment and to participate in activities and events of their choice.

### Objectives:

To **develop** partnerships and collaborative working relationships with workers in bushfire affected areas of Victoria.

To **facilitate** three 2-day training sessions for women wanting to establish a Women Gathering group.

To develop appropriate **resources** for group leaders to utilise when implementing groups.

To enable up to 40 individual **Women Gathering groups** across bushfire affected areas.

## Examples of Evaluation Questions:

### **Workshop Evaluation Questions**

Today's workshop was...

What I like best was...

What could have been improved?

I feel confident to run a women gathering group...

If I had problems I would...

Anything else you'd like to tell us?

### **Open ended questions for women after attending six sessions of their group**

Why did you attend this group?

What did you enjoy most and least about your group?

Can you tell us about what this group has meant to you?

Can you tell us about any other stories or comments about your experiences within your group?

## Key Evaluation Themes

- Extent that the project was able to reach its target group
- Quality and appropriateness of training session and resources
- Capacity of partners, workers, group leaders and women to contribute
- Identification of project enablers and barriers
- Impact of program intervention on women, leaders and community

## RESULTS & FINDINGS

### Workshops Held

One day WGAF Workshops were developed based on the model for previous Women Gathering workshops developed by WHGNE.

To offer the greatest opportunity for attendance, fourteen, four-hour workshops were held across Victoria. Overall, 285 people participated in the workshops, including community members, workers and government representatives.

Location of workshops & number of participants who attended		
Location	Date	No. who attended
Healesville	25/2/10	65
Castlemaine	2/3/10	17
Warragul	16/3/10	12
Drouin East	17/3/10	13
Traralgon	17/3/10	45
Whittlesea	13/4/10	7
Alexandra/Acheron	14/4/10	30
Tarra Valley	15/4/10	14
Rosewhite	16/4/10	20
Yea	22/4/10	19
Bendigo	29/4/10	8
Melbourne	14/9/10	2
Marysville	29/9/10	23
Kinglake	5/10/10	10
<b>Total</b>		<b>285</b>
<b>WGAF Focus group</b>		
Alexandra/Acheron	31/8/10	25

Location of participants who attended workshops	
Location	No. who attended
Hume Region	117
Murrindindi	89
Mitchell	8
Alpine	20
Grampians Region	4
Gippsland Region	79
Latrobe	48
South Gippsland	4
Wellington	4
Baw Baw	23
Loddon Mallee Region	18
Metro Regions	42
Address unknown	12



## RESULTS & FINDINGS

One hundred and fifty-one (53%) **workshop evaluation** surveys were collected. Of these:

- Seventy-four women (49%) stated or indicated that they enjoyed the workshop – ‘fun’ ‘fantastic’ ‘valuable’ ‘inspiring’.
- Seventy-seven women (57%) felt informed – ‘informative’ ‘interesting’ ‘good ideas’ ‘new ideas’.
- One hundred and seven (71%) like being with and hearing from other women, getting ideas and meeting new people.
- After attending the workshop 126 (83%) felt confident to run a group.
- One hundred and thirty-two (87%) responded with a strategy in case they need support with the group, either by ‘*contacting my support worker*’ or other named professional or ‘*Ask! There are lots of options for support*’.

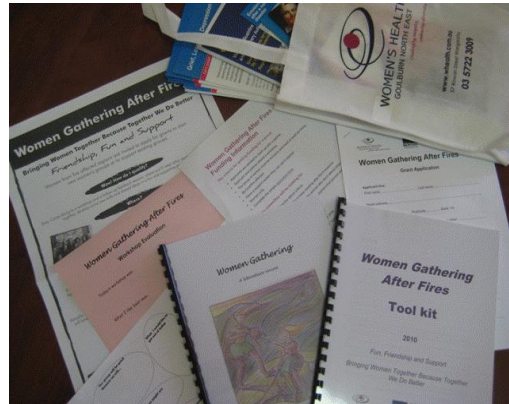
Women told us they were personally empowered from simply attending the workshops. Observation and later conversations indicated networks and friendships were established at the workshops.

Participants gained an understanding of the Women Gathering principles, guidelines and what makes a group work. This was demonstrated by those groups reworking their application after attending the workshop.

## Resources Developed

### Resources distributed at WGAF workshops

- Women Gathering Literature Review
- WGAF Tool Kit
- Planning work sheet
- Funding information
- Application form
- Evaluation form
- Health information bags or brochures
- Local information
- Contact information for facilitators



In the group leaders’ survey, 17 out of the 23 participants indicated that the toolkit was relevant and useful. Comments highlighted that the toolkit was reinforcement material for those who attended the workshop. Most knowledge was gained from the discussions and activities in the workshops, with the resources supporting this knowledge in a practical way.



## Groups meeting

Eighty-seven groups were funded to support or start a group in their local community. Forty-seven groups returned their surveys (54%).

Based on these surveys:

- Groups averaged eight participants.
- On average, ages ranged from 35 to 60 years old; however, some groups reported teenagers, and women who were in their 90s.
- Fifteen groups identified as being an existing group prior to being funded by WGAF.
- Three groups identified as established after the fires, but before receiving WGAF funding.
- Twenty eight groups identified as a new group funded by WGAF.

All groups were requested to return surveys. One group was not able to begin, other groups had not held their six sessions upon collation of this data. Others had barriers to returning the surveys and, given the circumstances, this was respected and accepted by project staff.

Number of groups in Local Government Areas		
DHS Region	Shire	No.
Eastern Metro Region	Yarra Ranges	9
Gippsland Region	Baw Baw	10
	Latrobe	13
	Wellington	1
Grampians Region	Hepburn	1
Hume Region	Alpine	6
	Mitchell	2
	Murrindindi	42
Loddon Mallee Region	Bendigo	1
	Mt Alexander	2
<b>Total</b>		<b>87</b>



## RESULTS & FINDINGS

### What groups did

All groups chose their own activity or activities.

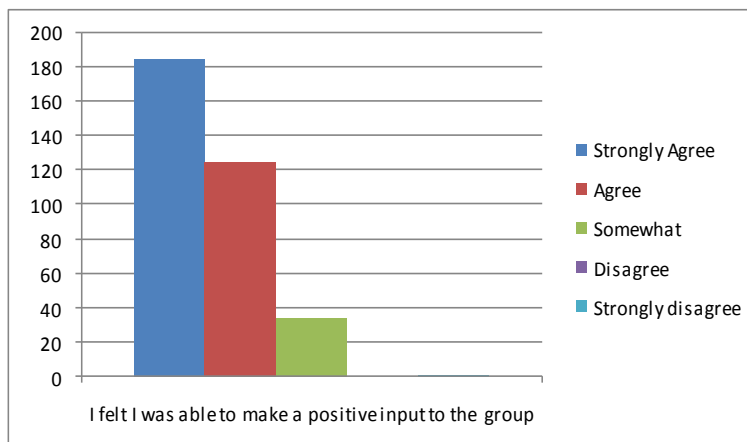
Many groups met to exercise together: Tai Chi, tennis, walking, pole walking, bowling, golf.

Art and craft activities produced something to keep, or developed projects to work on together whilst chatting. Activities included: beading, quilting, patchwork, felting, wool, pottery, lead lighting, calligraphy, card making, woodwork and mosaics.

Some groups met specifically around food: meeting for lunch, to create a cookbook, learning about new styles of cooking and making coffee with a new coffee machine.

Other activities included Fireguard group, mums' groups, book groups, garden groups and groups that met to see movies or play board games together.

### Short Term Social Connection Tool Results<sup>1</sup>



From the 47 groups who returned the surveys, 345 survey respondents indicated that —

- 96% agreed or strongly agreed that they felt they **belonged** to their group.
- 99% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were **treated with respect** by others in the group.
- 95% agreed or strongly agreed they felt the group had a **positive effect** on their emotional health and wellbeing.
- 1.5% felt unable to bring up **feelings and emotions** openly within their group.

## Women who attended groups said they have gained...

### **Fun**

“This group was a reason for me to stop everyday life for a while and relax and do something I enjoy—not what I have to do!” – Butterfly Women

“We always have a laugh”— Boolarra Flora & Fauna Quilting Group

### **Friendships**

“Long term friendships have developed”— Neighbourhood Ladies Fire Guard Group

“I enjoy getting together with women who are now my friends” — Patchwork Collections Friendship Group

### **Support**

“The bond of friendships and the support we give to each other is invaluable”— Craft Group

### **Leadership**

“I started the group, it’s helped me tremendously”— Women Gathering for Fun

“I have gained lots of self confidence in organising meetings and have enjoyed the talk and companionship”— Colourful Yarns

### **Connection**

“It has helped me integrate with other people from the community”— Book & Film Club

“It has brought a new level of trust with those who were strangers to me”— Creative Triangle

### **Hope**

“The group has helped me feel good about myself again”—The Bucket Club

## Working together

Central to this project was the partnerships and a collaborative working relationship with workers and organisations already engaged with fire affected communities.

The project plan was to partner with workers who had the trust of communities and to eliminate over-burdening women with 'another' worker.

Initial key contacts were: Rural Women Leading Change Project workers; other Women's Health Services; Local Government Fire Recovery workers and Hub Captains, who assisted in collating a list of 146 workers.

Workers were invited to the launch and information session, centrally located in Melbourne. Three workers from Metropolitan regions, five from Gippsland region, seven from Loddon Mallee region, one from Grampians and ten from Hume region attended the information launch.

Thirty-four workers from 23 organisations, including eight shires, and workers from Community Health Services, Hubs and other community services attended the workshops.

WHGNE partnered with the Department of Planning and Community Development to design, develop and facilitate workshops and resources.

Fifty-nine different workers from 38 organisations supported the groups. Eight shires, seven Community Health Services, three Neighbourhood Houses, ten community services, four Hubs or Fire Recovery Services, two Churches and two Maternal and Child Health Services.

One local shire contributed additional financial resources to support more groups in their community.

## DISCUSSION

### Workshops

Discussion with local workers and women quickly informed us about the local communities, areas of need and approaches to working with the women. This helped to target and tailor the model accordingly to meet the needs and situation of each community.

Women stated they didn't like travelling out of their area. Delivering as many workshops as possible to cater for different interests and to minimise travel is essential reach the maximum potential of this program.

Not all women who attended workshops put in an application for funding, but all stated they benefited from attending a workshop. Some have applied the principles in other groups or as a group member. The networking and connections made at the workshops were invaluable, especially when women found they were from a similar geographical area.

Some women came to a workshop because they needed to be a part of a group, but didn't have the capacity to run a group themselves at this time. These women were rewarded for attending by establishing friendships or links into their community via the workshop.

Attendance was not as high as expected from women who had moved out of the bushfire affected areas and there were significant challenges in making contact with these women. Workers seemed to be engaged mostly with those women who had remained in the affected areas. The women who did attend and who were now living outside the fire affected areas were those that had strong contacts or links with the area.

For future projects a recommended strategy would be to have a forum or information session prior to the workshop at the workshop location. There was a tendency for workers to attend a workshop to assess the project before promoting it to the women; hence the women missed out as workshops were not repeated. By having an information session, women and workers can find out more information, have questions answered and make a decision to attend or to promote the project.

Indigenous, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD), women with a disability and same sex attracted women were under-represented at the workshops.

All workshops were tailored to meet the needs of that group of women. Smaller workshops were more personal, intense and less structured. Larger numbers of women at the workshop meant facilitators didn't hear as many stories, as the women shared in small groups.

Workshops in smaller communities often meant the women knew each other and had strong connections. Some workshops had many workers, some had none. When there were too many workers, women felt outnumbered and not as free to talk. Workshops where there were few or no workers meant women had to use their own networks to find a support worker.

Women are ready to connect or reconnect with other women at various stages after a disaster. Allowing the project to be available over a longer period of time would allow women and groups to join when they were ready. Women in Kinglake and Marysville areas were just beginning to pick up the project as it was concluding. Keeping funding opportunities open over a longer period of time would allow the project to be used as a recovery tool, which would then continue as a model for community strengthening.

Three enablers for workshops were: having two facilitators; having a relationship with workers in the area; and having workers who understood the WGAF vision and principles, and who were able to convey these to other women in their communities.

## Groups

Group leaders' capacities varied depending on their personal capacity and circumstances. One group did not begin at all; this was due to personal circumstances. The joint applicant, who is an essential prerequisite for receiving funds, was not able to take up the role on her own.

Other groups that struggled, especially new groups, were due to the group leader or leaders' capacity at the time, examples were when they became unwell, had a personal crisis or change of lifestyle i.e. began study. Groups that worked best were groups that shared leadership.

The groups attracted a limited number of ATSI and CALD women. One group was a same sex attracted group.

## Recommendations

- Workshops go to the communities
- Having a forum or information session prior to the workshop
- Regular workshops & opportunities to access funding over the long recovery period
- Project worker works closely with workers already engaged with the community
- Co-facilitation recommended at workshops and for groups
- Engage workers who understand the WGAF vision and principles, and are able to support and inspire other women.

## KEY LEARNINGS

### Women Gathering groups work when...

- The group is low cost and simple to run
- The group is small with an activity or focus
- There is a passionate leader for the group
- There is shared leadership
- There is group ownership
- Food is shared
- Gatherings are regular
- There are group rules that are explicit
- Groups are inclusive
- There is celebration and fun

### Women Gathering model works because it...

- Provides women with confidence, self esteem and resources.
- Uses a strength based approach acknowledging the resilience and skills of women and gives them the opportunity to blossom.
- Provides opportunities for the power of storytelling and listening to heal, motivate, encourage and empower.
- Builds social capital, capacity and develops skills, such as leadership.
- Empowers women and communities to be independent from service providers; it doesn't set up a dependence on workers.
- Is simple.
- Is a positive response to disaster recovery.
- Highlights the ability of communities to heal themselves with support rather than 'help' coming in.
- Goes to the community.
- Is transferable to many contexts.

### Our Group works when...

- Everyone has a chance to speak and be listened to.
- Our stories and comments are safe and not repeated outside the group.
- Everyone is invited and encouraged to join in.
- We accept our differences – others might think differently, but it doesn't make them wrong.
- We have a common interest or shared activity.
- We have food to share and a suitable venue.
- Our leadership is shared and everyone has opportunity to contribute.
- Laughter, fun, trust, acceptance, respect and a positive attitude are part of our group.
- We have a shared understanding about how our group operates.

## CONCLUSION

Women Gathering After Fires was embraced by fire affected communities. The project resourced and built upon what the women were already doing for their own recovery. While the funding resourced groups, a key success factor of this project was the workshops where women were able to network, share, develop ideas, and support each other. The limitation was the timeline imposed upon the project to conclude, not allowing communities to access the project within their recovery timeline. This project has enabled and inspired women who were affected by the 2009 Victorian Bushfires to continue gathering for friendship, support and fun in their local communities, even after the project's conclusion.

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### Reference

<sup>1</sup> Central Hume Primary Care Partnerships, 2010 Short Term Evaluation Tool.  
<http://.centralhumepcp/?file=home&smid=5>



# PICTURE GALLERY



Photo by Dianne Goschnick



Narby Firebirds at the Black Spur Roadhouse



Beading Group



Pottery Group



## Women Gathering After Fires by Dianne Goschnick 2010

'Women gathering after the fires'  
 Brought us together, to be inspired  
 To form different groups, to bring women together  
 To meet with each other, despite the weather.

Many different groups were created and there was fun and laughter

To ensure not all was lost, following the disaster  
 New friendships were formed and stories were shared  
 And heartfelt feelings and souls were bared.

Our Garden Group, so keen and delighted  
 Meet regularly monthly, so dedicated and excited  
 Everlasting friendships, like our gardens are growing  
 Together as friend, other women we are getting to knowing.

As our friendship grow stronger each time we meet  
 We welcome newcomers and we will kindly greet,  
 Each woman so special and valued dearly

### Lead lighting in Kinglake

It is really important for us to be able to spend quality time together that doesn't revolve around having to 'talk' to heal. We have created art together. We will have something physically 'positive' to connect us forever, not just the fires



"The group offers support, love, friendship & best of all—laughter and fun"  
 - Flameingoes



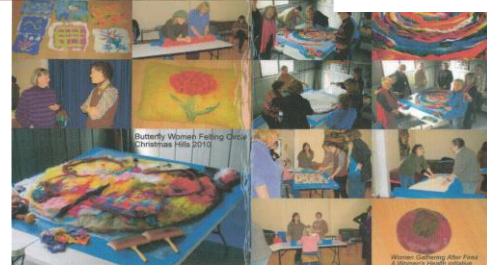
Kilmore Belly Dancers—Flameingoes

"One lady is able to catch-up once a month with people she has known for 30 years since having to leave the area after the fires."



"Now we have all the tools and the use of a shed we can keep up the work we started"  
 - Woodwork for women

Our gardening group was set up as part of the WGAF program. This band of women meet on a monthly basis, visiting each others gardens, sharing garden stories, swapping plants, cuttings, recipes, garden produce, garden ideas and generally providing friendship and support.



### Butterfly Women Felting Circle

This group has been the catalyst for new friendships, much needed support and the learning of new skills. The environment of the group has been nurturing and friendly and exactly the sort of 'head space' we have needed.