

## **R-MAD: Residents Making A Difference**

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### Goal:

To create a neighbourhood environment that supports active community opportunities for residents at a public housing estate.

### Objectives:

1. To improve neighbourhood walk-ability.
2. To increase resident's access to bus services.
3. To reduce resident's exposure to safety hazards in their community.
4. To improve collaboration between the partnership agencies and community members.

### Background:

Whitehorse Community Health Service (WCHS) commenced working with residents in this public housing community in 2003 in recognition of the health inequality that exists in the public housing environment and the knowledge that this population group was likely to experience higher levels of illness and chronic disease related to the social, environmental and economic conditions in which they live. An early consultation with community members identified lack of access to opportunities for physical activity as a key health issue. A number of barriers mitigating against participation were also identified, including:

- lack of local & accessible' opportunities for physical activity overgrown and natural' adjoining parkland;
- poor access to public transport making it difficult to travel outside the estate;
- lack of control' over the estate environment, in particular the development and maintenance of gardens and access to an adjoining council parkland reserve;
- lack of knowledge of appropriate physical activity options for their age and states of health.

Residents expressed a feeling of isolation and fear to use the parkland reserve. Paths were often muddy and had exposed tree roots that were potential trip hazards.

It was decided to establish a partnership with some key local agencies, such as the tenancy and housing support agencies, Council and Community House to work with the community to identify ways to improve neighbourhood and living environments to create a healthier and active community.

### Target Group:

A group of 54 older residents in a clustered public housing estate in the City of Whitehorse . (Age range 55-93 years.)

### Actions undertaken:

Residents presented the access and hazard issues to a Council representative at the R-MAD meeting. Council outlined that the promotion of native vegetation and bird life were central to the preservation of the parkland reserve. A Neighbourhood walk-ability was undertaken - using the NHF (National Heart Foundation) Healthy by Design walk-ability audit tool. The tool was modified following consultation with NHF & Australian Planning Institute. A mapping of preferred routes and distances to local shops and bus stops was carried out.

The partnership group identified that many of the residents concerns could be addressed while still maintaining the integrity of the parkland. Low lying branches were trimmed to allow better vision while walking. A new park bench was installed to allow residents to rest during their walk to one of the critical bus routes. A landscaping consultant was engaged by Council to design a park plan incorporating R-MAD recommendations.

Qualitative and quantitative data has been collected throughout the life of the program. These include: pre and post measurement of criteria such as: neighbourhood amenity, safety issues, physical activity participation rate, bus service audits, community surveys, focus groups, feedback and observational data collection, staff journaling, meeting minutes, partnership evaluation, photography, stories and narrative.

Outcomes:

R-MAD has achieved the following outcomes:

- Neighbourhood environment & safety improvements: footpath repairs, redevelopment of parkland access path, park bench installation, ramp installation at community hall, improved estate signage, road intersection improvements. Advocacy and significant consultation with council departments in the partnership recently culminated in the development of a ten year Council plan for the neighbourhood and upgrading of local amenities including: installation of additional park benches, a board walk and upgrading of paths in the two adjoining council parklands which are a critical connecting point for residents to access their nearest bus stop. As part of the process, every resident was mailed a copy of the council plan prior to it being presented to them at the monthly R-MAD meeting.
- Community strength and social connectedness: formal and informal support structures now exist in the community, community members regularly participate in social activities together in the community hall. Residents report that this has been a significant change compared to previously high levels of mistrust and conflict at the estate.

The continued enthusiasm and input from residents and the establishment of collaborative partnerships has been central to the success of R-MAD.