



Media release



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WHITTLESEA LEADS ON DIVERSITY

The City of Whittlesea has been awarded a major new program by the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) aimed at improving community acceptance of cultural diversity.

The three-year program Localities Embracing and Accepting Diversity (LEAD) is one of two trials in Victoria, and will be launched on Harmony Day, Sunday March 21, at the Whittlesea Community Festival.

VicHealth Chief Executive Officer Todd Harper said: "Communities that support cultural diversity have been found to have better health outcomes."

"The City of Whittlesea is being funded \$900,000 over 3 years. Whittlesea has been chosen due to its strong history of supporting diversity and ability to trial new and innovative approaches to complex social problems."

"It is vital to promote diversity and reduce discrimination in order to build productive, socially cohesive and inclusive communities."

"Research shows that people are more likely to have better mental health when they live and work in environments where diversity is valued and accepted. On the other hand, race-based discrimination is clearly linked with mental health problems, particularly depression," Mr Harper added.

LEAD has been developed in response to VicHealth research which shows that despite widespread support for diversity in Victoria, people from migrant, refugee and Indigenous backgrounds continue to experience unacceptably high rates of race-based discrimination.

The Whittlesea LEAD Project will focus on building positive attitudes and behaviours towards diversity in the wider community and supporting local organisations, such as retailers, workplaces, schools and sports clubs, to be fair, safe and welcoming for all.

Whittlesea Mayor Cr Mary Lalios said: "The City of Whittlesea is embarking on a three year program, which we hope will become a model for Australian local governments."

"As a highly diverse municipality, with more than one third of our residents born overseas, and representing 140 different countries, and a strong and growing Aboriginal community, we pride ourselves on our welcoming, inclusive and harmonious community. This is something we need to continuously nurture, now and into the future.

"We are also excited about working with the whole community, in addition to our current work with migrant, refugee and Aboriginal communities affected directly by discrimination or racism."

"We will be working across a number of areas including sport and recreation, employment, education, the media and local government to strengthen our communities."

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"I'm looking forward to being involved in this program and to Whittlesea's involvement in making our communities healthier, happier and safer," said Cr Lalius.

Mr Harper said that it is ground-breaking for local governments to be working in such a comprehensive way, right across their local communities for better health and acceptance of diversity.

"Research shows that around Australia 47 per cent of all people from non-English speaking backgrounds report having experienced discrimination."

"Up to three quarters of the Indigenous population report experiencing race-based discrimination," Mr Harper added.

LEAD's emphasis will be on addressing discrimination against people from African, Asian, West Asian and Indian backgrounds, as well as Indigenous Australians, as research indicates these people experience higher rates of discrimination.

A range of partners have been identified for the Whittlesea project, including a large local employer, local mall and a selection of schools and sporting clubs. Partners will be supported to undertake an anti-discrimination audit of policies and practices and develop action plans to address gaps.

Employees, retailers and schools will participate in cultural awareness and diversity training. Champions and leaders within organisations and the community will also be identified.

Both LEAD Projects, Whittlesea and City of Greater Shepparton, will be evaluated by a University of Melbourne team to build on the model for Australian local governments.

The Whittlesea LEAD Project will be formally launched by The Hon Laurie Ferguson MP Federal Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs and Settlement Services at 2pm at the Whittlesea Community Festival, 21 March, Big Top Harmony Tent, Public Gardens, 158 Barry Road, Lalor.

Speakers also include:

- Whittlesea Mayor Cr Mary Lalius;
- Local resident Dr Berhan Ahmed, 2009 Victorian of the Year and Chairperson, African Think Tank; and;
- Peter Gordon, Deputy Chairperson VicHealth Board.

The Federal Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) and beyondblue are funding partners in LEAD. The Victorian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and the Municipal Association of Victoria are implementing partners.

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A photo opportunity for LEAD is available on request

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