

Blind Sports holds court at Melbourne Park

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

Blind Sports Victoria (BSV) assists people who are blind or sight impaired to take part in a wide variety of sports. BSV was established in 1977 and is the state sporting association representing a variety of sports and recreation opportunities.

BSV is a member of Blind Sports Australia (BSA), the organisation which manages national and international competitions. As a member of BSA, participants in BSV can have the opportunity to take part in major events such as the Paralympics and World Championships.

The project

Blind Sports Victoria is working with sport and recreation providers to increase the opportunities for people who are blind or sight impaired to be involved in physical activity and recreation.



Vision impaired tennis participants. *Image courtesy of Shelley Salter.*

Team spirit aces vision impaired tennis program

The story

Earlier this year, Sally was enjoying a day at the Australian Open Tennis Championships with her friends. Sally, 17 years old, loved the atmosphere of the Australian Open, the constant buzz of the crowd and the instantaneous cheers when an Aussie player hit a winner to claim a tight set. She also enjoyed listening to the Australian Open live radio commentary, being with her friends and joining in the cheers.

When the tennis tournament leaves Melbourne Park, Sally's friends take to the local court trying to emulate some of their favourite players. It's something they continue all year round but without Sally. Sally's only involvement in tennis was going to the Australian Open. With only 5% vision, she hasn't been able to join her friends to play a game of tennis.

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

Now, an innovative Australian-first vision-impaired tennis program has changed everything for Sally. Through the initial efforts of partners BSV, Tennis Victoria and Tennis Seniors Victoria, Sally had the opportunity to finally have a go at the game she loved.

Special *Come and Try* days provided an important step in developing opportunities for people who are blind or sight impaired to participate in tennis. However, BSV believes the strengthening relationships of the partners involved had led to an even greater outcome.

"Each partner has contributed resources, brought different strengths and skills to the program, shared costs as required and shown a commitment to seeing the program through. We held our program at the indoor courts at Melbourne Park over six Friday evening blocks on three occasions over the year. While there has been tremendous goodwill from the start, the true commitment was highlighted when each partner turned up to the Friday night sessions even when their football team was playing!" BSV's Executive Officer Maurice Gleeson explains.

More recently, Victoria University has become an important new partner in the program. Students recruited from the university are volunteering on Friday nights. BSV said Victoria University is such an eager partner that they have been in the unusual position of having too many volunteers on some occasions! The students' involvement has added greatly to the development of the program, providing an exciting new mix of ages and cultures.

"Each of our partners is pulling in the same direction and has the ultimate goal that the program will get to the point where it doesn't rely on any of us. Already, we have seen volunteers taking ownership of the program and taking a more active role in activities. They are assisting players with skills development which would normally require Tennis Victoria and Tennis Seniors Victoria to assist everyone individually," adds Maurice Gleeson.

Anybody who has a vision loss or whose vision impacts on them participating in regular tennis is eligible to be part of the program. BSV says that many totally blind people have never held a tennis racquet or been on a tennis court. This program enables them to develop skills associated with tennis movements such as serving, forehand and backhand.

"Learning these movements is also a really valuable way for the participants to develop directional hearing. These exercises are really new and exciting for many people who are blind and sight impaired. The social interaction with other participants and volunteers is also a wonderful experience for everyone involved," says Maurice Gleeson.

Approximately 40 blind and sight impaired people have participated in the program over the last two years. The program and the partnership continue to go from strength to strength.

"The partnership could not have been planned to happen this way. It was only by coming together with common objectives and conducting the program based on the participants that allowed our partnership and program to evolve," adds Maurice Gleeson.

Thanks to a thriving relationship between four committed organisations, next time Sally goes to the Australian Open she'll be able to tell her friends proudly; *"Just like Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal, and the Williams sisters, I've played tennis on this court too!"*

For more information on Blind Sports Victoria go to: www.blindsports.org.au,
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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.