

Community Services News



Stronger families, Stronger communities

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North Katoomba Community Hub is a model for success



Getting the winter woollies ready: Jen Solomon (left) and Elissa Martini at the hub's Warm and Fuzzy Festival. Elissa has taught textile-related skills to many hub members.

In many of NSW's poorer communities, the challenges of social isolation and poverty are often compounded by a lack of services and inviting spaces to help disadvantaged families thrive.

But that's starting to change. Working with agency partners and other non-government organisations, Community Services and its whole-of-government families strategy arm, Families NSW, is funding the development of community hubs in many of the state's poorer neighbourhoods.

Community hubs are usually the venue for playgroups, childcare centres, preschools, family resource centres and sometimes health centres.

"The hubs are bringing people in communities together, connecting them to the services they need and fostering community leadership," says Robynne Cole, Director of Partnerships and Planning, Nepean Network, Department of Families and Community Services.

"By bringing families together and connecting them to vital services, we believe community hubs build individual resilience, generating a sense of pride and belonging in the community."

A particularly successful model in Robynne's area is the North Katoomba Community Hub, now eight years old and flourishing in a pleasant space in North Katoomba Public School.

"We identified North Katoomba as one of the areas where a hub could be beneficial," says Robynne.

Community Services gives the hub \$29,125 to operate annually. In addition, the department recently gave \$111,848 for the hub's new Possum Toy Library and supported playgroups.

A hub of activity



Soup's on: Chef Greg Broome teaches North Katoomba Community Hub members how to make pumpkin and macademia nut soup. He is a TAFE outreach teacher who has run two café skills courses for the hub.

But the hub's success didn't happen overnight.

"It's taken time, and some trial and error, to get the hub going and make it what it is today.

Developing local relationships, overcoming suspicion about what we were doing and making people feel they have a stake in the hub was crucial to making it work," says Hub Coordinator Jeanette Crawford, who works with Connect Child and Family Services, the non-profit organisation which manages the hub.

Jeanette says she was lucky the principal of Katoomba North Public School and its staff are big hub supporters.

"We were cautious about asking teachers to do things because the quick way to turn off teaching staff is to give them more work to do. But that wasn't a problem at North Katoomba. They wanted to support the hub and they often have great ideas for events and initiatives."

Today, the hub features supported playgroups twice a week (over 60 families now participate) and activities for parents.

There are family activity days every school holidays, information days (e.g. the Katoomba/Leura Fire Brigade comes once a year to talk about fire safety, bringing all the bells and whistles with them), as well as breakfasts and dinners to foster community.

There is also a Koori Club to encourage local Aboriginal children to become more connected to their culture and heritage.

"The hub is a feeder into school life. By giving children some enrichment in their early years and working with the school, they are familiar with school life and ready to learn when they leave the playgroup," says Jeanette.

Blue Mountains Women's Health Centre provides parental activities including free yoga and exercise classes and TAFE Outreach runs courses such as horticulture and teacher's aid programs.

"There is a real partnership aspect to what we do," says Sue Fick, Manager of School and Community-Based Programs at Connect Child and Family Services.

"We consult and engage with community residents to see that the hub is meeting their needs and work with other community organisations to get things done."

Warm and fuzzy festival

Over the past three years, the hub, in conjunction with the school, has hosted an annual "Warm and Fuzzy Festival," a community arts project whereby colourful beanies, mittens and other winter woollies are made by hub regulars and sold at a fun day in June (Sunday, 5 June in 2011).

"The idea came from one of the school teachers and local residents who were talking at a coffee morning about what makes North Katoomba such a special place," says Sue.

"This eventually led to the idea of a warm and fuzzy festival in winter, modelled after the festival held annually in Alice Springs."

The festival features cooking demonstrations for budget comfort food, a chance to try microwave dyeing, spinning and weaving demonstrations, children's activities and local entertainment. All money raised at the festival is ploughed back into hub resources.

"The hub and the festival are certainly helping to promote a more positive image of the North Katoomba community. I've had people say they're happy there's a place for their family to come to on a regular basis for some fun, interaction, exercise and learning. It really is making a difference to local families," says Jeanette.