

Healthy Workers – Healthy Futures

Case Study: Pangula Mannamurna

“As the CEO of Pangula Mannamurna, I view having a healthy work environment fitting with our strategic vision of Our Health in Our Hands.

As an organisation we are working together to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing in the South East. We aim to empower people to make informed healthy decisions regarding all aspects of health and wellbeing at the individual, family and community levels – this applies to both staff and the community. Overall, having a healthy, balanced work environment that supports our staff leads to a healthy, balanced and more productive workforce who are better placed to care for themselves and for our community.’

Karen Glover, Chief Executive Officer

The Approach

Pangula is an Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service in Mount Gambier with outreach sites at four regional centres in the south-east of South Australia. Pangula operates with around 23 staff providing a wide range of holistic, clinical and health promotion services and programs to the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. Staff roles include Aboriginal health workers, educators, nurses, outreach workers, GPs, administrators and a practice manager.

The organisation has a comprehensive approach to supporting the health and wellbeing of all staff. The on-site well-equipped gym is available for both staff and community use. A personal trainer provides instruction four times a week and staff are able to use one hour of paid work time and their own time to attend the gym. Community programs such as the Strong Fathers Strong Families group also make use of the gym. Often staff and community are exercising together.

Regular walking meetings encourage incidental physical activity and all staff are encouraged to ‘get up from the desk’ every 30 minutes to stretch and move. All workstations have been assessed for ergonomic compliance.

Twice in the last year an eight-week Leaning Challenge has been partially funded to support healthy eating and weight management. Advice on healthy foods, physical activity programs and mutual support have encouraged over half of the staff to participate and fostered communal discussions about cooking and how to maintain commitment to being active.

Staff can also use work time to attend Tai Chi and yoga sessions and one staff member is now trained as an instructor. Staff and community members attend classes together showing support for each other to be healthy.

An organisational healthy food policy has seen food provided at board and community meetings and events become much healthier. Pangula Mannamurna is an alcohol and smoke free environment. Pangula has a smoke-free

workplace policy and the Tobacco Action Worker provides tools, advice and support for any staff hoping to quit smoking. A number of staff (3) have quit and five others have attempted to quit – every quit attempt is important - with ongoing support to kick the habit.

A Fit for Work policy ensures staff are not overburdened with demands, as can often be the case for those working in high need community organisations.

The Rationale

The program is led from the top. The Chief Executive Officer has a strong commitment to promoting health and empowering Aboriginal people, including the staff, and has introduced new policies and activities. As well as staff health being important in its own right the CEO understands that healthy staff are more productive and successful in their work. She is a regular participant in the health programs and activities, modeling good practice.

Importantly staff credibility is enhanced when staff ‘practice what they preach’. With high levels of chronic disease in the community, and especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Pangula staff feel more confident raising issues of smoking or weight (for example) if they are taking action to maintain or improve their own health.

Fit with organisational core values

Aboriginal culture underpins the thinking and activities of the organisation. The three Message Sticks (Ceremony /Talk; Hunt/ Gather; Song/ Dance) for our region help us understand how to better respect ourselves, respect other people and respect the environment around us so that we may take up our responsibilities. Encouraging and supporting good health for all staff is fully aligned with the organisation’s purpose of supporting the health of the community. Pangula is a major employer of Aboriginal people and is taking the job of improving health seriously.

Pangula’s strategic directions recognise the importance of valuing staff. There is also a



commitment to ensuring all staff have a good understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and the community's connection to country. Cultural tours and camps are held to build good working relationships between staff and with local Elders and to ensure cultural competence.

The approach of valuing and supporting staff has resulted in other supports including extra leave at Christmas time, extra carer's leave allowances; full support for, and access to, paid study leave; and provision of an employee assistance program for staff and families. Meditation programs are provided, especially during stressful times.

The Process

When one of the doctors asked at a *Huddle* or planning session, 'what are staff doing to ensure they are healthy?' the healthy workplace strategy was set in motion. Over a series of meetings staff were asked to indicate their health-related needs – their own and that of their co-workers - as well as what workplace improvements could be made. Potential practicable and popular strategies were brainstormed. This was supported by the Pangula Mannamurna Board and remains a regular item of discussion at staff meetings.

The approach has been gradually evolving over the last 18 months and is driven on a day-to-day basis by a small group of enthusiastic staff committed to staff health.

Positives and Achievements

One of the main positives about the healthy workplace program is that Pangula is considered a very special place to work. People feel valued and strategies such as walking meetings help make it a friendly place and encourage strong camaraderie. It's difficult to measure change but morale is high and the feeling is that staff are generally healthy, especially given they are exposed to sick people. The Practice manager and other staff have stated that one of the reasons that they chose Pangula as an employer was because of the organisation's healthy initiatives.

The gym is a terrific asset to have and people attending feel more productive and mentally agile after a session. It helps relieve stress which is important for staff dealing with complex issues, relationships and demand for services.

A culture of sharing problems and supporting

colleagues has developed as a result of the whole of organisation support for staff.

There is a willingness to talk about and address difficult issues and working relationships, set personal and work boundaries and ensure conflict resolution in order to encourage a positive workplace culture.

Overcoming the Challenges

A diverse staff with varying needs and interests means not everyone participates in all healthy workplace activities. There is clear recognition that the circumstances of people's lives including family commitments, differing abilities and ages, may make it harder for some to prioritise good health practices. The culture remains supportive and people aren't judged for their decisions. Small changes are recognised – a quit attempt long and short term, a walk around the block or a healthier food choice.

Environmental changes, such as provision of healthy food at meetings and events, also mean everyone is supported to be healthy.

Working in Aboriginal health can be demanding. For many staff the natural inclination is to put the needs of individuals and the community first. They can feel guilty for taking time to walk around the block for a conversation with a colleague or take a scheduled break. Modelling by key staff and promoting the evidence that physical activity (for example) is good for productivity and workplace communication, helps to overcome this barrier. Gradually this has encouraged staff to 'have a go'.

Ensuring sustainability beyond the enthusiasm and commitment of current champions is recognised as a risk. This is being addressed through development of Board-approved policies, as well as incorporating support for staff in strategic directions. Combined with Pangula's reputation as a positive and supportive place to work these features help embed the approach as usual practice.

The Future

The healthy workplace strategies will be reviewed within the organisations regularly held planning days. Staff can indicate areas of interest and policies and programs will be amended accordingly. As job and person specifications are reviewed there is the potential to include a health focus.

Duration and resources

There is no direct budget line; however funding is available for the gym instructor and other activities.

Find out how to create a healthy workplace, find a Healthy Worker Adviser for your sector, or submit your own case study:

Healthy Workers Healthy Futures Initiative
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