



Latrobe Health Advocate

Quarterly Update April - June 2020





Latrobe Health Advocate
2 Tarwin Street, Morwell VIC 3840

The Latrobe Health Advocate respectfully acknowledges Aboriginal people as the Original Custodians of the land we walk on today – the land of the Braiakaulung peoples of the Gunaikurnai nation and passes on respect to their Elders past and present, future and emerging.



Jane Anderson, Latrobe Health Advocate

I am pleased to present this quarterly report from the Office of the Latrobe Health Advocate for the period April to June 2020.

Since my last quarterly update, I have continued to listen to communities in Latrobe whilst we work our way through the COVID-19 response. As this update goes to print, we are supporting our metropolitan neighbours who are experiencing a second lockdown and encouraging communities in Latrobe and across regional Victoria to work within the current rules so that we can avoid finding ourselves in similar circumstances.

During this quarter my office continued to support Latrobe communities, local services and the Victorian Government in their response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Like many in our communities I used a range of online methods, phone, video calls, and virtual meetings, to reach out to people. People generously shared their experiences with me so that I could in turn provide insights to the Victorian Minister for Health and the Victorian Chief Health Officer about the impacts of [COVID-19](#) on Latrobe communities.

Insights were also shared with the Chair of the Latrobe Health Assembly and CEO of VicHealth for the purpose of advocating for ongoing support for Latrobe communities. As the Latrobe Health Advocate, I am here to listen and to help our health system and governments to understand and respond to the needs of local communities and these insights offer a snapshot of the regional experience during this response.

During the COVID-19 response my office in Tarwin Street Morwell has been closed. However, we have continued to work on a variety of projects in that time and I am looking forward to sharing this work with you in this report and in coming months. Like many organisations and businesses across Victoria, my office has become familiar with a range of virtual communication platforms.

We have ZOOMed, TEAMed, SKYPEd and Facetimed our way through meetings and catch ups, exercise classes and workshops and all the time in awe of the flexibility and agility of people to adapt and change as needed.

Please read on and if you have any questions, contact my office by calling 1800 319 255 or visit and like our Facebook page where you can keep up to date with the events I'm attending (virtually) and information on health and wellbeing issues. You can also follow me on Twitter and our website is where you can find copies of the reports we publish along with this quarterly update.



www.lhadvocate.vic.gov.au

Activities April to June 2020

The office of the Advocate continued its engagement work during this quarter. People's generosity in sharing their personal experiences with her has enabled the Advocate to develop some powerful insights that she will share with services and governments to enable better informed and purposeful engagement with communities in Latrobe.

The Advocate identified [COVID-19](#) as a priority for her office in March. Since then she reported weekly to the Victorian Minister for Health and the Chief Health Officer on the impacts of COVID-19 on communities in Latrobe. From June, these reports continue fortnightly as the emergency remains in place.

In the reports the Advocate presents what she is hearing from communities, the innovations she is observing across a range of services and highlights the issues of concern for Latrobe communities.

It was evident early on that like many communities across Victoria people in Latrobe were concerned about a number of issues and were seeking reassurance that their needs would be met.

Among those concerns were the impact on peoples' mental health, the likely increase in health inequities, the economic impact and increased financial stress within the business and general communities and the danger that people would not seek out medical help for fear they would "overload" the system.

What also happened was that people and organisations adapted and changed the way they did things. Doctors and patients started to use telehealth and appointments became virtual. Partnerships between governments, public and private operators were formed, and people had opportunities to access services in a variety of ways. These changes have been embraced by many and there is a desire for these innovations to continue into the future.

As the months passed, significant announcements were made by governments and services to support mental health and financial stress in particular. Services were resourced and supported out in the community. Latrobe City Council set up a helpline to assist people to access the services that were available and local

providers changed the way they delivered services to ensure that people could still access the supports they needed. Food banks provided emergency relief and schools supported their students with remote learning.

The Advocate is encouraged by the recent localised approach to managing the emergency. Regional communities, while mindful of their metropolitan neighbours are keen to ensure that the positive innovations that have occurred as a result of COVID-19 remain and the Advocate continues to remind Latrobe communities to be vigilant in following the rules that are in place to protect everyone.

Reduce your risk of coronavirus

- **WASH** your hands often with soap and running water, for at least 20 seconds. Dry with paper towel or hand dryer.
- **TRY** not to touch your eyes, nose or mouth.
- **COVER** your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. If you don't have a tissue cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve or elbow.
- **STAY** at home if you feel sick. If you take medication make sure you have enough.
- **PHONE** your doctor or the hotline – **1800 675 398** – if you need medical attention. They will tell you what to do.
- **CONTINUE** healthy habits: exercise, drink water, get plenty of sleep.
- **WEARING** a face mask is not necessary if you are well.
- **BUY** an alcohol-based hand sanitiser with over 60% alcohol.

Find out more
www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus

If you are concerned, call the
Coronavirus hotline 1800 675 398 (24 hours)
Please keep Triple Zero (000) for emergencies only

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We are exceptionally lucky in Australia. Everyone will be much kinder to each other in the future

There was concern about people not coming to the GP clinic – telehealth has helped and is great

During National Palliative Care Week in May the Advocate released a progress update for the Minister and Latrobe communities about improvements and systems changes that have occurred in response to her recommendations about [end of life palliative care](#) services in Latrobe.

This report highlighted many positive systems changes that have occurred in a short period of time. The Advocate identified that greater attention is required by the Victorian Government to the consideration of a hospice in Latrobe and the investments needed to best utilise palliative care volunteers and to offer local communities greater bereavement supports.

The Advocate is interested in the opportunity the Latrobe Regional Hospital Stage 3A expansion creates for the design of physical environments that can meet the needs and aspirations of local communities in relation to end of life palliative care services.

The Advocate was recently invited to meet with the Victorian Health and Human Services Building Authority and Latrobe Regional Hospital to discuss the expansion. Community engagement is currently underway to seek feedback on the proposed designs.

The Advocate is implementing a social media campaign to promote her progress report and provide feedback to local communities. Recently, concerns have been raised with the Advocate about inappropriate waiting times for end of life services in Latrobe.

Work continued on [Access to Services](#) in Latrobe. The Advocate is working closely with the Department of Health and Human Services, Gippsland Primary Health Network, Latrobe Community Health Service and Latrobe Regional Hospital to finalise a draft action plan that aims to address the underlying issues impacting the availability of doctors in Latrobe.

There is an increasing amount of goodwill and commitment to the Access to Services project with an emphasis on identifying which actions are most important and most likely to bring about long term change.

I would like to see if Latrobe Valley can finally get a palliative care hospice.

Support is not available when families are most vulnerable. Loved ones only die once, it should not be so traumatic.

Continuity of care is important. Seeing a doctor who has spent time with you before, makes things quicker and easier



As part of her 2019/20 Statement of Intent, the Advocate sought to understand how people in specific communities could best have their voices heard and what made engagement meaningful for them. This quarter the Advocate sought out people experiencing financial stress and asked them to share their experiences with her.

The aim of these conversations was to enable the design, development and implementation of ways of engaging that support people to participate more fully in systemic change that improves health and wellbeing in Latrobe.

The Advocate asked:

What is important to you? (Not just in terms of health and wellbeing but more broadly)

What are your wellbeing challenges, opportunities and aspirations?

Have you taken part in community engagement in the past? What did you like and not like about that experience?

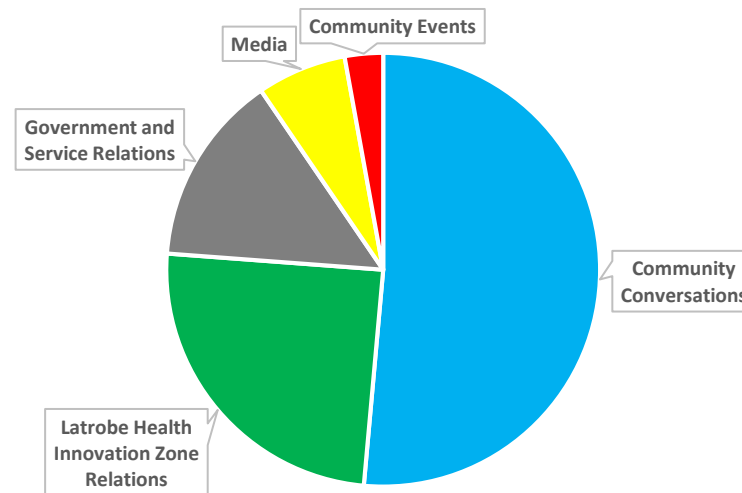
The Advocate will report on her findings in the coming weeks but overwhelmingly she found that there is a generosity of spirit and hope that underpins the way people experiencing financial stress manage their circumstances.

People value their social connections and their families. Children in particular are extremely important, bringing joy where it may be hard to find. People are proud of the sacrifices they've made that have kept a roof over their heads.

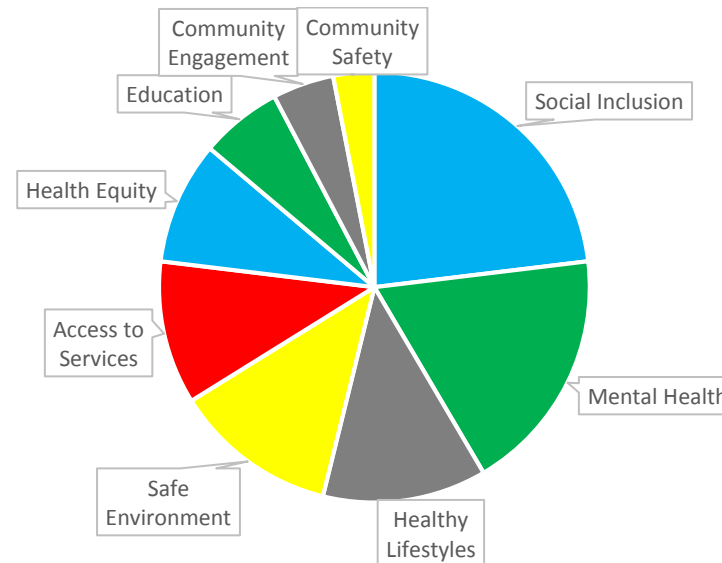


There was a theme of requiring respect and trust in engaging with people, a theme that has come across with other communities and something that is highly valued in Latrobe.

Activity Breakdown April - June 2020



Community Voice April - June 2020



The Top Five Aspirations

1. Social Inclusion
2. Mental Health
3. Healthy Lifestyles
4. Safe Environment
5. Access to Services



Human connections in Latrobe

There is no doubt that COVID-19 has changed the way people in Latrobe connect with and support each other. For some, feelings of loneliness and isolation are already familiar, and the ongoing health effects of COVID-19 physical distancing measures may not yet be fully realised.

Unfortunately, those people experiencing loneliness and isolation before COVID-19, are feeling even more disconnected. They have been separated from friendships and community services that they depend on for their health. What had previously been a face to face to conversation with a mental health support worker is now a text message and what used to be time with a friend is now time apart.

For others, being separated from friends, family and community settings is a new experience and it has been hard to adjust. Technology has been a necessary part of the solution and the gaps in who can access and confidently use technology are now visible.

There are concerns for people who don't have the skills or technology to connect with others. Libraries and other community settings offer social connection, access to technology and resources that some people depend on for their health.

Local services have observed that some people don't have technology or the ability to link to technology and they are really feeling it.

A local Lions Club is struggling to stay connected with only 3 out of 13 people that own a computer. They have said this makes it difficult to communicate as a group and fear that what they are experiencing may be happening with many other community groups. They believe the longer it goes on, the harder it will be to reconnect.

There is now an opportunity to better understand the network of human connections that exist in Latrobe and to find new and creative ways for people to stay connected and support each other socially.

It has been hard for some people to accept physical distancing measures. They have struggled with not knowing when they can reconnect with family, play a game of golf, have a yarn or give someone a hug. They miss seeing people in their community. They are looking to the government for a way out and want a sense of the future ahead.

People have talked about the importance of connecting with other humans. They have said that not being able to hug their family is killing them. A single parent has found that when their children are not around, they can feel very lonely and detached.

Many community groups and organisations have quickly changed the ways they engage with communities, reaching out to their participants and networks via telephone calls and online platforms. However, some organisations have expressed concern about the impact on volunteers. Volunteer meetings and activities have been cancelled which is creating a distance between volunteers and organisations. Staff need to work differently to keep volunteers engaged.

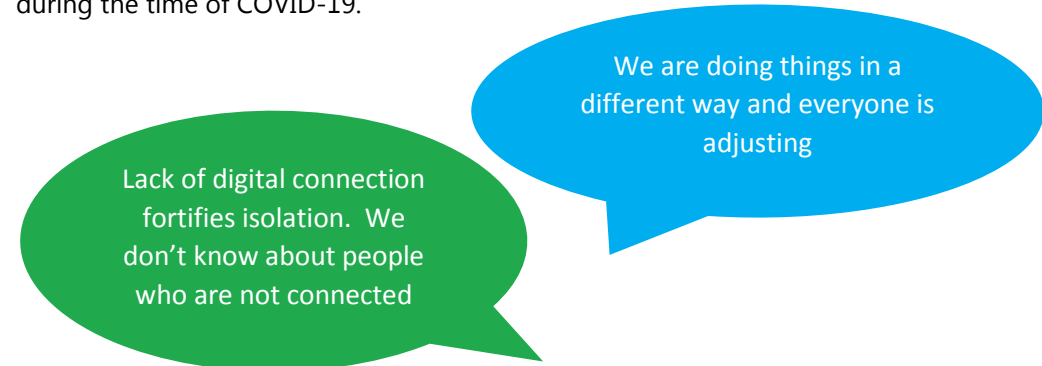
For LGBTIQ communities, who would often rely on local events and gatherings to prevent the impacts of feeling marginalised or detached from society, COVID-19 has meant that they are not able to get out to have fun and celebrate with each other as they usually would.

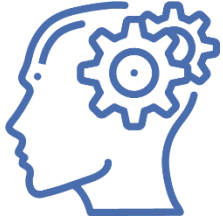
People living with disabilities have said that some of their peers understand what's happening and some don't. There is a reliance on social supports to translate complex information and provide access to technology.

Some older people have said that they are starting to feel institutionalised. They are seeking permission from their families more often than they used to, resulting in a lack of confidence and feelings of a loss of control and independence. There is increased demand for home care services.

Some people have enjoyed learning about how to use technologies and the creative ways group activities, family and community gatherings are now occurring online.

Latrobe communities have consistently shared their aspirations to stay connected and to help others who may be experiencing isolation or loneliness, particularly during the time of COVID-19.





Better mental health for people in Latrobe

With the global scale of COVID-19 and the way it infiltrates every aspect of society, it is hard for anyone to escape from the mental health impacts of the pandemic. Within Latrobe there is a heightened awareness of the need for people to look after their own mental wellbeing and to look out for others.

There has been a fundamental shift in the home environment, which is now also a workplace and for many local families, a school. The volume of change within businesses, workplaces, community settings and health services is immense.

Latrobe communities have demonstrated their resilience and an ability to cope and although there is more work to be done advances in telehealth have resulted in greater and more convenient access to help for those that need it.

People are sharing feelings of a loss of independence; they are feeling constrained and struggling to establish a routine. They want to 'keep going' physically and mentally. They have said that they feel 'invisible'.

Business owners are experiencing increased anxiety and financial stress. They are somewhat overwhelmed by the rate of change and never-ending media. They are unsure about how to protect their staff and customers and concerned about their future.

People are worried about COVID-19 stigma and judgement within the community. They are concerned about how this can manifest on social media and the negative mental health impact this may have.

Local lawyers are concerned about limitations on visits to the hospital and the increased vulnerability of mental health patients. They have said that gaining access to clients is now difficult.

Tensions are starting to emerge in households as people try to manage work and schooling, or have their alcohol or drugs delivered to their homes. There is less opportunity for people to escape or have time away from others.

People may be feeling overwhelmed for the first time and may not be used to those feelings which can be debilitating.

The local university is concerned about the mental wellbeing of their staff and students including first year and international students now living in isolation. University students are adapting to online classes; however, they are suffering without incidental supports such as interactions with teachers and peers and access to books.

Home schooling is affecting people and impacting their work commitments. Employers are offering flexibility where they can. In some households this is working, in others, people are feeling pressured and tired.

For many, houses are now a workplace, place of education and a home. This can be difficult for families and single parents. There are stresses on interpersonal relationships with partners working from home with no outlet or separation. They are experiencing a loss of lifestyle.

People are longing for physical connection with others and feeling the mental health impacts of isolation. They have said, "you don't get touch and hugs through a screen".

Community members have reflected on the global impact of COVID-19 and shared their appreciation for the situation in Australia. They have expressed concerns for people who are suffering. They have to limit how much television they watch.

Some people are feeling impacted by having too much screen time. They are missing the incidental opportunities to network and build relationships with others.

Some people have been busier than usual, despite spending more time at home. They have said they 'are waiting for things to slow down'.

My mental health is impacted, even though I'm an introvert, I still need contact with others.

People out there may be feeling overwhelmed for the first time and not used to those feelings

A local secondary school surveyed its year 11 and 12 students about the impacts of COVID-19;

- More than 50% students found learning in a remote environment more difficult than learning at school. The main reasons for this were 'less support from your teacher' and 'less motivation'.
- High numbers of students said that their sleeping patterns have been affected and that their social interactions with friends have been affected.
- Approximately 40% of year 12 students and close to 50% of year 11 students said their mental health has been affected.



Concerns have been raised about the lack of awareness and supports for people suffering from mental illness, particularly for older people. There is a desire for more psychologists to be available for mental health inpatients to help people talk through their feelings and to achieve a greater sense of control over their life.

People have talked about the toll that financial stress can have on their mental health. Some people are focused on getting through one day at a time and find motivation in their children.

Opportunities for work and to earn a living can determine how families spend their time, what supports and activities they access and how they are feeling. Some of the coping strategies people have talked about include going for a walk and dreaming about the future.

There are pockets of joy. You need a release point each day – if you don't get out of the house, you go crazy.

When you look after yourself, you're able to look after others.



Healthy Lifestyles for everyone in Latrobe

There is a more universal focus on health and wellbeing as the basis of everything, and the economy is secondary. This presents an opportunity to reimagine how communities can enjoy and benefit from a healthy lifestyle into the future. Now is the time to address the impact of health inequities and entrenched social disadvantaged that is experienced by some people in Latrobe.

There is emerging interest in the foundations of living healthy and well. Increased awareness of the importance of exercise and many examples of cooking healthy meals at home.

Discussions about health and wellbeing are becoming increasingly prominent. There is a realisation that without healthy communities, there cannot be a healthy economy. Health and wellbeing is now seen as everyone's business.

Some people have realised that spending more time at home has helped them to slow down and enjoy the opportunity to rest from what was a busy and demanding lifestyle.

Community workers have observed an increase in food insecurity and fear this may continue when government income supports reduce. With physical distancing measures in place people accessing food programs are not provided the opportunity to choose which foods suit their family.

People who are experiencing financial stress have shared their desires to prioritise healthy food and exercise for themselves and their families and identified some of the barriers that prevent this from happening. The barriers include price differences between healthy and unhealthy food options, cost and access to public transport and the mental health impacts of financial and employment circumstances beyond their control.

A local exercise group for older people is seeing signs of people's health deteriorating as a result of not being able to participate in classes. They have observed an increase in falls and decline in mental wellbeing for some participants. Group organisers have a desire to offer classes again and to help people utilise their brains and enjoy exercise together



Safe environment for people in Latrobe

There is no vaccine for COVID-19 and ultimately governments and health services are counting on people in the community to pay attention to public health messages about hygiene and physical distancing to prevent the spread of the highly contagious virus. People in Latrobe are worried about this and want to do the right thing. It is confronting for them when others within their community or elsewhere behave in ways that seem to disregard the public health advice.

Some people are taking physical distancing and hygiene measures seriously and others are not. Some people in Latrobe are not hearing, understanding or responding to COVID-19 messages. They are not changing their behaviours. This is leading to tensions within workplaces and between friends. People are fearful about going out into the street and returning to work and want reassurance that government measures will be adhered to.

Services want to protect the wellbeing of their staff and have concerns about PPE supplies. They know the COVID-19 response will require a sustained effort and that good communication is a priority.

Industrial workplaces still in operation are seeing apathy leading to a lack of behaviour change and stigma about potential COVID-19 symptoms and positive test results.

Alongside the COVID-19 response, communities prepared for the felling of the Hazelwood Power Station Chimneys in April. Concerns were expressed about people in the community who may not have been aware of the event or the potential health risks of asbestos. Local groups sought reassurance that weather conditions were being monitored and measures had been taken to ensure the health of communities was not compromised.



I am being as cautious as possible and it is frightening to see people that aren't

I control what I can to protect myself, but am concerned about the behaviours of others



Better access to health services in Latrobe

Although COVID-19 has changed the way people in Latrobe interact with and access services, communities continue to look for understanding and empathy. There is a need to achieve an appropriate balance of responding to COVID-19 and redesigning the way services are delivered without losing sight of the patient and community experience.

When people in Latrobe are trying to establish a trusted relationship with a new doctor, they are looking for someone who will listen to them and demonstrate a willingness to understand their needs.



Members of the public and staff within services have been overwhelmed with information about COVID-19 and how to access services. People have described being bombarded with information that sometimes comes from multiple sources at the same time. At other times information appears to be contradictory or does not seem relevant to Latrobe or other regional communities.

It has been hard for carers and relatives wanting to visit someone in the hospital, access a service or provide patient feedback during COVID-19, particularly when the restrictions have not been designed for every circumstance. People have said that they are understanding of the need for protocols but find the way some rules are applied and communicated can at times seem unnecessary or lacking in empathy.

People have shared their ideas and aspirations for patient liaison personnel in health services who are skilled at listening and negotiating.

People in the community have identified professional language barriers between health services and members of the public and have expressed concerns about some of the experiences they have had.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People have shared their concerns for people in their community who don't access health services. They have shared their aspirations for more understanding and awareness within society of Aboriginal culture and history and want to see this reflected in local health services. Someone has put forward the idea of a Koori section at the hospital to help people heal before they are discharged.

I have about five people sending me the same stuff. My inbox has exploded, and I struggle to read it

It would be nice to have a Koori section before discharge for healing yourself.