

Date 26 October 2010

Subject nib foundation grant to establish New South Wales Young Carers program

Children of parents with a mental illness are often a neglected group of carers, but thanks to a national partnership grant from nib foundation, young carers will soon have access to much-needed mentoring and support services.

The \$500,000 grant from nib foundation will allow for an 18-month, state-wide rollout of the Schizophrenia Fellowship's ON FIRE! support program to carers aged eight to 18 years.

The award-winning program provides support to young carers of a person with a mental illness through early intervention assistance, resources, education and mentoring to help them better cope with what can be a disturbing and often traumatic family circumstances.

nib foundation Chairman, Terry Lawler said the extension of the unique program will provide almost 200 young carers across New South Wales with access to ON FIRE! activities, education and mentoring.

"Supporting young carers is one of nib foundation's focal areas so we are delighted to be able to assist the Schizophrenia Fellowship address the often forgotten needs of these young people," Mr Lawler said.

"The program is expected to have a multiplier effect, providing indirect benefits to the parent with mental illness, other carers and family members, friends, schools and the community at large," Mr Lawler added.

According to the Schizophrenia Fellowship, in 2005 there was between 21% and 23% of children living in Australian households where at least one parent had a mental illness. This equates to just over a million children.

Schizophrenia Fellowship CEO, Rob Ramjan, said the number of children living with a parent who has a mental illness continues to grow and there is no funding available at either a Federal or State level to address these needs.

"These children are themselves at risk of developing a mental illness, as well as a range of other personal issues including physical health problems, isolation, poor coping and life skills, behavioural problems and disturbances in interpersonal functioning," Mr Ramjan said.

"nib foundation's support will help create a better future for many young people in this caring role, while also reducing the health cost burden in Australia associated with mental illness," he added.

According to program creator, Nickolas Yu, ON FIRE! has already delivered exceptional results including improved health, wellbeing and resilience of young carers.

"We have camps and fun days throughout the year and at any given time there are 30 to 40 kids participating, some of whom go on to become leaders themselves. Recently, three have gone onto study law and communications, which is really inspiring," Nickolas said.

Nickolas was first exposed to mental illness when at 15 years of age his mother was diagnosed with schizophrenia.

“Dad looked after us as best he could. He wasn’t emotional. I can probably count on my hands how many times in that whole five years that he ever spoke to any of us kids about what was happening in our family. I realised then that it was my responsibility to take on part of the parent’s role; the emotional care,” Nickolas said.

After years of caring for his younger siblings with little support, Nickolas decided to set up ON FIRE! for kids whose parents have mental health issues.

“The idea is to create spaces where these kids can simply be, where people don’t look at them as victims, but rather, convey trust, hope, belief, and confidence in them and help them continue developing resilience, so they can grow and flourish,” he said.

The expanded ON FIRE! program will see an additional six staff and 65 volunteers trained to deliver the program, with a research partnership with the University of Sydney ensuring best practice and evaluation of the program. Replicated models are expected to be set up next year at sites throughout New South Wales, including the Hunter region, Wagga Wagga and Sydney South West.

The ON FIRE! support program will be officially launched at 10.30am on Wednesday 27 October, 2010 at the Harbourview Terrace, Taronga Centre, Mosman.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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