

## Case Study

### Vinnies Mental Health Service

#### *Food for Thought Initiative*

#### Background

Vinnies Mental Health Service (VMHS) is a supported accommodation service for adults with a persistent and enduring mental health diagnosis. The Village is a 28-unit facility based in Woodbridge, Perth that provides 24/7 support using a non-clinical, person-centred, recovery-focused and trauma-informed model of care. All meals are provided to consumers on site.

In early 2018, staff at the Village became concerned after noting increasing rates of diabetes among consumers, with about one third of residents diagnosed as pre-diabetic or with type 2 diabetes. At the same time, an increase in consumers' BMI and sugar consumption (the Village was going through approximately 17kg of table sugar a fortnight – just for coffee and breakfast times) was also observed. VMHS wanted to do something about this and thus began the Food for Thought Initiative. This project included a number of strategies designed to reorient the meal service, increase consumer and staff knowledge, interest and capacity around food and nutrition, and build a healthy food culture.

#### Goal

The Food for Thought Initiative aimed to improve the food environment of VMHS with a primary focus on improving the nutritional intake of consumers residing at the Village.

#### Objectives

1. Increase consumer self-awareness and capacity around food and nutrition to support mental and physical wellbeing.
2. Increase consumer and staff knowledge around the role food plays in their health through ongoing education.
3. Incorporate foods into the menu that have been shown to support mental and physical health.
4. Create a culture that enables consumers to advocate for a healthier food environment.



## Strategies

### Assessment and planning

- Sought information about the impact of different foods on mental health from evidence-based sources, particularly Deakin University's Food & Mood Centre.
- Consultation with Cancer Council WA around strategies to create a healthy food environment.
- The Western Australian School Canteen Association was engaged to conduct a menu assessment and provide recommendations.
- VMHS staff unpacked the menu to understand what goes into each meal and determine if each item was supporting consumers' health.

### Food environment

- Changes were made to the food ordering system to make it more streamlined. This was to reduce the amount of time spent on sourcing food and allow higher quality foods to be sourced.
- Changes were made to the menu including:
  - stronger emphasis on homemade and minimally processed foods
  - oily fish included twice per week
  - deep fryer removed
  - processed meats, packaged sauces, frozen pre-made foods and pre-made cakes and biscuits no longer served
  - full-fat milk and dairy products replaced with low-fat options
  - meat-free Mondays introduced
  - berry smoothies added to the weekend menu
  - takeaway nights removed
  - cordial no longer offered, with consumers instead given the option on special occasions to make their own drinks with mineral water, fruit, and fresh herbs
  - fibre content of meals increased through incorporating more vegetables, beans and legumes, and foods high in prebiotics and probiotics into meals
- Unhealthy food no longer used as prizes or rewards at consumer events.
- Catering for consumer and staff events follows organisational nutrition and catering policy.
- Health promoting signage displayed around the village.
- Started a consumer-led produce garden.

### Staff

- Provided nutrition education to the onsite cook and reframed her role, emphasising that the foods she cooks have a great impact on consumers' mental and physical health.



- Assessed staff and consumer nutrition knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours through a survey.
- Information on the Food for Thought Initiative provided at staff meetings.
- Cancer Council WA staff conducted an education session with staff around the link between nutrition and physical and mental health, while also outlining the elements of a healthy diet.

### Consumers

- Proposed menu changes were taken to the monthly consumer meeting to gain feedback and support for making changes.
- Existing system to collect consumer feedback on the food service was harnessed to determine satisfaction with menu changes.
- Introduction of cooking workshops with a focus on foods that support consumers' mental health. As part of the cooking group consumers encouraged to research meals, shop for the ingredients, and then cook them.
- Consumer workshops to target specific issues e.g. sugar in drinks, takeaway vs homemade.
- Regular exercise groups offered to consumers.

### Organisational change

- Developed and implemented a nutrition and catering policy across the wider Specialist Community Services (VMHS sits under this service).

### Outcomes

There has been a food culture shift at the village from a staff and consumer perspective. When the menu was deconstructed and changes implemented, the money spent on packaged, pre-made and processed foods was significantly reduced and this extra allowance was redirected to sourcing fruit, vegetables and higher quality foods. Additionally, the Village serves more meat-free items on the menu which allowed for the purchase of higher quality meats such as salmon. These steps enabled the Village to maintain the same food service budget.

Prior to the initiative 50 per cent of consumers said meals were always healthy for them; 18 months into the initiative 95 per cent of consumers said meals were always healthy for them. These results were consistent with the menu changes which emphasised homemade, healthier meals. The meal suggestions made by consumers went away from party pies and sausage rolls to healthier options like curries, soups, omelettes, chops and roasted vegies; they are not asking for packaged and processed foods anymore.

Four consumers decreased their BMI and were able to maintain this. VMHS is not seeing the same progression to prediabetes and diabetes after moving into the Village that they were seeing previously. There has been an increase in the number of conversations that consumers are having with staff around food and nutrition, with consumers expressing an interest in reducing their sugary drink consumption, managing portion size, prioritising healthy eating, preparing healthy meals, managing sleep, and doing more exercise. Some consumers have also begun exploring other dietary changes and the potential impact on their health, such as eating foods free from gluten, using milk alternatives and following a vegetarian diet.





## What worked

Being transparent with consumers about the menu changes, encouraging them to give things a go, and reassuring them that their favourite foods weren't being taken away but modified, helped bring them on board so they could see the benefits of the changes being implemented. Feedback on menu items was sought regularly, giving consumers a level of ownership over the process.

Regular consumer education in the form of cooking groups, nutrition presentations, and resources encouraged consumers to talk about food and nutrition and how it impacts them; these topics were not being discussed prior to the initiative.

Implementing a food ordering system decreased the time spent on shopping, freeing up time for the cook to prepare and cook meals from scratch. At the start of the project, the cook was provided a lot of education around the link between nutrition and mental health and how the food she cooked could support residents to live well.

Providing professional development sessions to all staff helped to increase awareness of the link between food and mental health helped build support for the changes being made. Introducing a nutrition and catering policy formalised the expectations around food provision at the service. These steps all worked together to help create the organisational change needed to make the initiative sustainable.

## Where to from here?

Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the project will help ensure that changes made are sustained and any further improvements needed are identified and actioned. Some strategies require ongoing implementation, such as consumer and staff education. An annual professional development workshop for staff addressing the impact of food on physical and mental health and outlining basic nutrition principles will build staff knowledge and skills, ensure that new staff are provided with the same information as those who were involved at the start of the initiative, and keep food and nutrition on the radar for all staff. Ongoing cooking and nutrition workshops will help remind consumers that they deserve to have good quality foods and will help build their skills relating to choosing and preparing healthy meals and snacks.

Currently, the Food for Thought initiative has only been implemented at VMHS Village accommodation. An audit of the food environment across all VMHS accommodation and support services is needed, along with site specific procedures to complement the nutrition and catering policy.

