

WELKOM – GOING THE EXTRA MILE

A centre that caters for the physical, psychological and spiritual wellbeing of the community is at the heart of the Community Work Programme in Welkom.

Welkom in the Free State is a declining gold mining area with high unemployment and a significant number of unemployed artisans and skilled people who have been retrenched in recent years. Mercy Life, the faith-based organisation which runs the CWP, has been harnessing these skills to build the programme.

Activities at this site, which includes the Bronville township and a vast adjacent informal settlement, started with a household social survey. Going door to door to talk to people, CWP participants found many vulnerable children, lots of people with identity document problems, an urgent need for help to access grants, and a lack of food. Participants collected information and made referrals to relevant government departments in an attempt to assist people. But their eagerness to help was blocked by mountainous obstacles as the relevant departments moved at pedestrian pace to put in place remedies.

Participants soon realised that their efforts were being reduced to data collection exercises without any spin-off. In turn, people were becoming reluctant to give out information and treated some CWP participants with suspicion because they deemed their motives “fraudulent”. At times, even in cases where people were referred, transport was a huge problem.

This, however, did not deter their spirit and drive to cure the social ills bedevilling their community – and it is from this determination that the Bronville Wellness Centre was born. At this centre, situated in a rented house, people can now access most services under one roof. The centre, which opened in February 2011, provides home-based care, support for orphans and vulnerable children, and ensures that people have access to government grants and other services.

People can get basic examinations, counselling and social services without having to suffer being sent from pillar to post. Sheila Soetmelk, the in-house head of social development, who is a CWP supervisor and works five days a week, handles grant applications and sees that eligible people receive government benefits.

Visitors to the centre are greeted with smells of food cooking in the kitchen, and there is a spirit of enthusiasm and commitment in the air. Project Manager Peter Jooste, who is also a pastor, says “the centre is anchored in restorative and spiritual principles, which motivates all those involved in the programme to go an extra mile”. On weekdays participants pray together before going out into the community.

The participants’ passion is, however, backed with training. All the caregivers have undergone three-months of home-based care training, which includes one month for theory and two months focusing on practical training. And the results are visible.

In January, community-based carers began working with 57 bed-ridden, terminally ill patients, most of whom were referred to the CWP by local clinics. The carers started a programme whereby every patient was visited in the morning with a porridge breakfast, and again in the afternoon with a cooked dinner, thereby ensuring that the patients had food in their stomachs before taking their medication. The physical care provided was supplemented with psychological and spiritual support from a counsellor. A few months later only nine patients remained in their care; the rest had all recovered sufficiently to resume normal life. The carers are convinced that the counselling played a crucial role in the recoveries, and this is now an integral part of their work, with 14 participants having been trained.

Participants are also often overwhelmed and consumed by problems they have to deal with every day – and need counselling to help them cope and regain composure. Like Frans Mojekisane. Frans is 62 years of age, married with eight children, and was retrenched in 1999 while working at a mine. Seemingly lightning can strike in the same spot twice because France was again retrenched in 2002 from his second mining job. He was unemployed for seven years, until in 2009 when he joined CWP.



"I came to the Wellness Centre because of serious family problems. My wife is unemployed, she is a hawker and not making enough to take care of the children. The children have one set of uniforms each. Sometimes I just need someone to tell me that everything is going to be okay," says Frans.

Stephanie Jones agrees that people need to know that someone cares. "This is not just a home-based care but love-based care," she says. "It has gone beyond our role as CWP participants to how we see ourselves in communities." Stephanie has been a CWP team leader for two years and has been taking care of a blind patient, cooking cleaning and bathing the blind woman. She wants to pursue a nursing career, an aspiration she says that comes from her time in CWP.

Another person who is pursuing an aspiration is Elizabeth Petersen. "CWP gave me a platform to share my story with the hope that people will draw lessons from it" says Elizabeth, who has started a HIV support group called Friends for Life. Elizabeth attended school until only Grade 9 and had never been employed before she joined the CWP in 2009. She is a mother of three, is HIV positive, and has been on ARVs for seven years. Through Friends for Life, Elizabeth gives talks in schools and churches to educate people about HIV and AIDS. Her aim is to encourage people to test for HIV and start leading healthy lives.

"It's a place where people discover who they are, who they want to become, and strive to become it," says Auntie Mary, who helps prepare the meals for the home-based care patients and orphans.

At present, 21 orphans are cared for. The children go to school, then come to the centre to eat a balanced meal, which has been worked out by a dietician. These meals are also transported on bicycle to home-based care beneficiaries. This helps curb defaults on medication for pills that need to be taken with meals, such as people who are on antiretrovirals. For bedridden patients, participants go out of their way to collect their medication from the clinic, and in certain cases push them in their wheelchairs to the clinic.

Children from Grade 1 to Grade 7 are helped with their homework along with guidance on the dangers of alcohol abuse and other lifestyle skills, all imparted by participants who stay until sunset when the kids go home, most of them going off to child-headed-homes. In recognition that playing forms an integral part of child development, participants create "playtime" and engage in different games – trying to create a home where none exists and staying true to the African proverb that "it takes a community to raise a child".

Breaking down barriers



Masibulele Mazolwana left school when he was in Grade 10 because of financial constraints after his parents' divorce. Fuelled by hopes of completing matric, the 21 year old wakes

up every day to do his job as a CWP participant. "I believe that I will someday finish my matric. As an individual I had to start somewhere and thought CWP was the right place to start," he says.

Through the CWP Masibulele has since received training in plumbing. "CWP has made me what I am today I am also helping to deliver food parcels to home based-care patients using my bicycle. I have also mobilised CWP youth to form a youth forum as I want to pursue my interest in arts production."

Masibulele says CWP has been as a unifier in the community of Bronville, which used to have racial divisions between coloured and black African people. A notable feature about bringing together a mixed black and coloured group in the CWP is that people say that the long-standing divisions between the two groups are being broken down.

The centre also cares for the elderly. Twice a week CWP participants who did a basic physiotherapy course give senior citizens from an old age home massages and exercises and hold health talks. The elderly also contribute R10 a month to assist with burial arrangements in the event of death.

Another group are cancer patients, who receive health awareness education and counselling. The centre now takes care of 25 cancer sufferers. Mita Titus is a home-based care supervisor and caregiver whose passion for helping the sick started 16 years ago when her mother was bedridden. "I went out and picked herbs that my mother used to give us when we were young" she says. Since then she has dedicated a big part of her life to caring for those who are less healthy. "My mother has recovered and I haven't stopped helping sick people in my community."

There are plans to roll out to other wards to become Life Wellness Centres. The councillors will then also assist the participants and their families in those wards. "A healthy and stable community is a community that works towards total transformation of that community and families", says Peter.

This profile is part of a series that looks at local innovation in the South African government's Community Work Programme (CWP). It was produced by Trade & Industrial Policy Strategies (TIPS) for the Department of Cooperative Governance (DCoG). For more information about the CWP go to www.cogta.gov.za/cwp.