



Wodonga Community Advocacy - Panel Discussion series

A case study from Gateway Health's Health Promotion Team

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| Aim | <p>To build the capacity of Wodonga community members to effectively advocate for local issues, empowering individuals and groups to influence policies and decisions that impact our community.</p> |
| Rationale | <p>Community driven advocacy is essential for shaping policies that reflect public health priorities and community needs. By equipping individuals and groups with advocacy skills, we can support grassroots efforts that contribute to a healthier, more equitable community.</p> <p>The Wodonga Community Advocacy initiative emerged from the <u>RESPOND</u> initiative, where local community members identified advocacy as a key challenge in working towards children's health. Advocacy in the context of health promotion refers to actions taken to gain political, social, and economic support for health promoting policies and initiatives (<u>World Health Organisation</u>). It involves speaking up for health issues, influencing decision makers, and creating environments that support well being.</p> <p>A case study outlining part one of the Wodonga Community Advocacy work can be found <u>here</u>.</p> |
| Links to local policy/initiative | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'We Advocate' is a core value in the Gateway Health <u>Strategic Plan</u>. • Advocacy is one of the three key strategies for health promotion, as described in the <u>Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion</u>. • Community advocacy is noted as a priority in the <u>Wodonga Council, Council Plan 2021 – 2025</u>. • Supports <u>RESPOND's</u> systems based approach to improving children's health. |

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| Objectives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share local advocacy stories to empower community members with actionable, real world skills and innovative ideas. • Offer a suite of accessible resources that support local advocacy efforts, enabling those unable to attend in person sessions, to still be able to engage and benefit. • Develop customised opportunities for young people to participate in advocacy training, tailored to their needs and perspectives. • Embed an advocacy focus into local strategic frameworks to drive systems change and sustain community advocacy efforts beyond the RESPOND funding period. |
| Outcomes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased awareness and engagement in local advocacy efforts. • Development of a <u>resource list</u> tailored to local advocacy needs. • Feedback from attendees cited enhanced understanding of how decision are made, and increased capacity to influence policy decisions. • Youth led advocacy training has been established as a key focus area in the successful Engage funding partnership with WayOut Wodonga. • A number of attendees transitioned into panelists sharing their stories. • Connections were fostered between attendees and panelists, creating meaningful opportunities for advocacy and engagement. For example, a young woman who shared her experiences with challenges in accessing mental health support was connected with Federal Member for Indi, Helen Haines, to discuss these barriers and enable better representation at parliamentary discussions. Additionally, one panelist later announced their candidacy for the 2025 Federal Election, while another went on to become the Deputy Mayor of Albury. Another panelist was introduced to a potential funding body, YAC Vic, opening pathways for further support and collaboration. |

The story

The Wodonga Community Advocacy initiative originated from RESPOND Wodonga, a partnership between Gateway Health and Deakin University focused on community led solutions for children's health.

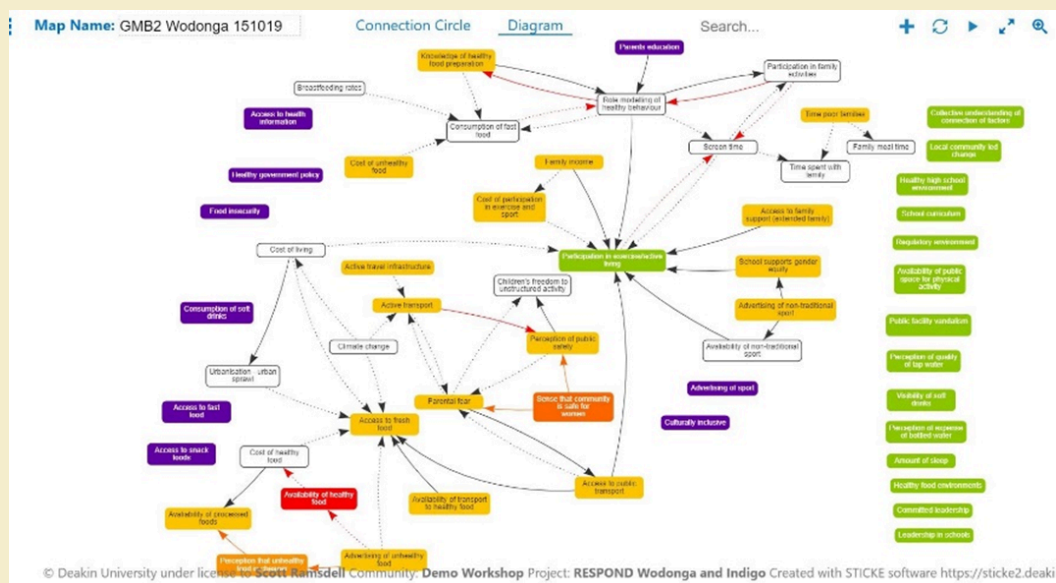
Using the co design process Group Model Building (GMB), stakeholders such as local councils, sporting clubs, teachers, parents, and community groups were engaged to analyse local data and identify key health challenges. The result was a “spaghetti map,” visually capturing factors influencing children’s health. This data informed approach was a drawcard for stakeholders, providing new insights into local health issues.

Out of this process, 60 community determined actions were identified. Five key themes emerged that aligned with Gateway Health’s scope of influence and expertise, one of which was community

advocacy—what it is and how can individuals engage in it.

At the same time, two key developments took place:

- The Wodonga Health Promotion team collaborated with the Goulburn Valley Public Health Unit to bring the Public Health Advocacy Institute (PHAI) to North East Victoria. PHAI conducted three tailored advocacy training sessions, catering to both North East Victorian health promotion practitioners and Wodonga community members. Published [here](#)
- In Wodonga, the Wodonga Brains Trust was formed, an informal reference group to guide the RESOND work. Their mandate is to act as an advisory panel to provide frank advice, connections with key stakeholders and where possible, co design RESPOND initiatives.



Systems map of factors influencing children's health in Wodonga, 2019.

The story continued...

In the first Brains Trust session, the question was posed: How can I, as a regular person, engage in advocacy?

With the Brain Trust's input, the community advocacy panel series was developed, prioritising lived experiences and practical, replicable insights.

The advocacy panels were designed to educate and inspire community members by providing tangible examples of big and small advocacy efforts. Sessions featured local and national advocates who shared their experiences and strategies. A strong emphasis was placed on creating a safe and supportive space for speakers, given the potentially sensitive nature of some topics discussed.

Speakers included:

- Rev. Tim Costello – Alliance for Gambling Reform
- Milthorpe Family – Child Survivor advocates
- Judy Ryan OAM – Richmond safe injecting rooms campaign
- Dr. Helen Haines – Integrity commission & ending pork barrelling
- Bobbi McKibbin – Keeping Dan Murphy's out of Junction Square
- Denis Ginnivan – Totally Renewable Yackandandah & Voices 4 Indi
- Dr. Rachel Richardson – Gateway Gender Service
- Cr Jessica Kellahan – Albury Councillor and youth advocate
- Solange Ntigonza – Youth mental health advocate.

To help guide the speakers in sharing their advocacy stories, the PHAI advocacy framework was used for structure.



This framework is organised around the key questions:

- What is the issue?
- What is the evidence?
- What is the ask?
- Who is the opposition?
- Who are you influencing?
- Who did you collaborate with?
- Which advocacy strategies did you employ?
- How did you measure the outcome?

The community response to the panels exceeded our expectations. Over 300 people attended the four panels, and many audience members have transitioned into speakers themselves.

The story continued...

A key element of the advocacy panels was community informing the process. Each attendee received both a hard copy and QR code for electronic feedback.

The feedback form covered the following questions:

- What was the most striking thing you heard tonight?
- Has this made you consider getting involved in any sort of advocacy, big or small?
- If so, what support would you need?
- We're planning a series of advocacy panels this year. Are there any other local people who have been involved in big or small advocacy campaigns that you'd like to hear from?
- Any other feedback?

This feedback directly influenced future sessions; for instance, speakers such as Tim Costello, Helen Haines, and Judy Ryan were all suggested by attendees.

A significant theme emerged from all the panel events around youth advocacy. Young attendees asked insightful questions, prompting discussions about how to support young advocates. Some young attendees were members of Wodonga's Freeza crew (a youth led group for arts and recreation events) as well as from Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YAC Vic).

During the panel events, the PHAI advocacy training was discussed, and young attendees expressed interest in a tailored version for young people. This sparked the idea to bring PHAI back to Wodonga to develop an advocacy program specifically for young people.

The Wodonga Health Promotion team collaborated with the Freeza crew to ensure the training was accessible and relevant. The youth group helped shape the content, delivery method, timing and invite list, reinforcing how community led initiatives are most effective when those impacted are involved in decision making.



Evaluation and lessons learnt

- The structured panel format, combined with interactive discussions, was highly effective in engaging attendees and fostering meaningful dialogue.
- Attendees valued seeing their feedback directly influence future panel topics and speakers, increasing community buy in.
- Engaging local community leaders as speakers helped build trust and relatability.
- Youth participation was a key strength, but required tailored approaches, including flexible scheduling and targeted content.
- A focus on the safety and wellbeing of members of the panel was critical, particularly when discussing sensitive topics.
- Word of mouth proved to be the most effective promotional strategy, highlighting the importance of strong community networks.
- A comprehensive risk management framework was essential to safeguard both panel members and attendees, particularly when discussing contentious issues.
- Providing structured advocacy training following the panels could help sustain engagement and skill development.

Snapshot of attendee feedback

Fantastic initiative. Exposure to these community leaders is great!

Thank you Gateway Health. I'm feeling so motivated to take action!

I will be telling my friends about these forums - a terrific way for community members to gain confidence, skills and inspiration in advocacy.

Watching young people share their stories and hearing Helen respond. ❤️

Rural Australia doesn't really use the power that it has!