



Wesley LifeForce Suicide Prevention Networks evaluation summary

Report produced by Wesley LifeForce and the
Centre for Mental Health, The University of Melbourne

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Wesley LifeForce

Wesley LifeForce provides suicide prevention services that educate and empower local communities, supporting people most at risk. Established in 1995, Wesley LifeForce began as a response to the growing number of suicides in Australia. Wesley LifeForce takes a comprehensive approach to tackling suicide by working across the areas of prevention, intervention and postvention.

Wesley LifeForce offers:

- support and resources to community networks helping to prevent suicide
- training in how to address mental health in the workplace
- suicide prevention training workshops for community members and healthcare professionals
- Suicide Prevention Train the Trainer program
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Train the Trainer program
- Lifeline Sydney & Sutherland telephone crisis support
- postvention memorial services for those suffering the loss of a loved one.

More than 40,000 people have been trained through the program to intervene to prevent suicide. In 2019/20 Wesley LifeForce Suicide Prevention Networks (Wesley LifeForce Networks) supported 114 member and affiliate suicide prevention networks throughout Australia and Lifeline Sydney & Sutherland answered 28,759 crisis calls.

Centre for Mental Health, The University of Melbourne

The Centre for Mental Health was established in the Melbourne School of Population and Global Health at The University of Melbourne in 2013 with the aim to improve mental health and mitigate the impact of mental illness at a population level. It does this through conducting high quality, collaborative, interdisciplinary research, academic teaching, professional and community education and mental health system development.

The evaluation of the Wesley LifeForce Suicide Prevention Networks was conducted by a research team from the Centre for Mental Health led by Senior Research Fellow Dr Lennart Reifels (PhD). Dr Reifels and the team have extensive knowledge and experience in the areas of suicide prevention, population mental health, as well as health systems and services research.

The research team is part of the Centre's Mental Health Policy and Practice Unit which comprises significant expertise in evaluating large scale mental health and suicide prevention programs and specific interventions. The unit has conducted various research including examining the negative impacts of irresponsible media reporting of suicide and using the media to positively influence change in suicide rates. The unit is led by the Centre for Mental Health director, Professor Jane Pirkis (PhD), who has undertaken studies of suicide prevention in Australia and profiled the epidemiology of suicide and suicidal behaviour among general population and at-risk groups.

Contents

| | | |
|----------|---|----------|
| 1 | Wesley LifeForce Suicide Prevention Networks program | 4 |
| 2 | Wesley LifeForce Networks evaluation | 5 |
| 2.1 | Background | 5 |
| 2.2 | Evaluation overview | 5 |
| 2.3 | Evaluation findings..... | 5 |
| 2.4 | Recommendations..... | 8 |
| 3 | The future | 8 |

1 Wesley LifeForce Suicide Prevention Networks program

Established in 2007, the Wesley LifeForce Suicide Prevention Networks (Wesley LifeForce Networks) program is a national community-led network of people and organisations, working together in a variety of local settings. From urban centres to remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, Wesley LifeForce Networks are working to support local people and those who have lived through an experience of suicide. The program offers support and resources to communities, helping to prevent suicide by focusing on prevention, intervention and postvention activities. This is coupled with suicide prevention training workshops for community members and healthcare professionals. The overall intentions of the program are illustrated below:



2 Wesley LifeForce Networks evaluation

2.1 Background

There is an increasing emphasis on federal and state/territory governments to decrease the likelihood, rate and impacts of suicide in Australia. The appointment by the Prime Minister of a National Suicide Prevention Strategy, appointment of an Assistant Minister to the Prime Minister for mental health and suicide prevention, increased funding directed towards suicide prevention activities by governments and the release of reports from the Productivity Commission and the National Suicide Prevention Advisor, have underscored the need for local community-based suicide prevention initiatives. Initiatives that enhance local community engagement and coordination of suicide prevention efforts within the broader context of a national suicide prevention approach.

Foreseeing a need for localised initiatives, Wesley Mission commissioned the Centre for Mental Health at The University of Melbourne to evaluate its Wesley LifeForce Suicide Prevention Networks program. Major findings highlighted that it is the only nationally operating, community-led suicide prevention networks program in Australia and national suicide data showed that on average, the introduction of Wesley LifeForce Networks reduced the suicide rate by seven per cent.

2.2 Evaluation overview

Melbourne University's Mental Health Policy and Practice Unit of the Centre for Mental Health conducted the evaluation. The aims of the evaluation were to appraise the impacts and outcomes of Networks for members and communities, and to establish the key factors underpinning effective and sustainable Network functioning.

Structure of the evaluation

Phase 1: The establishment phase involved initial stakeholder consultations, establishment of an Expert Advisory Group, a literature scoping review, primary refinement of the network program logic, finalising the evaluation plan, designing study protocols, obtaining ethics approval and data access and the development of a database to underpin key evaluation activities.

Phase 2: The empirical phase focused on data collection, populating the database, data analysis and reporting of findings. Data were collected using a range of methods, and by way of six studies which involved a Network coordinator survey, focus groups and interviews with executive committee and general Network members, as well as the analysis of external Network outcomes data in terms of changes in help-seeking, suicide and suicidal behaviour.

Summary scope

This evaluation summary highlights key findings from the Wesley LifeForce Networks evaluation based on the six studies, including an online survey of 41 Network coordinators, 10 in-depth Network focus groups, 16 semi-structured interviews with executive committee and general Network members. External outcomes data (including national suicide data for 60 Wesley LifeForce Networks and control communities, and state-based data on hospital admissions due to intentional self-harm and the uptake of Kids Helpline crisis support services in New South Wales) were analysed for changes in the rates of suicide, suicidal behaviour and help-seeking.

2.3 Evaluation findings

A foundational literature review focused on similar international network initiatives established that the Wesley LifeForce Networks program is the only nationally operating program of its kind in Australia or in the international published literature. The literature review further identified a lack of evidence on intermediate and long-term outcomes of community-led suicide prevention network initiatives. This places Wesley LifeForce Networks in a unique position for the long-term study of outcomes and community capacity building initiatives.

Network impacts and outcomes

The combination of qualitative and quantitative data from the Networks survey, focus groups and interviews provided a comprehensive overview of the Wesley LifeForce Networks program.

The evaluation findings provided clear evidence of positive internal Network impacts for Network members as well as some indication of positive community outcomes.

Impacts for Network members

- increased awareness and understanding of suicide prevention issues
- increased confidence and capacity to address such issues via support strategies
- providing a source of personal support and an avenue for learning and capacity building
- providing opportunities to support others and act as change agents in local communities
- providing a safe and empowering space for those with a lived experience of suicide
- intrinsically rewarding work offering a sense of personal satisfaction, meaning and purpose
- fostering greater community connections through personal and professional linkages
- increased knowledge of service providers and support services in the community.

Research participants also noted some unintended outcomes and challenges resulting from their Network involvement, such as the need to manage high workloads with few active members, the risk of burnout, the risk of being emotionally triggered for people with lived experience and frustration over slow progress or the lack of sustained local stakeholder support. Notwithstanding such challenges, the evaluation findings overwhelmingly highlight the evident benefits of Wesley LifeForce Networks for Network members, both in terms of immediate and intermediate outcomes.

Perceived community outcomes

- increased community knowledge and awareness of support services
- increased community confidence and capacity to help someone at risk of suicide
- increased coordination and collaboration between Networks and service providers
- improved service linkages and access pathways
- reduced stigma regarding suicide which in turn facilitated help-seeking
- greater sense of community connection.

Overall, beyond the positive impacts for Network members, there is good evidence to suggest that Network activities resulted in perceived increases in community knowledge and awareness of, as well as stronger linkages between, local support services; and increased community confidence and capacity to assist those at risk of suicide. Wesley LifeForce Networks acted as an effective conduit to connect relevant local stakeholders, including people with a lived experience, in suicide prevention activities, and to foster a greater sense of community connection. Relatively unchanged perceptions of broader levels of community suicide risk and community wellbeing may partly reflect the difficulty for participants to confidently assess or rate such aspects.

External Network outcomes data findings

Complementary analyses of external Network outcomes data indicated a significant reduction in the overall suicide rate following Network introduction but provided no further direct evidence of resulting changes in help-seeking or suicidal behaviour.

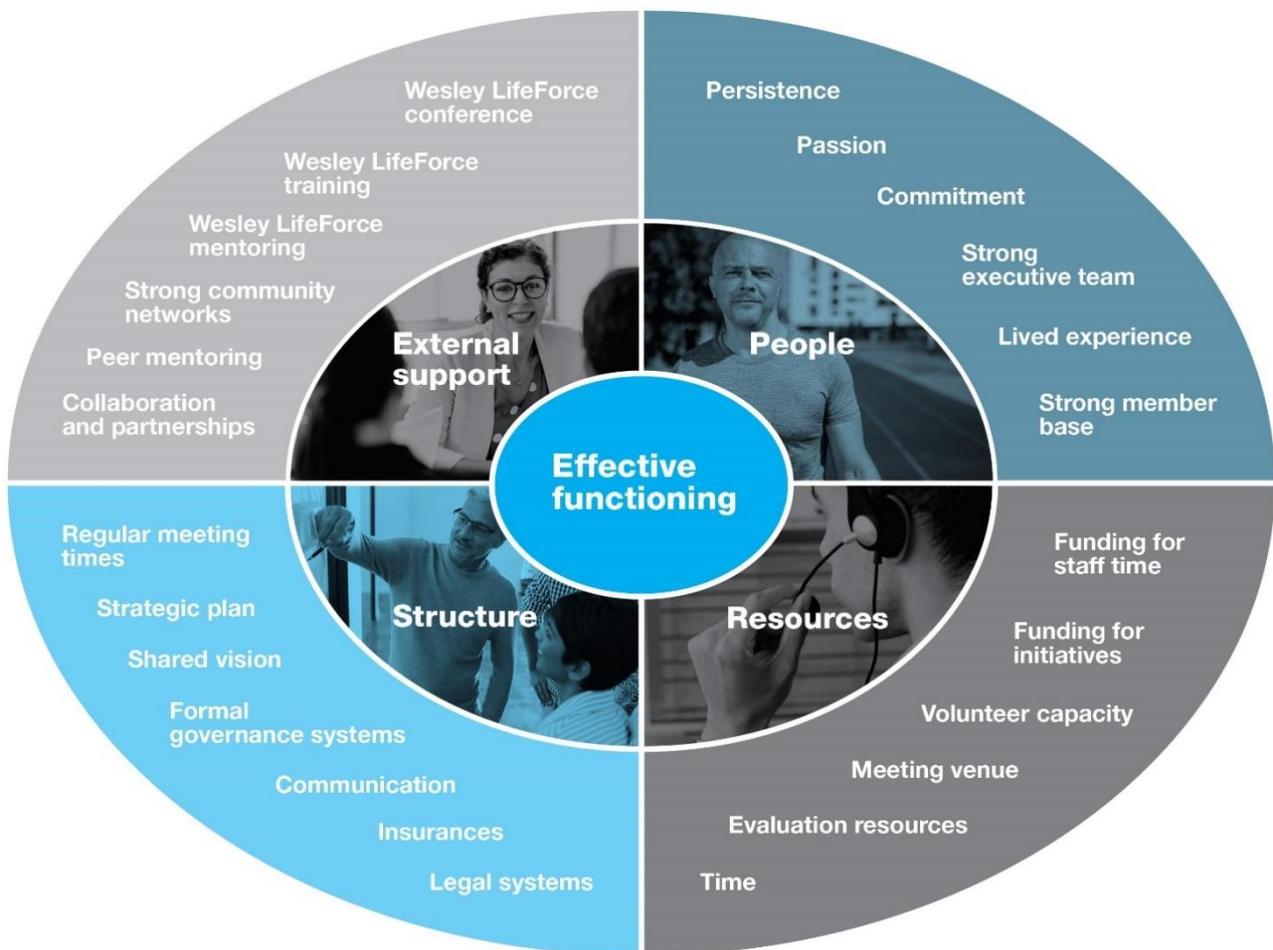
Longitudinal analyses of national suicide data showed that on average, the introduction of Wesley LifeForce Networks reduced the suicide rate by seven per cent. This pattern of effects was most pronounced in the third quarter after Network introduction, with a significant reduction of 17 per cent in suicide rates.

Network social media campaigns promoting crisis support services did not appear to significantly impact on local help-seeking from, or the uptake of, Kids Helpline services in New South Wales during campaign months. However, due to the youth-specific nature of the service, the imperfect available data and other factors not controlled for in this study, this finding may need to be treated cautiously and cannot be generalised to other crisis support services.

The robust analysis of NSW hospital admissions data provided no further evidence of the impact of Wesley LifeForce Networks on reductions in suicidal behaviour (as indicated by changes in hospitalisation rates due to intentional self-harm). However, this finding may benefit from further corroboration across other jurisdictions.

Key Network success factors

The diagram below outlines key success factors underpinning effective and sustainable Network functioning, which are organised into four broad quadrants: people, resources, structure and external support. Some of these key factors are more focused on developing internal Network processes and member capacity, while others are geared towards fostering productive ongoing collaborations with local communities, health services and other external supports.



The success factors are designed to address some of the ongoing challenges faced by Wesley LifeForce Networks and other volunteer-based organisations alike, which include the need to:

- **Be strategic:** to develop a strategic plan and continue to review and utilise the plan to ensure its implementation and progression.
- **Generate funding and resources:** a key to becoming autonomous and supporting planned Network activities and future directions.

- **Grow the membership:** reflecting the ongoing need within volunteer organisations to build and maintain an actively engaged and capable membership.
- **Network with organisations and services:** recruiting representatives from local organisations and inviting key stakeholders and health providers to engage in the Network can open doors for collaborations and partnerships.

2.4 Recommendations

Recommendations from the evaluation emphasised the importance of capacity building, streamlining, facilitation and bolstering of ongoing program and Network operations.

Increase capacity for Network governance

- Support and build the entrepreneurship of members and Networks.
- Support existing processes and resources, which increase Network capacity and efficacy.
- Update the existing guidance documentation on Network governance.
- Measure and monitor Network activities to more adequately represent activities targeted at specific population groups.

Streamline and bolster Network support functions

- Wesley LifeForce should work with the Networks to build a more centralised administration support to assist with routine administration tasks and facilitate ongoing Network operations.
- Continually update and maintain the Wesley LifeForce Hub, which provides information and supports to the Networks.
- Build in appropriate safeguards to increase self-care and debriefing measures for members.

Facilitate Network linkages and learning opportunities

- Increase opportunities for knowledge exchange and support, including through the annual Wesley LifeForce conference using technology to facilitate interaction and knowledge transfer for those who cannot attend.
- Global impacts of COVID-19 highlight the important role of local Networks and the need to facilitate future adaptation and upskilling in terms of technology and remote operations.

Bolster evaluation capacity and enhance routine data collection

- Enhance ongoing program data capture through annual Networks surveys to provide a national snapshot of current suicide prevention activities.
- Develop local evaluation capacity of Networks to better articulate merit and impacts.
- Develop Network sustainability indicators beyond initial formation and establishment phases.
- Continue to refine the program logic as the program evolves to ensure sustained and improved Network outcomes.

3 The future

As local grassroots initiatives that are structurally supported through an overarching national program, Wesley LifeForce Networks can provide a complement to other regional suicide prevention initiatives provided by Primary Health Networks, which are more strongly focused on service provision and coordination. Key evaluation findings regarding Wesley LifeForce Networks internal and external outcomes and the factors underpinning effective and sustainable Network functioning, contribute to the emerging international evidence base on community-based suicide prevention initiatives. In this context, the evidence of ultimate Network outcomes in terms of a reduction in suicide rates is noteworthy and encouraging.

Wesley LifeForce Networks provide a vehicle to foster broader engagement in suicide prevention and strengthen the coordination of suicide prevention efforts within and across local communities.

With relatively modest seed funding received by Wesley LifeForce Networks, the resulting impacts for Network members and local communities demonstrated strong local linkages and positive partnerships with service providers. Networks can mobilise additional resources for suicide prevention and engage with communities in ways that would not otherwise have been possible. Due to the nature of Wesley Mission and the size of the organisation, there is scope for other supports to be linked in the future. Wesley Mission operates many different programs across Australia. These programs can support Wesley LifeForce and mitigate known risk factors for suicide. With further support and ongoing research, these programs could be linked to further strengthen and support local communities in the future.

Programs aiming to prevent suicide are becoming more targeted and sophisticated, including an increased focus on local grassroots initiatives. Wesley LifeForce is a program that upholds the values of local community engagement in suicide prevention activities and is complementary to this trend. Wesley LifeForce Networks focus on upstream measures which are aiming to build stronger and more resilient communities who are more willing to seek support and support each other, while fostering encouragement for those with a lived experience of suicide. Due to their ability to be flexible and react quickly to community needs, Wesley LifeForce Networks can offer on the ground support to Primary Health Networks service providers but most of all the community.

For further information regarding the evaluation:

Reference: Reifels L, Williamson M, Schlichthorst M, Too T, Morgan A, Roberts R, Mercer P, Munkara-Murray K, Jordan H (2020). Wesley LifeForce Suicide Prevention Networks Evaluation: Final Phase 1 & 2 Report. Centre for Mental Health, The University of Melbourne.

Acknowledgements:

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For further information about Wesley LifeForce Networks

Web search: Wesley LifeForce Networks

How to get involved?

Join a Wesley LifeForce Network, which brings together people and organisations in local communities to raise awareness about suicide, while empowering members to develop suicide prevention strategies at a grassroots level.

Call 1800 100 024 or **email** lifeforce@wesleymission.org.au

Book suicide prevention training with Wesley LifeForce Training, which aims to educate and equip Australians with the tools to recognise and help someone who is at risk of suicide.

Visit wesleymission.org.au/suicide-prevention-training

Wesley LifeForce is not a crisis service.

If you need assistance immediately call emergency services on 000 or Lifeline on 13 11 14.

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Contact us

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Church in Australia.

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because every life matters