

To the members of the Rotary Club of Hawthorn.

I am a Social Worker with Centrelink's Rural, Murray-Darling & Climate Change Branch. Over the past five years I have worked with men & women farming the land & various rural communities, throughout Shires of Moira, Shepparton, Campaspe and Murray Shire in N.S.W. In my role I have been extremely fortunate to experience great latitude in responding to the needs of rural people.

My background and insight is enhanced, given my personal experience. I am a farmer's daughter, own & operate a business that intersects with Dairy industry and live in a small rural community my family on an 84 acre ex-dairy farm.

It's no secret that over past seven years our region has experienced the most persistent & severe drought event in Australia's history. As the dryness continues into 2010, families and communities are experiencing massive change to their lifestyle, wellbeing & future. For men, women and their children, life that they have known is seriously threatened.

For rural people the experience of grief, due to loss, is widespread; loss of income, culling stock, failed crops, loss of identity, hope & optimism and possibly life. Living in the workplace (on their farm) exacerbates the devastating impact on peoples' physical & psychological wellbeing. More recently, in my work with families, I am seeing significant increases in the effects of long term stress on their mental health status and relationships.

The Australian Government & Centrelink have played a vital role in supporting people affected by drought through a range programs & support services. Funds through Federal Government have significantly contributed to rural economies over past seven years

Rural people are a unique breed, proud, stoic and fiercely independent - attributes I admire - but this can impede their access to support payments and range of programs and, particularly, counselling.

Overcoming rural people's stigma associated with "Welfare" was challenging, but successfully accomplished by demonstrating respect by stepping out of our office & into their world. Taking information and support into small rural towns and to the kitchen table of farming families has proven most effective in 'engagement'.

Fear and uncertainty regarding a "future" in agricultural communities is extremely debilitating. Maintaining and fostering resilience in individuals, families and communities faced with adversity is challenging, yet essential.

Within the Moira Shire, unique relationships have been developed between various agencies in both agricultural & human service sectors, across all differing levels of Government and in genuine partnership with Non-Government Organisations.

The operations of the Moira Shire Drought Recovery Committee and their respective partnership with Boroondara Cares Project has significantly contributed to the financial, human and social capital in individuals, families and rural communities in the Moira Shire.

Initially, this connection between Moira Shire and the Rotary Clubs was perceived as a short term project. Yet, recently, I attended my third consecutive "Evening with the Stars" event and clearly the relationships, respect and care between rural and city folk has gone past a mere financial relationship and into a long term emotional connection.

The events that the Boroondara Cares program initiated and supported are too numerous and varied to list. What is critical to emphasise is that, the events significantly foster the social connectedness within rural communities and build on the community capacity.

Participating in community events is fundamental in fostering resilience in the people and communities, and a critical aspect in protecting peoples' emotional and psychological health. In 2005 more than 2100 Australians were reported as taking their own lives. This figure is more than the total number of deaths from road accidents, industrial accidents and homicides

It is with great appreciation, that I represent the Moira Shire Drought Recovery Committee, in providing a snapshot to the Hawthorn Rotary Club of the phenomenal impact of the various events and work being done to support the people and rural communities within the Moira Shire.

Without doubt, the care that has been shown toward our rural families far transcends the value of money received. The funds have significantly enhanced the capacity to hold events and supporting individuals and families with material aid. It is pleasing to note that the relationships between city and country people transcend the confines of the drought in the Moira Shire.

Thank you to each and every member of the Rotary Club of Hawthorn for your generous support & consideration of the challenges faced by rural communities in the Moira Shire.

Kind regards  
Carmel Shellie, Rural Social Worker, Centrelink, Shepparton