



# Improving mental wellbeing

## Local government action guide

Councils can influence the quality and distribution of conditions needed for good health, that is, the natural, built and social environments in which we live, learn, work and play.<sup>1</sup> They have a major role in supporting the objectives of the *Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008* by protecting, improving and promoting public health.<sup>2</sup>

Councils can positively impact the mental wellbeing of all individuals, families and communities by:

- building community resilience through creating safe, respectful and equitable communities, workplaces and public environments
- providing opportunities for increasing all residents' participation and social connections
- preventing violence against women before it occurs by addressing the known contributors to such violence (see *Gender equality and respectful relationships* local government action guide).

The guide is one of six providing evidence-informed actions that councils may consider when preparing their Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan and other local strategies. The proposed strategies are consistent with state health promotion priorities and prevention frameworks, including the *VicHealth Mental Wellbeing Strategy 2015–2019*, *Victoria's 10-year Mental Health Plan* and the *Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2015–2019* (the Plan).<sup>3,4,5</sup>

The Plan builds on a 'systems thinking' perspective that recognises the complexity of health issues and the underlying causes of poor health and wellbeing. It also identifies place-based approaches as a key platform for change, recognising that the places where people spend their time – communities, schools, workplaces, sporting clubs and more – play an important role in shaping their health and wellbeing. The aim is to maximise value by leveraging multiple networks, investments and activities to deliver outcomes for communities.

Links to other guides and further resources and available at [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/localgovernmentguides](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/localgovernmentguides).

Links to the Victorian Population Health Survey 2014 findings are available at [www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/population-health-systems/health-status-of-victorians/survey-data-and-reports/victorian-population-health-survey/victorian-population-health-survey-2014](http://www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/population-health-systems/health-status-of-victorians/survey-data-and-reports/victorian-population-health-survey/victorian-population-health-survey-2014).

For more detailed information on your area go to [www.exploreyourdata.com.au](http://www.exploreyourdata.com.au).

## Why is improving mental wellbeing a public health and wellbeing priority?

- Mental health and wellbeing are fundamental to our collective and individual ability as humans to think, emote, interact with each other, earn a living and enjoy life.<sup>6</sup>
- Mental wellbeing has been defined as a “a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community”.<sup>6</sup>
- Conversely, mental illness is defined as “disturbances of mood or thought that can affect behaviour and distress the person or those around them, so the person often has trouble functioning normally. They include anxiety disorders, depression, psychosis and schizophrenia.”<sup>7</sup>
- Levels of mental wellbeing and prevalence of mental illness vary according to socio-demographic and socioeconomic factors, with disadvantaged and marginalised population groups having a higher risk of experiencing mental illness and poor mental wellbeing.<sup>8,9,10</sup>
- While mental wellbeing and mental illness are considered to be distinct concepts, many factors that promote mental wellbeing are also factors that may protect against mental illness.<sup>11,12</sup> These factors include resilience and social connection.
- Resilience, social capital and social connection are important for the development and maintenance of mental health and wellbeing.
  - Resilience is a person’s capacity to overcome significant challenges or negative life events and successfully return to their previous level of function, avoiding mental ill-health.<sup>13</sup> High levels of resilience are associated with a lower risk of mental health problems and an improved sense of mental wellbeing.<sup>14</sup>
  - Social capital describes the benefits that arise as a consequence of social connections.<sup>15</sup> Developing positive social connections and relationships is essential for optimal development, and provides a wide range of positive physical and mental health outcomes.<sup>14,16,17</sup>

## Understanding equity

**Health equity** is the notion that everyone should have a fair opportunity to attain their full health potential and that no one should be disadvantaged from achieving this potential if it can be avoided.

**Inequities** are the observed differences between population groups (e.g. a subpopulation group and the Victorian population) that stem from socioeconomic, political and cultural drivers of social position.

**Equitable** approaches are those aimed at closing the gap in outcomes for different population groups. This may mean providing additional support for people experiencing disadvantage in order to achieve equal outcomes.

- In relation to Victorian adults, the VicHealth Indicators Survey 2015<sup>18</sup> survey found that:
  - Victorians have an average resilience score of 6.4 out of a maximum rating of 8.
  - younger people (18 to 34 years) have significantly lower resilience scores than the average, and older age groups (45 to 74 years) have significantly higher resilience scores
  - Victorians who are unemployed, have lower annual household incomes, are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, or reside in the most disadvantaged areas in Victoria, reported lower resilience
  - with respect to perceptions of neighbourhood social connections, three-quarters of Victorians agreed that people in their neighbourhood are willing to help each other out, seven out of 10 agreed that people in their neighbourhood could be trusted, and six out of 10 agreed that they live in a close-knit neighbourhood
  - Victorians in the lowest annual household income category, and those residing in the capital city and the most disadvantaged areas of Victoria, were less likely to agree that they live in a close-knit neighbourhood.

## Strategic goal

Council is committed to taking action to build resilient and socially connected individuals and communities.

### Objectives and actions

#### Build resilient communities

- Engage council employees in training to build community resilience. This will equip council officers with the knowledge and resources to incorporate resilience principles into their day-to-day decision-making, processes and cultures.<sup>19</sup>
- Plan and approve affordable and suitable housing, efficient transport networks including cycling and walking, and community infrastructure including health care, educational facilities and recreational spaces.<sup>19,20</sup>
- Execute the standards of and promote the Victorian Achievement Program ([www.achievementprogram.health.vic.gov.au](http://www.achievementprogram.health.vic.gov.au)) as a tool to promote mental health and wellbeing in settings such as schools, childcare facilities, sports clubs and recreational facilities, workplaces and hospitals.<sup>21</sup>
- Increase the community's perception of neighbourhood safety by developing safe pedestrian routes (e.g. adequate street lighting, slower traffic speeds, adequate footpaths), promoting active travel programs and redeveloping local environments to get more people out and about within neighbourhoods.<sup>22,23</sup>
- Engage and support community groups to transform under-used or vacant land or buildings into new public spaces.<sup>24,25</sup>
- Support sports clubs and community groups to provide more welcoming and inclusive environments for all groups, including newly arrived migrants, refugees and Aboriginal people (see useful links).
- Support locally based community awareness campaigns to highlight the benefits of cultural diversity (see useful links).
- Encourage the development of social and emotional skills in young people through school-based programs to promote resilience and general wellbeing, and to prevent depression, anxiety, suicide, substance use, aggression and violence. Ensure a focus on groups who experience lower mental wellbeing and resilience.<sup>26,27</sup>
- Establish governance, infrastructure and funding mechanisms to support community involvement in the development and implementation of evidence-informed policy and neighbourhood and local infrastructure planning. Ensure a focus on groups who experience lower mental wellbeing and resilience.<sup>19,28,29</sup>
- Set explicit goals and objectives in relation to reducing inequities in resilience rates, and evaluate impacts and outcomes of local policies and programs for different social groups.<sup>30,31</sup> VicHealth's *About Fair Foundations and promoting health equity* resource provides further information about how this can be achieved – [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/fairfoundations](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/fairfoundations).

#### Increase social connections through community participation

- Identify specific population groups, individuals or areas within the community that could be at higher risk of social isolation or reduced mental wellbeing.<sup>28,32</sup>
- Identify new or existing community programs that increase participation, social interactions and resilience of high-risk groups.<sup>28,32</sup>
- Provide programs and services to support residents transitioning into key life stages, including maternal and child health programs, childcare and kindergarten programs, youth-based programs, and family and retirement services.<sup>28,33</sup> Support key community organisations such as charities, community groups, neighbourhood houses, senior citizens clubs, men's sheds and sporting clubs as important local assets where people can maintain their social connections and be part of their local community.<sup>28,32</sup>
- Support and deliver community events that encourage social connection through delivery of services, information, programs and festivals.<sup>32</sup>
- Use schools as central points to connect students and the community, including mentors, parents, employment opportunities, and community and family services.<sup>28</sup>
- Set explicit goals and objectives in relation to reducing inequities in social connections, and evaluate impacts and outcomes of local policies and programs for different social groups.<sup>31</sup> VicHealth's *About Fair Foundations and promoting health equity* resource provides further information about how this can be achieved – [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/fairfoundations](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/fairfoundations).

### Useful links

#### Play by the Rules

[www.playbytherules.net.au/toolkits/homophobia-in-sport-toolkit](http://www.playbytherules.net.au/toolkits/homophobia-in-sport-toolkit)

#### VicHealth LEAD Localities Embracing and Accepting Diversity

[www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/programs-and-projects/localities-embracing-and-accepting-diversity](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/programs-and-projects/localities-embracing-and-accepting-diversity)

## References

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- <sup>10</sup> beyondblue 2016, *Depression and anxiety in gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex people*, beyondblue, Melbourne.
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