

# MEDIA RELEASE

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## CONVERSATIONS MATTER ACROSS THE COORONG

The life-saving power of community conversations is helping tackle the serious issues of suicide and mental health across the Coorong District Council area.

After the heartbreaking loss of a number of locals to suicide in recent years, the Coorong District Council and passionate local residents have been working proactively to improve the mental wellbeing of people across the district and build more resilient communities.

Its latest initiative - the **Conversations Matter Lakes Suicide Prevention Network (SPN)** – will be officially launched at the Meningie Food Fair on Friday, 8 March. This network will provide valuable support, education and connection to people in the Meningie, Narrung, Raukkan and Salt Creek areas.

Created by the Council in partnership with the community and SA Health, *Conversations Matter Lakes* is one of three SPNs within the overarching Coorong Conversations Matter group, which was set up by the council in 2016. There are also dedicated Conversations Matter networks covering the Mallee and Parks areas as well.

Coorong Mayor Paul Simmons said the networks play a vital role in breaking down stigma surrounding mental health, raising awareness, delivering education and helping local communities recover from the shock and grief of suicide.

“We know that rural areas face challenges that can have a serious impact on people’s mental health and wellbeing, especially issues such as isolation, loneliness and drought,” Mayor Simmons says.

“There is a risk that those who are going through a rough time will withdraw and their struggles can go unnoticed at a point in their lives when in fact, they most need support.

“This is why it’s so important to build connected communities and empower our local residents to reach out to their neighbours and friends and have those potentially life-saving conversations.”

Funding from SA Health has helped the Conversation Matters Coorong SPN grow and deliver several regional initiatives to get people talking and to raise awareness of mental health and the ways in which locals can help.

*Conversations Matter Lakes* has already been working within its local communities, but now will soon expand its activities. The group will bring locals together for an evening of conversation and social connection with its second **Long Table Dinner on 24 March 2019**. The inaugural event held in January last year, proved a success using food to encourage residents to come together, meet their neighbours and chat.

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Council's Director Community and Corporate Nat Traeger, who is also part of the SPN leadership group and a local mental health advocate, said the group's work builds on the Council's ongoing commitment to suicide prevention and community wellbeing.

"Actively enhancing the quality of life for people throughout the Coorong community is a key focus for our Council," Ms Traeger says.

"By encouraging health, wellbeing and safety through a number of initiatives, including *Conversations Matter Coorong*, we are helping to create stronger, more resilient communities.

"Through the dedicated work of the people behind the three local networks, the message is getting out that individuals really can make a difference in another person's life, simply by reaching out and taking the time to talk to those who they notice are struggling.

"I have been so encouraged to hear locals sharing their own stories about experiences with challenging times and mental wellbeing. Those public conversations are such a positive and valuable way in which we can challenge the stigma around mental health and break down barriers that might be preventing someone from taking that first step to talk about their worries and seek help."

Ms Traeger shared her own story of the impact of suicide on the Tailem Bend community recently in the *2019 Empowering Our Communities Calendar*, created by the Australian Government's Country SA Primary Health Network. Tailem Bend businessman Brad Smedley also features in the calendar touching on his family's experience with depression and the ways he and others working in agribusiness can look out for farmers' mental wellbeing.

The Council has also helped locals understand how to approach sensitive conversations, by partnering with groups including Primary Industries and Regions SA and Country SA PHN to train people in how to connect with those who might be struggling and encourage them to seek help. A Menswatch Program which helps men connect with and support other men, is also being delivered.

To read more about work of the Coorong Conversations Matter SPN, or how to get involved with suicide prevention efforts, visit the Council's website [www.coorong.sa.gov.au](http://www.coorong.sa.gov.au).

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