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Subject Young Carers Program opens in Wagga Wagga thanks to nib foundation grant

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 in the Riverina now have access to much-needed mentoring and support services.

The \$500,000 grant from nib foundation has seen the establishment of the Schizophrenia Fellowship's ON FIRE support program across New South Wales, including the Wagga Wagga service.

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 into the Riverina will provide young carers, aged eight to 17 years, 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 nationwide.

Mental health issues are also placing increased pressure on our health system. During FY10, nib health funds paid out almost \$15 million for mental health treatment and services, an increase of 4.8% from the previous year.

Wagga Wagga program co-ordinator, Bev Denley said the ON FIRE support program will help create a better future for many young carers, while also reducing the health cost burden in Australia associated with mental illness.

"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," Ms Denley said.

Recruitment of program participants and volunteers is now underway, with seven volunteers recently trained as leaders.

The first ON FIRE Fun Day will be held on Saturday 7 May, with the inaugural camp to be held on the weekend of 20 to 22 May at Borambola Sport and Recreation Centre. Participants will take part in both recreational and educational activities that include developing enhanced life skills and self-confidence building.

For more information about the Wagga Wagga ON FIRE program please contact Bev Denley on 02 6925 9259 or 0422 371 322.

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