

Going with the flow gets results

Increasing participation in physical activity through community sport and active recreation

This project is part of a VicHealth funding program known as PICSAR, which aims to increase participation levels in community sport and active recreation amongst people with disabilities and those from low socio-economic, Indigenous and new arrival communities.

The organisation

The Victorian Canoe Association Inc. (Canoeing Victoria) was formed in 1930 and incorporated in 1984. It is the state body responsible for the management, co-ordination, development and promotion of canoeing in Victoria. It represents the interests of its members, the public and the national body (Australian Canoeing) and is committed to the provision of the highest standards of competition, safety, coaching, instruction and education and the creation of opportunities for participation.

The project

Canoeing Victoria's *Go with the Flow* project has a key objective: to develop locally sustainable opportunities for Victorian Indigenous communities to access and participate in community-based canoeing. This involves creating inclusive and safe physical and social environments to support participation. It is hoped the Indigenous participants in the program will receive positive health benefits from sport and recreation, develop canoeing skills to enhance their cultural experiences and feel an increase in social wellbeing. Indigenous communities in the Robinvale and Mildura region are the first to participate in this project.



Double canoes paddling on the Murray River at the Mildura Aboriginal Corporation's Community Canoeing Fun Day. *Image courtesy of Renee Hamblin, Mildura Aboriginal Corporation.*

The right partnerships the key to community participation

The story

When Canoeing Victoria (CV) named its Indigenous community canoeing project *Go with the Flow*, it had no idea how spot-on the title would become. Now, after two years of working with local Indigenous communities in north-western Victoria, CV has learnt that 'going with the flow' is the key to a culturally appropriate and effective physical activity program.

"We had not worked with Indigenous communities in regional Victoria before and quickly discovered that developing and implementing programs in communities where we had no track record requires a different and more flexible approach than our traditional programs," explains Andrea Boothroyd, CV's Co-Executive Officer.

More information about Participation in Community Sport and Active Recreation (PICSAR) is available on the VicHealth website at: www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/picsar

The organisation knew that there were a number of areas where it had to improve its knowledge and skills. It was obvious from the start that in order to build positive relationships with the communities, CV needed to develop strong partnerships with a wide range of Indigenous and local community organisations.

“Our first partnership was with Sport and Recreation Victoria’s Indigenous Sport and Recreation Program Unit. They have been very important in helping us gain a better understanding of issues the communities have to face on a day-to-day basis and in promoting canoeing to the local community representatives,” adds Andrea.

The Indigenous Sport and Recreation team introduced CV to an important local organisation, the Mildura Aboriginal Corporation (MAC), which has recognised the need for more physical activity opportunities in its community. MAC has proven to be an ideal partner for CV, playing a critical role in advising on local cultural issues and in introducing canoeing to the local community. Without MAC’s support, it would have been very difficult to get the *Go with the Flow* program off the ground. MAC, with assistance from the Mallee Sports Assembly, organised community canoeing days complete with a barbeque, beach cricket and other fun community activities. The events have seen approximately 60 people participate in canoeing, with over 100 community members attending during the day.

“We learnt some valuable lessons through working with MAC and delivering the Community Days, including the importance of being flexible and the limitations of some of our processes,” says Andrea.

For example, CV learnt that some of its internal procedures, like its participation forms, were tailored to formal groups such as school groups. These forms were not necessarily appropriate for more casual local community programs.

Implementing the program from CV’s head office in Melbourne to the communities in Mildura and Robinvale provided some valuable project management lessons. Andrea estimates that more than half of the program costs during the initial delivery of the program were related to travel. This led to CV thinking about more sustainable ways of working.

“Ideally we would like to train and support a number of local guides and instructors to run regular sessions on the water and take people on camping and canoeing trips. It would be wonderful if the program became locally run and sustainable,” adds Andrea.

CV believes that training local community members to be qualified Flatwater Canoeing guides and instructors would also help empower the local community to regularly organise community canoeing days and other ongoing participation opportunities.

Canoeing Victoria has learnt that running a community program requires flexibility, good communication, the right partners and respecting the different needs and changing priorities of the people with whom you are working.

For more information on Canoeing Victoria go to: www.vic.canoe.org.au
Telephone: (03) 8846 4120

PICSAR

Sport and active recreation organisations are well placed to assist VicHealth in addressing the health inequalities that result in poorer health outcomes for many groups in the community.

They have a tradition of providing opportunities for individuals and groups to:

- participate in physical activity,
- connect with other members of the community,
- feel part of their local community, and
- develop knowledge and skills that can be used in a range of contexts.

The Participation in Community Sport and Active Recreation (PICSAR) Program comprises three funding programs:

- State and Regional Grants
- Active Participation Grants
- Active Club Grants

The first two programs are long-term investments that work with State Sporting Associations, Regional Sports Assemblies, statewide peak agencies and regional organisations to increase participation in physical activity in specific target populations.

A learning snapshot from the independent evaluation being conducted by Monash University/ARTD Consultants shows that:

1. partnerships are perceived as beneficial to program delivery
2. it is important that staff (paid or voluntary) have the required skills to implement activities
3. sports at all levels should consider adapting policies and activities to provide greater flexibility to promote inclusion.