

# Connecting kids to clubs creates champion communities

*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

Leisure Networks is a community-based, not-for-profit organisation and registered charity that promotes and strengthens community sport, recreation and health opportunities for people of all abilities across the Barwon region of Victoria.

Leisure Networks Association Inc was formed by the merger of two organisations in 2001 and now supports, facilitates or delivers approximately 20 community-based programs and initiatives.

## The project

Sportsaccess is an innovative participation model that supports the connection of young people to sporting clubs based in their local community. The model promotes participation by removing costs associated with memberships, uniforms and essential equipment while facilitating the introduction of families to sporting clubs.



Anok enjoying the opportunity to join her local basketball club through the Sportsaccess program. *Image courtesy of Rebecca Hickey, Leisure Networks.*

## Pivotal partnerships get the project moving

### The story

Leisure Networks' Sportsaccess pilot program targeted primary school aged children in the Corio and Norlane areas. The project aimed to connect as many children as possible to a local sporting club of their choice.

The idea for the pilot was based on the understanding that one of the most significant barriers to sport participation

is cost. If cost were to be removed, increased access and participation would result.

Realising that partnerships were crucial to the project's implementation, Leisure Networks consulted with several key personnel and agencies. These included Neighbourhood Renewal, City of Greater Geelong, McKillop Family Services and Glastonbury Child and Family Services.

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

School principals, teachers and welfare officers were asked to identify students who were interested in sport but potentially constrained from participating due to the child's family circumstances. Specifically, families who received the education maintenance allowance were a priority.

Clubs based in the community were contacted to discuss the Sportsaccess model and their capacity to accept new members. Clubs were provided with information relating to each potential new member and were also supported by initiatives through Leisure Networks' club development program.

Leisure Networks placed enormous importance on the role of the families in the success and development of the project. They initially found that for many families involvement in sport and physical activity was not a priority. The Sportsaccess model is helping to change this by requiring a signed agreement from the family. This commits them to supporting their child's participation in a chosen sport and to encouraging their child to do their best. These partnerships with families often resulted in extended participation in a sporting club by the child, their siblings and their parents.

The success of the pilot program saw 80 children join their chosen sporting club with the majority of them participating for a full season. The children and, in many cases, their families actively participated in sports as varied as horse riding, cricket, basketball, soccer, gymnastics, football, ten pin bowling and trampolining.

Twenty-two clubs welcomed the children, with many clubs taking the initiative to also assist with transport, subsidise fees and increase opportunities for family involvement.

The model has now transferred to another community, Whittington, with positive results. To date, more than 100 young people have connected with over 30 sporting clubs from 13 different primary schools in Corio, Norlane and Whittington.

Deakin University received funding to develop a research project to track the ongoing participation of the children engaged in Sportsaccess.

Leisure Networks believes its Sportsaccess project officer was the vital ingredient in promoting the program and facilitating relationships with schools, clubs, children and the retail sport equipment provider. The project officer's time and investment was crucial to the program's success which can be demonstrated by the high retention rates of the children in their chosen sports.

Leisure Networks now plans to extend the project's reach and sustainability. This plan has in principle support from the five local government authorities, service clubs, local Indigenous networks, the G21 Health and Wellbeing Pillar, pilot schools, pilot clubs, the Corio and Norlane Development Advisory Group and the Leisure Networks Board.

These future partnerships will be vital to the development of the model across the region.

Many learnings have come out of the pilot project. Leisure Networks believes the project is about much more than increasing participation. It is about social connectedness, the value of commitment from families, schools, clubs and local partners, and participation as a preventative action. If carefully targeted and developed, early intervention programs can go a long way in changing behaviours and values.

For more information on Leisure Networks go to: [lnetwork@leisurenetworks.org](mailto:lnetwork@leisurenetworks.org) [www.leisurenetworks.org](http://www.leisurenetworks.org) or telephone: (03) 5224 9929

## 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.