

MEDIA RELEASE

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The Big Connect to boost mental wellbeing of Victoria's young people with 100,000+ new social connection opportunities

Health promotion foundation VicHealth will partner with organisations across the state to deliver more than 100,000 new opportunities for young people to socially and safely connect across 2022-2023.

As coronavirus restrictions continue to ease across Victoria, The Big Connect – the first investment of VicHealth's ground-breaking [Future Healthy](#) initiative – will support the mental wellbeing of our young people, by creating opportunities for them to reconnect with their friends, families and communities in ways that work for them.

A range of Victorian organisations will have the opportunity to partner with VicHealth on The Big Connect, and receive a share of up to \$5million, including those from our sports, active recreation, arts, cultural, youth, health promotion and community food sectors.

The new investment comes as a VicHealth survey¹ reveals, concerningly, more than 1 in 3 (36%) young people in Victoria feel like they don't fit in with their local community or neighbourhood. The survey also found that **among Victoria's 18 to 25-year-olds:**

- 4 in 5 (82%) haven't been able to spend as much time with friends as they would like during the pandemic
- While 4 in 5 (84%) recognised that being socially connected is important for their mental wellbeing.

And among Victoria's parents and carers with children aged 6-17, the survey found:

- Almost 4 in 5 (78%) were worried about the pandemic's impact on their child's ability to connect with friends
- 7 in 10 (69%) said opportunities to socially connect with others in their local neighbourhood had an impact on their child enjoying good health
- 3 in 4 (73%) believed having good social connections with friends supported their child to enjoy good health.

Victorian Minister for Health Martin Foley said The Big Connect will create over 100,000 new opportunities for Victoria's young people to reconnect.

"Over the past 18 months, staying socially connected to others has been one of the most important issues for Victoria's young people," Minister Foley said.

"As we begin to open up safely, The Big Connect will create more than 100,000 new opportunities for young people to socially connect and improve their mental wellbeing."

VicHealth CEO Dr Sandro Demaio said The Big Connect will fund inclusive projects that are co-designed with young people and families right across Victoria, in response to what they want and need.

"Our survey shows that young people want and need more spaces where they can feel a sense of belonging and connection with others, particularly as we emerge from coronavirus restrictions," Dr Demaio said.

"Young people, parents and carers know that connecting meaningfully with others is important for good health, and there's plenty of evidence to support this. Research shows that building and maintaining

meaningful social connections helps children, young people and their families boost their mental wellbeing, while reducing their likelihood of developing longer term ill-health.

“We’re proud to be working in partnership with organisations and young people across Victoria to deliver new and exciting ways for young people to connect.”

Future Healthy Community Champion Ravi moved to Australia from India on his own almost 4 years ago. The 26-year-old, who lives in Melbourne’s inner north, knows how important it is to feel connected to your local community.

“Not everyone is fortunate enough to have social circles and people who actually get you. It’s a really big problem, and especially among queer young people, it’s even a bigger problem,” Ravi said.

“During the pandemic, it’s been even more difficult to meet people and find that sense of belonging.”

Ravi said uncertainty about the future had weighed heavily on the emotional wellbeing of him and his friends over the past 18 months. As restrictions ease, he said having welcoming spaces where young people can share how they’re really coping was essential for recovery.

“The first thing to start with is safe and inclusive spaces, where you can really talk about what you’re going through without people judging you or without people criticising how you feel,” Ravi said.

“Those kinds of communities, whether online or offline, are extremely important in uplifting young people and then making sure that the future is safe, brighter and healthy for the next generation.”

Learn more about Ravi on the [Future Healthy website](#) or watch his video [here](#).

About The Big Connect investment:

The Big Connect is an integrated health promotion package, including funded partnerships, sector capability building, educational support for families and a public-facing health promotion campaign.

As part of The Big Connect, VicHealth will work in partnership with organisations and young people across Victoria to design and develop projects that provide meaningful social connections for young people aged 0-25 including families. Up to \$250,000 per project will be available for innovative and impactful initiatives that can be expanded and delivered on a large scale. VicHealth will also work with health and community organisations to boost their understanding of social connection and roll out a campaign to connect young people and their families with social, fun and free activities in their local areas. *To learn more or apply, visit vichealth.vic.gov.au/funding/the-big-connect*

About Future Healthy:

Launched in September, Future Healthy is a ground-breaking initiative focused on creating a healthier future for Victoria’s young people. As coronavirus continues to affect the health and wellbeing of young people, Future Healthy will invest \$45million in new programs over 3 years to support people aged 0-25 to begin to build back better: reconnect socially and safely, get active, and access and enjoy good food. *Learn more at futurehealthy.vichealth.vic.gov.au/*

ⁱ Between July and August 2021, VicHealth conducted an online survey of 750 of Victoria’s young people aged 18-25 and 750 of Victoria’s parents and carers of kids aged 6-17. The survey explored their barriers and attitudes towards what makes communities healthy, as well as social connection, physical activity and access to healthy food.