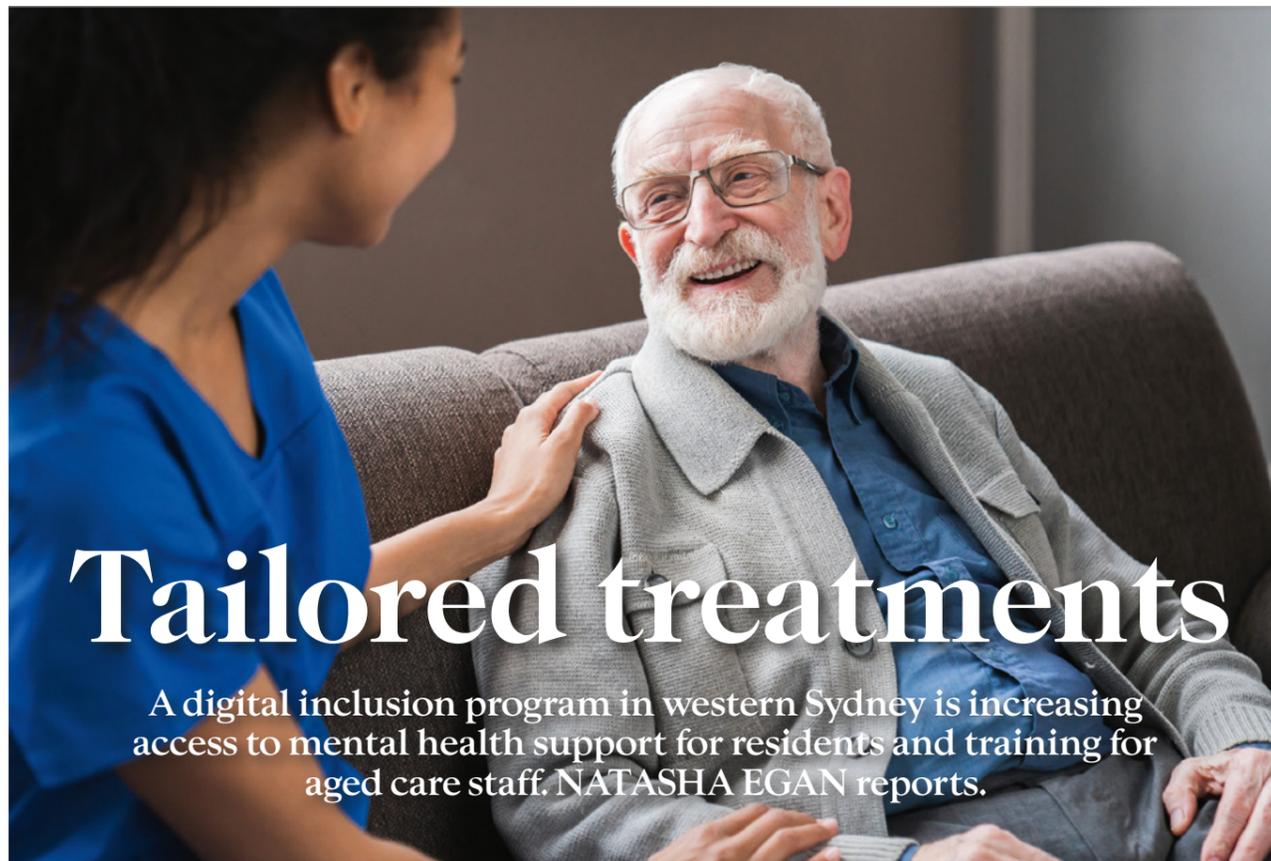


# Frontline



## Tailored treatments

A digital inclusion program in western Sydney is increasing access to mental health support for residents and training for aged care staff. NATASHA EGAN reports.

Existing health issues and visitor restrictions due to COVID left new aged care resident Lionel\* struggling to adapt to his surroundings. He was experiencing persistent low moods, reduced motivation and energy, frustration, feelings of despair, concentration and memory issues, and anxiety symptoms.

However, things got better for Lionel after he was referred to the Wellbeing in Aged Care Program, an initiative funded by Primary Health Network WentWest to provide short-term mental health interventions to aged care residents in western Sydney.

Through treatment co-developed with Lionel and his family and facility nursing staff, Lionel was helped to comfortably adjust to his new home, says WentWest. During the six-week program, Lionel reported that he felt increased motivation and energy and reduced anxiety, frustration and despair.

WentWest's Wellbeing in Aged Care Program, which is run by Community Options Australia, commenced as a pilot in July 2020. In 2020-21, a third of western Sydney's 65 aged care homes (22 homes) and 139 clients engaged in the program through 736 support sessions in total, WentWest reports.

"The program offers wraparound support and in addition to psychological therapies includes interventions to prevent loneliness and isolation," WentWest tells *Australian Ageing Agenda*.

It includes six free individual sessions delivered fortnightly. Additional sessions are possible if required on the condition this does not impact other residents' timely access to the program, WentWest says.

The program has been well-received with client surveys showing 81 per cent of participants reporting they were either satisfied or very satisfied, WentWest says.

Following its success, WentWest extended the contract with Community Options Australia. However, challenges with working within aged care homes during COVID triggered a need to adapt the service.

This led to the introduction of an additional digital component that will virtually deliver group resident wellbeing sessions and staff training.

WentWest says the digital inclusion program aims to reduce travel times for clinicians, increase the number of sessions conducted in a day through telehealth, and improve the ability to address neurological and behavioural conditions through clinical sessions and group online staff training. It also offers COVID-safe methods for group intervention and training sessions.

Andrew Harvey, chief executive officer of Community Options Australia, says the digital component allows them to deliver more tailored services to aged care facilities that meet both physical face-to-face and virtual needs.

"As we know through lockdown, that telehealth component has been really important," Harvey tells AAA.

To implement and trial the Wellbeing in Aged Care Digital Skills Training Program, Community Options Australia has teamed up with YourLink, an organisation that provides skills programs, training, coaching and technology to increase the adoption of digital solutions among seniors, carers and care workers.

"We're all interested in trialling this to increase the number of services we're able to deliver. And to do it in a safe manner focused on quality and have something that's sustainable," says Harvey.

YourLink already works with aged care providers to help build digital skills among staff and residents so that they can confidently use smart devices and apps. It has delivered skills training to 3,000 seniors, informal carers and care workers in previous projects, says Richard Scenna, founding director.

"We've designed a digital program to work with Community Options Australia to release into those aged care homes around the uplift of digital skills with these staff members," Scenna tells AAA.

The training has been co-designed with Community Options Australia and clinical psychologists to complement the Wellbeing in Aged Care Program. It includes 45-minute "punchy" lessons around key topics, he says.

"There's a foundation one, which is around tips and approaches for introducing technology to residents. This is around learner styles and coaching. It's not so much the tech and more about how you introduce technology to someone," Scenna says. "We've got a number of topics around communication apps, navigating settings and accessibility, apps for entertainment and fun, apps for wellbeing, health and mindfulness and then apps for information to inform and learn."

Scenna says the sessions are short to suit aged care workers, who can't get away "for big chunks of time" and designed to be engaging rather than webinar style like other training staff may be required to do.

"We believe the cut through is around the discussion, the examples and people bringing their scenarios. We can create that experience in the 45 minutes, and we've seen that work quite nicely in other training programs we've done," he says.

Scenna points out it is also about building confidence and skills rather than learning specific applications and enhancing knowledge for platforms staff already use.

"We use Zoom as the platform but we elevate the way they're using Zoom so they're using chat, polls and reactions so they're engaging in the learning as they engage with us," he says. "They don't need hypothesis and theory. They just need to know 'how can this help me in what I'm doing today?'"

**"They just need to know 'how can this help me in what I'm doing today?'"**

The program is initially providing digital skills training to staff but there are plans to extend this to residents.

Harvey says the YourLink platform helps to create a more accessible mental health service. "It's a new way of delivering services for us and we're keen to work with YourLink and hopefully in other communities as well based on the success of this project."

He says one of YourLink's strengths is that it tailors programs to the needs of the facilities and residents. YourLink also offers follow up training.

"We've all found with anything new, unless you take people with you through that process often people either don't use it because they don't know how to use it, or they use it in a manner [for] which it wasn't intended. Or they don't use it at all because they just don't think it's valuable. Through this exercise and the work with YourLink, we are trying to convince people that this is a good way forward."

The results of the digital trial should be available later this year.

WentWest recommends the wider uptake of the Wellbeing in Aged Care Program in other regions.

"It's an effective program, which is highly esteemed by the residential aged care facilities who are actively engaged," WentWest says. "Establishing relationships with aged care homes is key to the success of the program."

Other learnings provided by WentWest include:

- supporting the older population requires a good understanding of the cultural influences, physical health issues, attitudes and opinions that contribute to the mental health of individual clients
- general practitioner awareness of the service is important but challenging – program expanded from GP referrals to GP and aged care facility staff referrals
- don't engage all the aged care homes in the program at once – it's important to map out a strategy for how to stagger engagement and increase or expand over time. ■

\* not his real name



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