

COMMUNITY CONNECTORS

Pilot Report 2024



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About Metro

Metro Trains Melbourne (Metro) operates and maintains the metropolitan rail service in Melbourne, transporting approximately 500,000 passengers daily.

With more than 7,000 employees, Metro aims to encourage the Melbourne community's vibrant and ever-evolving lifestyles by providing a seamless transport solution to keep individuals connected.

Metro maintains and renews the railway network to ensure its assets are safe and operate reliably. It also partners with the State Government to deliver city-shaping projects and build Melbourne's railway of the future.

Metro is committed to having a positive social impact in the communities it serves. Through initiatives focused on reconciliation, social partnerships, and community education, it aims to strengthen, unify and support the Melbourne community and beyond.

About SECL

Established in 1970, South East Community Links (SECL) operates with the vision that every person counts and every system should be fair. It works alongside multicultural communities in Melbourne's south east to offer trusted, place-based, and people-centred services.

Guided by the core values of equity, inclusion, compassion, dignity, diversity, and choice, SECL values the skills, perspectives, and experiences that multicultural communities bring to the organisation and broader society.

In partnership with governments, communities, and businesses, SECL delivers culturally responsive, coordinated, and effective services that meet clients' needs.

Spanning multiple locations, SECL's services include emergency relief, casework, community programs and support, youth and family services, homelessness and housing support, financial counselling, employment support, family violence support, and settlement services.

Acknowledgement Of Country



Metro Trains Melbourne and South East Community Links acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work. We pay respect to their Elders, past, present and emerging, and to their cultural and spiritual connections to Country.



Executive Summary

The Community Connectors program was piloted as an innovative community outreach initiative delivered in partnership between Metro Trains Melbourne (Metro) and South East Community Links (SECL), a renowned provider of community services in Melbourne's south east.

The program was designed to reduce the number of incidents at Dandenong station. Incidents such as anti-social behaviours and trespassing can negatively impact the safety and wellbeing of passengers and staff and can affect station operations and train services. In doing so, the program aims to assist passengers and community members who frequent the station and face multiple and complex challenges, including mental health issues, substance abuse, poverty, family violence and housing insecurity.

Throughout its pilot phase from 24 July 2023 to 30 June 2024, the program deployed trained community practitioners known as Community Connectors who worked weekday afternoons to mitigate anti-social behaviour, address various community needs, and support the smooth operation of Dandenong station. Their efforts included immediate interventions and ongoing referrals to SECL programs and other local services.

Supporting the legislative changes decriminalising public drunkenness, the program took a harm reduction approach to Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD). It provided a judgement-free option for people who may have been under the influence, ensuring their safety and providing appropriate support.

Additionally, the program engaged with individuals who may have experienced mental health challenges, offering initial support and referring them to other services. This approach aligns with the changes recommended by the recent Royal Commission into Mental Health.

A variety of methodologies, including surveys of passengers, staff, and stakeholders, were used to review the Community Connectors pilot's outcomes and impact. The Community Connectors collected data about their engagements, describing the number of interactions, referrals and support provided.

In addition, Metro analysed its incident data to determine whether the program had the desired impact of reducing anti-social behaviour and trespass incidents.

This report summarises the program's significant impacts which included:

- Facilitated over 3,300 engagements
- Referred 188 people to additional services
- De-escalated 54 incidents and prevented harm in a further 49 situations
- Engaged 50-60 people in flexible casework and 18 in intense casework.

The data demonstrates an increased sense of community safety, early intervention in situations involving self-harm, and improved understanding among Metro staff.

Importantly, the program has involved closer collaboration with key stakeholders and wider capacity building for both partners. Feedback from passengers, Metro staff, and other stakeholders like Protective Services Officers (PSOs) and Victoria Police was overwhelmingly positive, highlighting both the program's immediate benefits and its potential for broader application.

The recommendations focus on:

- Integrating additional skills and cultural backgrounds into the Community Connectors team
- Establishing a confidential space for flexible casework at the station
- Refining the Metro staff training program
- Improving data collection and community engagement
- Exploring the feasibility of replicating the program at other stations with similar needs.



About the Community Connectors pilot

Melbourne's public transport rail network is vital for a thriving community, connecting people with essential services, employment opportunities, and each other.

A range of factors can impact the smooth operation of train services. As a natural hub and central gathering point, train stations are sometimes the focus of anti-social behaviour. This has historically been the case at Dandenong station, which has an adjoining bus hub, is a gateway for regional travellers, and has courts and social support services nearby.

As the first of its kind in Victoria, the Community Connectors outreach pilot program was established to contribute to addressing the root causes of these issues by providing proactive, direct support to the community. The program also enhanced the capacity of Metro staff through targeted training and support.

The pilot also created a safer environment for passengers and Metro staff by reducing the number of anti-social behaviour and trespass incidents at and around the station. The program's ultimate goal was to strengthen Dandenong station as a key public space that is inclusive, safe, and contributes to a vibrant local community.

The pilot was conducted from 24 July 2023 to 30 June 2024, and its findings will inform continuous improvement and the potential rollout to other stations in the Metro network.

How the program works

The pilot program had two key streams:

- Providing direct support to the community
- Capacity building for Metro staff at Dandenong station.

South East Community Links appointed two community practitioners with qualifications in social work, mental health and nursing to directly support community members. These practitioners, known as 'Community Connectors', were located at Dandenong station from 1–5pm on weekdays.

Their role was to provide direct support and advice to community members and coordinate referrals to local services for drug and alcohol, mental health, homelessness, and family violence support.

People were also referred to other relevant services from SECL including emergency relief, youth housing and empowerment programs, settlement services and financial counselling.

A combination of social isolation, mental health and substance abuse challenges were some of the barriers preventing people from accessing support.

There was also a lack of knowledge of available services and how to connect with agencies. The Community Connectors proactively conducted welfare checks and provided a bridge to connecting these participants with support services. The team provided practical support in making appointments and offered immediate emergency relief including snacks, water and myki cards. Referrals were made to SECL's Dandenong site for additional emergency relief including food, vouchers and clothing.

While most engagements were ad hoc or one-off meetings, the Community Connectors also offered casework support for community members who chose to access dedicated, long-term support to meet their needs, overcome challenges, and achieve their goals.

Flexible casework was introduced to work with community members who were unlikely to attend formal sessions but were willing to engage with community practitioners at the station.

The program also trained Metro staff to help them better understand the refugee and migrant settlement journey, the local community environment and support services.

Four modules of training were delivered to Metro staff to assist them in responding to people affected by alcohol or drugs, or experiencing episodes related to a mental illness. The modules also covered migrant and resettlement journeys, local services, referral pathways, self-care and debriefing.

This capacity building training was important to ensuring a holistic approach to supporting the community. By building a greater understanding of the community's background and challenges, staff were better able to apply a person-centred approach and recognise the factors that may be contributing to anti-social behaviours.

The program was overseen by a Steering Committee comprising representatives from SECL (Chair), Metro, Victoria Police and the Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety.





The faces of the program

From clinical settings to community connections

For over two decades, Mark Singh dedicated his life to acute care and mental health, tackling the high-pressure demands of clinical environments. Despite the rewarding nature of his work, the intensity took its toll, leading Mark to seek a change that maintained his passion for helping others while offering a different pace and setting.

This search brought him to the Community Connectors program, where he saw an opportunity to apply his extensive experience in mental health in a new, community-focused way. Mark transitioned from the hospital corridors to the bustling activity of Dandenong station, becoming a vital presence for people needing support amidst their daily commutes.

In his role, Mark became known not just for his expertise but for his approachability and deep empathy, traits that endeared him to the community. Whether helping someone navigate public services or offering a listening ear to those facing personal crises, Mark's presence at the station was a pillar of support.

One of Mark's early experiences involved a critical intervention with a distressed individual contemplating self-harm at the station. With calmness and compassion, Mark and his colleague managed to de-escalate the situation, ensuring the individual's safety and connecting him with essential support services.

This incident highlighted the profound impact of the Community Connectors program and solidified Mark's commitment to his new path.

"Every day brings new challenges, but also incredible moments of connection and transformation. It's about more than just providing help; it's about building trust and offering hope," - Mark Singh

A new track for Tom

Tom* is a regular at Dandenong station, often seen during his daily commutes.

In the past, Tom's presence was notable due to his unpredictable behaviour, stemming from a complex mix of Acquired Brain Injury (ABI), alcohol dependence, and substance use. Known to both police and PSOs, Tom's actions often disrupted the station environment.

The Community Connectors team decided to take a different approach with Tom. Rather than relying on law enforcement, which had been the standard response to his episodes of intoxication and aggression, the team chose to engage with him. They introduced themselves to Tom, offering conversation, refreshments, and practical assistance like guiding him to the correct platforms and helping with train schedules.

This new strategy marked a turning point. Tom, who had been frequently involved in confrontations and engaged in anti-social behaviours like urinating at barriers, started to change.

This case study highlights the 'flexible case management approach' that had been employed at the station. Community members like Tom did not engage in formal casework.

However, the Community Connectors' consistent and compassionate approach helped build a new level of trust. They engaged with Tom regularly, and he responded positively to the attention and care provided. He decreased his anti-social behaviour and no longer required police intervention at the station.

Metro staff valued the support Community Connectors provided to Tom. This collaborative effort ensured timely and respectful interventions, respecting the dignity and safety of everyone involved.

**Not his real name*



"I like it that you are both here every afternoon...sometimes when I get frustrated or don't know what to do I think "I'll go and see them and talk with them, they'll be able to help me!" and you know what? - you always do...even if you can't DO anything, I know that just having a chat will help," - Participant

A holistic approach to safety and support

At 12 years old, Jason* was disengaged from school, instead spending time with adult friends and allegedly getting involved with criminal activity and facing court proceedings.

Things escalated further when his mum asked him to leave his family home. Already known to the police, Jason was hanging around Dandenong station when local police officers met him and introduced him to the Community Connectors team.

The team engaged Jason in a relaxed way, and quickly built rapport. They recognised he needed further support and safety and persuaded Jason to meet with the SECL Youth Links team.

The Community Connectors travelled with Jason on the train to the Noble Park Youth Links office, where he was introduced to SECL youth workers.

The Youth Links team connected well with Jason, ensuring he felt comfortable and then supporting him to reconnect with his mum.

Jason was assigned a caseworker and, together with his mum, began receiving wrap-around community support. They participated in the Youth Links Navigator program that addressed the underlying causes of youth disengagement with education.

The engagement with Youth Links and Community Connectors supported Jason to re-engage in school and gave him a wider network of support and services to help him stay safe.

**Not his real name*

Timely and responsive intervention prevents harm

The Community Connectors played a key role in intervening in urgent situations when safety was paramount.

On one such occasion, the team was called over to support Rick*, a young man who appeared heavily intoxicated. Noticing he was becoming distressed, the Community Connectors connected with Rick quickly and were then able to contact his mum.

The team stayed close as Rick started to become upset, expressing a desire to self-harm and attempting to move towards oncoming trains. Verbally redirecting Rick and physically blocking his path, the team sought extra support from Metro staff and PSOs.

PSOs and Rick's mum soon arrived, and positively, he was released to his mother with information on getting additional medical support. Thanks to their skills and training, the Community Connectors were able to intervene in a timely way to prevent the possibility of self-harm.

In turn, train services were not disrupted and staff and passengers were not impacted or exposed to a traumatic experience.

**Not his real name*



Engagement and case management

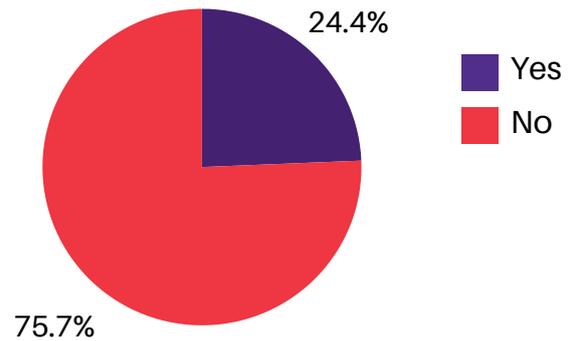
Demographics

Most people who engaged with the Community Connectors were aged 45-54 (21%), followed by 35-44 years (15%), and the majority of community members were male (61%).

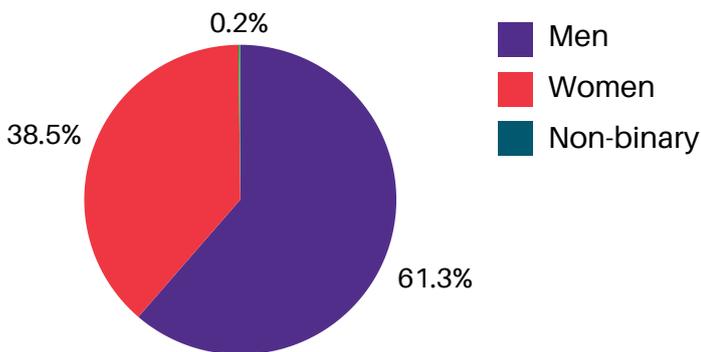
Engagement at the station contrasts with support given at other SECL services in which females (61%) are more highly represented than males (39%). This contrast is largely attributable to well-known and researched behaviours that males are less likely to seek help for their mental health[1]. Pleasingly, the Community Connectors program is helping to break down any stigma with seeking assistance.

Around a quarter spoke a language other than English with Dari, Hindi and Vietnamese being the top three languages. People came from 70 postcodes with passengers from Dandenong being the most frequent users of the service (40%) followed by Cranbourne (24%).

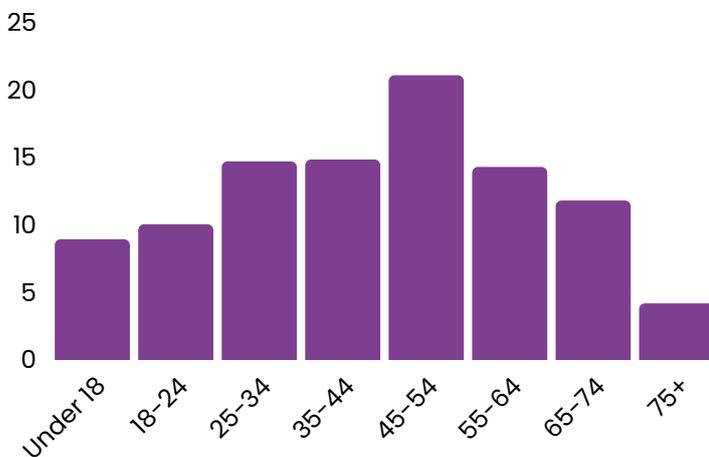
Speaks a language other than English



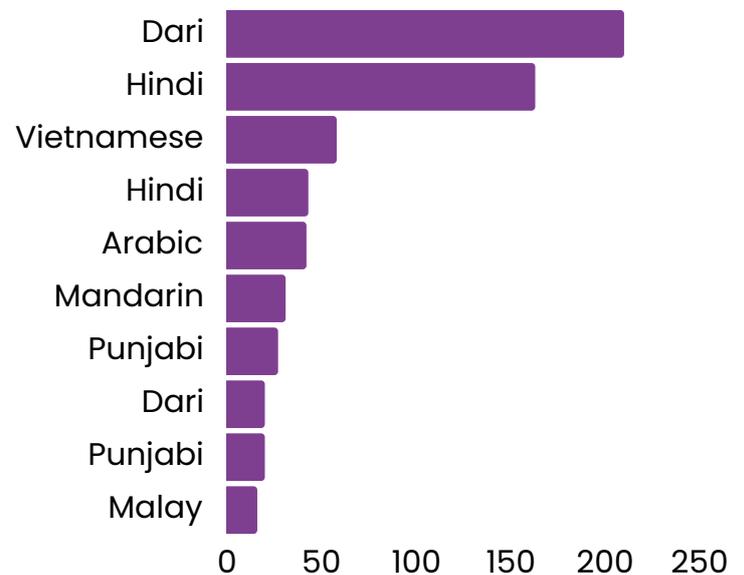
Gender



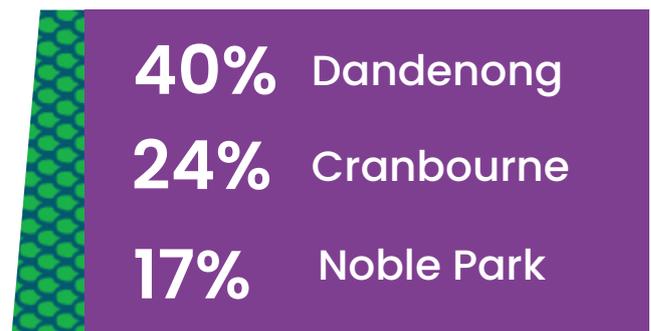
Age



Languages



Postcodes



1. For example, <https://aifs.gov.au/tentomen/media/depression-suicidality-and-loneliness-mental-health-and-australian-men>

Engagements

While many passengers engaged with the Community Connectors on a general basis, other reasons for engagement included:

- Mental health (9%)
- Alcohol and/or drugs (9%)
- Distress (5%)
- Emergency relief (2%).

The Community Connectors de-escalated 54 incidents (e.g. assaults, aggressive behaviour) and prevented harm in a further 49 situations including five cases of self-harm. Almost 190 people were referred to one of SECL's services (76%) or external services (24%).

Reasons for engagement

Mental Health	9%
Alcohol and/or Drugs	9%
Distressed	5%
Emergency Relief	2%



Total engagements



Case management

The Community Connectors employed a "flexible casework" model to effectively support community members. The aim was to provide ongoing support and interventions that foster trust and rapport, especially with people struggling with substance abuse or anti-social behaviour. The dynamic and informal nature of engagements with community members drove this participant-led approach. Recognising the unique challenges individuals face, such as lack of access to mobile phones, unstable housing, and financial difficulties, the team adapted to varying levels of engagement.

Throughout the pilot program, 50-60 participants engaged in flexible casework. In addition, 23 participants were referred to formal casework with SECL. Of those people 18 engaged with case management. As at 30 June 2024, there are eight cases open and 10 cases closed or completed. Of the closed cases, six participants achieved their goals within two to five weeks.

For the current participants, substance use remained a primary issue for five individuals, necessitating frequent welfare checks and reactive support. The remaining participants, dealing with barriers such as language and neurodiversity, received assistance through advocacy and access to appropriate services.



Station incidents

Anti-social behaviour

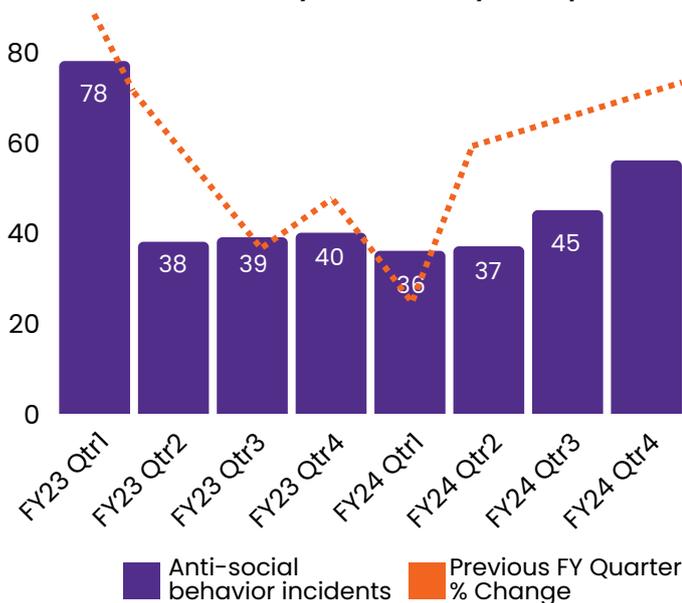
Metro data indicates that the overall number of anti-social behaviour incidents fell by 11% during the pilot program. However, incidents increased by 43% during the hours when Community Connectors were present at the station.

The broader economic and social environment, including the rising cost of living, has led to increased anti-social behaviour and people presenting with mental health challenges. Additionally, the presence of the Community Connectors has brought more incidents to light that might have otherwise gone unnoticed.

The most common types of reported incidents during the hours of the program included:

- Unruly behaviour or intoxication (55%)
- Alleged assaults on passengers (20%)
- Verbal or threatening behaviour towards staff or contractors (15%).

Anti-social events by financial year quarter

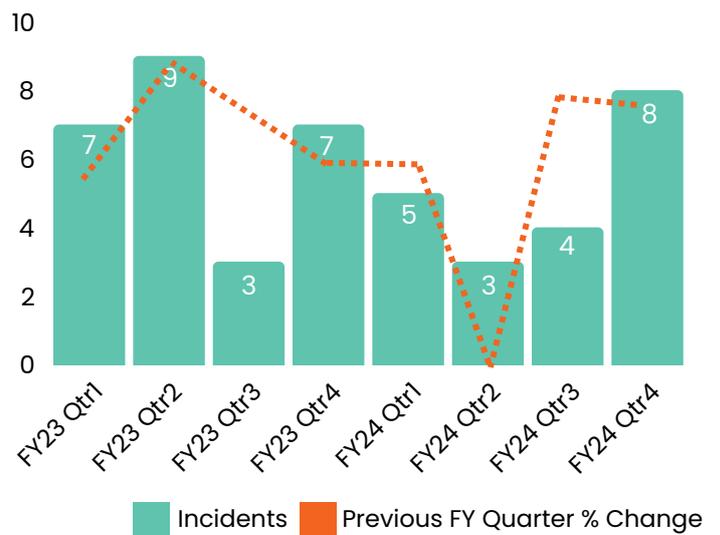


Trespass

The total number of trespass incidents at or around Dandenong station increased by 12% during the pilot. However, trespass incidents decreased by 23% during the hours when Community Connectors were present.

The most common type of trespass incident was "Beside/Foul Track," typically involving police intervention. There were 23 instances of threatened self-harm, an increase of six from the previous year. The Community Connectors intervened in five of these self-harm incidents.

Trespasser events by financial year quarter



Ultimately, the causes and factors leading to, or increasing the likelihood of, these incidents and anti-social behaviour are complex and nuanced. The data highlights the extensive and varied needs within the community and how the station serves as a natural gathering and connection point.

It is evident that the Community Connectors program has delivered tangible positive impacts to many in the community. However, attributing the reduction or increase in incidents requires deeper analysis and consideration of these broader factors.

Metro and SECL are refining their approach to measuring the impact of the program, aiming to better assess its effectiveness at the station.

Additionally, Metro is developing response initiatives aimed at reducing the number of trespassers on the train network.

Stakeholder Feedback

Interviews

The stakeholder interviews with SECL and Metro staff offer detailed insights into the evolution, implementation and impact of this innovative community outreach initiative.

Feedback from SECL

SECL highlighted its proactive role in shaping the program, advocating for a robust and nuanced understanding of community needs, especially in relation to mental health. The appointment of a team member from a clinical environment to community wellbeing was effective in enhancing the program's capacity to handle complex situations encountered at the station.

SECL's feedback highlighted significant outcomes such as the improved handling of people impacted by trauma, reflecting a shift from a reactive to a proactive and compassionate approach in managing community interactions. This shift was illustrated by interventions that prevented self-harm and provided immediate support, highlighting the value of having mental health expertise readily available in public spaces.

In addition, the integration of specialised roles, like a youth worker, was noted as an opportunity to respond to demographic and seasonal changes. Insights into working with diverse young people at the station reinforce the need for roles that are approachable and specifically tailored to engage younger community members effectively. Gender is also important for engaging with some cultural cohorts.

It was noted that there is a need for a dedicated, confidential space at the station for private consultations especially as part of flexible casework.

The discussions also emphasised a strong collaborative spirit and a commitment to iterative learning and flexibility. SECL praised Metro's ongoing partnership, noting the shared commitment to refining the program based on community feedback and operational insights.

Feedback from Metro

Metro's input highlighted the dual benefits of improved safety at the station and actively enhancing community wellbeing. The program was positioned as a bridge between Metro's business operations and its social impact aspirations, with specific mention of the program as a 'shared valued' initiative in Metro's community engagement portfolio.

Key outcomes from Metro's viewpoint included substantial community engagement metrics, which included thousands of interactions and numerous referrals to additional support services. These metrics not only demonstrated the program's reach but also its depth in terms of meaningful community support. However, challenges in quantifying the direct impact on reducing incidents were noted as an area still under evaluation.

Training sessions aimed at increasing staff empathy and understanding of diverse community members were met with mixed responses, reflecting a diversity of backgrounds and experiences in the station team. However, Metro agreed that the training has led to greater internal awareness and integration of community-focused perspectives among staff.

Summary

Both SECL and Metro acknowledged the significant behavioural change and community trust built through the program. They praised the program's flexibility and adaptability, reflecting a responsive model that adjusts to emerging needs and challenges. This has facilitated a deeper, systemic engagement with the community, going beyond traditional corporate responsibility activities.

The interviews collectively reflected a strong foundation for future growth and potential expansion of the program. Both organisations expressed a desire to further this model, potentially broadening its application to other communities and stations, driven by the positive feedback and the collaborative model that has characterised their partnership to date.

Surveys

A series of surveys were conducted at different stages of the Community Connectors pilot to assess its impact and gather feedback for continuous improvement. These surveys were targeted at passengers, station staff and broader stakeholders.

Passenger Surveys

Passenger surveys were conducted pre-pilot (299 responses), mid-pilot (124 responses), and end-pilot (299 responses) to track changes in safety perceptions and confidence in accessing help at the station.

The surveys indicated a clear improvement in how safe passengers felt at Dandenong station over time. Initially, a significant portion of passengers reported feeling 'Rarely' or 'Not safe at all'. However, by the end of the pilot, there was a noticeable decrease in people who said they felt 'Not safe at all' or 'Rarely safe' and an increase in the number feeling 'Sometimes safe', suggesting an enhanced sense of security.

How safe do you feel using Dandenong station?			
Response	Pre-pilot	Mid-pilot	End-pilot
Not safe at all	6.35%	0.81%	1.49%
Rarely safe	7.69%	5.65%	3.87%
Sometimes safe	26.09%	28.23%	38.39%
Often safe	38.46%	33.87%	35.42%
Always safe	21.40%	31.45%	20.83%

Confidence levels regarding knowing where to get help if feeling unsafe showed significant positive changes. Initially, many passengers expressed little confidence, but by the end of the pilot, there was a remarkable increase in those feeling 'Pretty confident'. This suggests that the program successfully communicated available resources and support, improving passenger reassurance.

How confident are you knowing where to get help if you feel unsafe at the station?			
Response	Pre-pilot	Mid-pilot	End-pilot
Not confident at all	18.39%	20.16%	7.44%
Pretty confident	51.84%	48.39%	89.58%
Extremely confident	15.38%	17.74%	2.08%

“While I wait for my train or bus, I always seem to be chatting with someone who’s experienced family violence. Sadly, there not much I can do.”

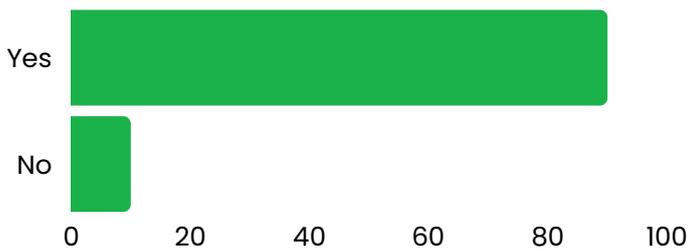
– Passenger



Staff surveys

Despite a low response rate (~ 25%), the staff survey provided insight into the program's awareness and perceived impact among station staff. A high percentage of respondents were aware of the Community Connectors program, indicating effective communication and visibility within station operations.

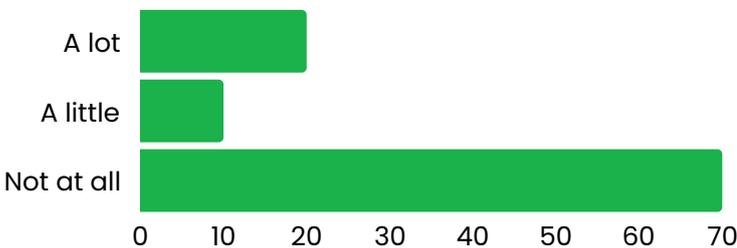
Are you aware of the Community Connectors program, delivered in partnership with South East Community Links?



However, the survey showed mixed feelings about the program's effectiveness in improving safety. Around 30% of respondents indicated there had been some improvement in safety and that having the Community Connectors at the station made them feel safer at work.

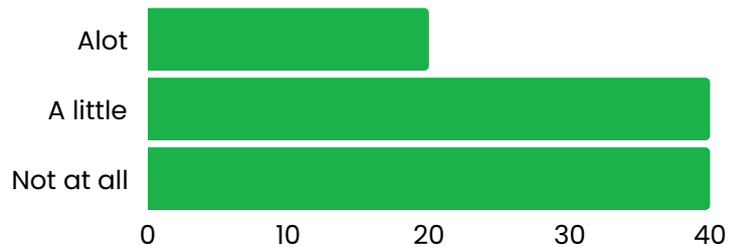
This highlights a potential area for increasing the program's visibility and impact concerning staff experiences.

Do you think the Community Connectors have improved the safety of the station?



In addition, 60% of respondents indicated that the Community Connectors had freed them up to do other duties. This is an unplanned benefit of the program.

How much has having the Community Connectors at the station freed you up to do other duties?



Staff training

Twenty-nine staff participated in the training sessions. Surveys were conducted to measure changes in understanding and awareness.

Responses indicated:

- 38% increase in understanding of a holistic approach to responding to community members in crisis
- 38% increase in knowledge of local services
- 28% increase in knowledge of de-escalation techniques.



"They are proactive and always engage with those in need and provide them with the information that they need."

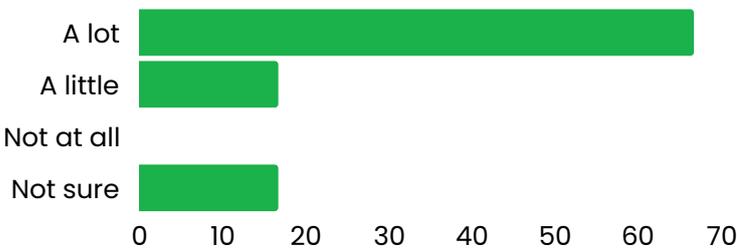
– Staff survey

Stakeholder surveys

Six people participated in the Stakeholder survey. Stakeholder feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with most recognising the program's contribution to improving community outcomes in Dandenong.

More than 80% of respondents expressed that the Community Connectors had improved the safety of the station. When asked what was working well, one stakeholder commented "direct linking to services, prevention of incidents and meeting people where they are at."

Do you think the Community Connectors have improved the safety of the station?



"Victoria Police, Transit Safety Division is proud to be a part of the Community Connectors pilot at Dandenong railway station, supporting referral pathways and enhancing public safety."
- Victoria Police Transit Safety Division

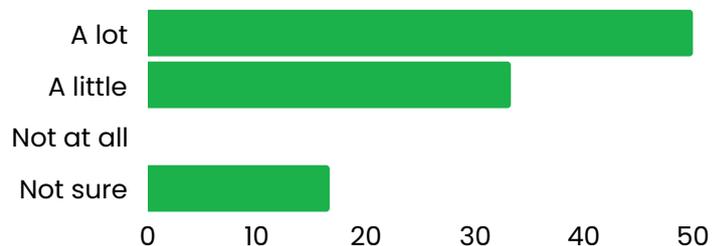


"They are able to provide services to the people who need help, however, anti-social behaviour still occurs at Dandenong."
- Stakeholder survey

Half of the stakeholders felt the program significantly improved community outcomes (50%) and a third (33%) noticed slight improvements. A small number of stakeholders were unsure of the program's impact.

This uncertainty highlights the need for ongoing evaluation and communication to ensure all stakeholders are informed and engaged with the program's progress and successes.

Do you think the Community Connectors have improved outcomes for the Dandenong community?



Findings

The pilot program provided invaluable insights and offered a fresh perspective into community needs and alternative approaches and solutions. These key learnings are designed to inform future development of the program.

1. Direct support to thousands of community members

Over the course of the year, the team engaged with thousands of passengers and members of the community at the station. The Community Connectors were able to directly undertake 3,347 direct engagements, providing varying degrees of support for a wide range of needs, and referring 188 people to 12 different community services.

The team was also able to engage more deeply with a more concentrated number of people through casework. Importantly, the team improved early intervention in cases of potential self-harm ensuring community members were referred to appropriate services.

2. Increased community safety

Throughout the program, the Community Connectors were involved in de-escalating heightened situations and incidents. From preventing self-harm to diffusing tension between people, the team's consistent presence and availability meant situations were identified and then addressed in a timely way. Passenger surveys indicated they feel safer attending and travelling through Dandenong station.

3. Better allocation of resources to ensure less disruption to normal operations

The more immediate responses from the Community Connectors have required less frequent and intense interventions from Authorised Officers (AOs), PSOs and police. In some situations, the team was able to use a different approach to managing these issues, connecting with a person's family and other community services for additional support.

4. Building understanding of Metro station staff

Through the training and direct interactions with the Community Connectors, Dandenong station staff gained a deeper understanding of their community's needs, including the potential impact of trauma on people's behaviour. Almost 30 staff participated in the training sessions.

5. Closer collaboration with key stakeholders

AOs, PSOs and Victoria police have actively supported the Community Connectors, partnering with them to address various incidents. Stakeholder feedback indicates the program was valued and the Community Connectors were well respected.

Anecdotal evidence suggests this close collaboration had an impact on the response to incidents by station staff, AOs and PSOs. Where they would previously default to calling the police immediately, Community Connectors noted a change in approach, including efforts to build rapport and provide support at the incident location.

6. Improved synergy between corporate responsibility and operational teams

The program allowed Metro's Corporate Responsibility Team to work directly with their service delivery colleagues. This close collaboration enabled the Corporate Responsibility Team to become more deeply engaged and better understand the complexity of the day-to-day issues faced by operational and local station staff.

On one level, this exercise led to building goodwill and stronger working relationships. At a deeper level, the Corporate Responsibility Team gleaned invaluable insights and knowledge that will shape future initiatives.

Findings continued...

7. Wider capacity building of Metro leadership and staff

The partnership with SECL has also contributed to the capacity building of Metro leadership. SECL's Chief Executive Officer, Peter McNamara, presented to Metro operational leaders at a quarterly forum on safety. This was a unique opportunity that provided the leadership team with new perspectives and a deeper understanding of the community and social issues. Metro staff participated in practical ways, supporting SECL's Bring Your Bills events in the south eastern suburbs.

Learnings

While the program delivered clear benefits and impacts to the community, it also offered valuable insights that will be instrumental in refining and enhancing future initiatives.

This section delves into these key learnings, highlighting areas for further reflection and discussion, improvement and potential strategies to optimise impact.

1. It takes time, patience, and the right partner

While there was a lot of enthusiasm to kick the program off quickly, Metro's Corporate Responsibility Team knew getting the foundations right was important, and this would take time. The team was determined to find the right community services organisation to partner with to deliver the program.

South East Community Links was chosen for its proven experience and expertise in delivering services to this local community. Their deep understanding of the community's needs, cultural nuances, and existing networks with service providers was key to the program's successful implementation. Additionally, there was a clear alignment of mission and values, ensuring a productive and collaborative working relationship between the organisations and, more importantly, at the local level.

2. The right team is crucial to success

Staff and members of the public alike accepted the Community Connectors' presence and interactions, appearing comfortable and accepting of these new supports at the station. From the reports of various engagements and observations of staff and passengers, the team could clearly establish their presence and purpose, engage well to create rapport, and quickly become a familiar and welcome presence at the station.

The community itself is made up of a highly diverse demographic with varying challenges. People of many different cultural backgrounds, socio-economic circumstances, genders, and ages converge daily at Dandenong station. This, combined with a range of issues, particularly alcohol use and other drugs and mental ill health, can cause behaviours to escalate and conflict.

The Community Connectors navigated these and built trust with the community successfully. Ensuring the team was made up of staff with the right combination of skills and personalities is undeniably a critical factor for the success of this and any future initiatives.

It was important for the Community Connectors to be trained in social work and have specific experience and training in mental health support. Gender balance was also noted as important for engaging with some cultural cohorts. For example, women from Afghanistan preferred to engage with a woman Community Connector.



Learnings continued...

3. Safety first, every time, is a fundamental pillar

There were no major safety incidents caused by or to the Community Connectors. Significant time was taken before the Community Connectors commenced their roles to develop a program risk management plan informed by a detailed risk assessment undertaken by Metro and SECL staff.

The Community Connectors also undertook external Rail Safety Induction training, which covers rail-specific risks.

The Safety Plan was regularly reviewed with input from the Community Connectors and station staff. This included the inclusion of debriefing arrangements for the Community Connectors following intensive engagements to ensure their psychological safety was maintained.



***“Reflecting on the statistics and discussions with SECL, it is evident that this program is improving safety including perceptions of safety.”
– Stakeholder survey***

4. Complexity in measuring impact

One of the key objectives of the program was to reduce the incidence of anti-social behaviour at Dandenong station. While the benefits to individuals are evident, the project team recognised the complexities involved in quantifying the impact of the project on the number of incidents.

The root causes of these behaviours are often linked to a range of socio-economic challenges, including lack of employment opportunities, affordable housing, and the rising cost of living. Individuals facing such disadvantages may struggle to access necessary support services, such as mental health care, which can further impact their health and wellbeing and potentially lead to anti-social behaviour.

Attributing the reduction or increase in incidents requires deeper analysis and consideration of these broader factors. Challenges in quantifying the direct impact on reducing incidents were noted, marking this as an area still under evaluation.

It is unlikely that the Community Connectors program alone can completely stem the number of incidents. The value of the program may lie in the interventions and linkages it provides to community members who might not otherwise access these supports, reinforcing the station's role as a vital hub for a thriving community.

The program also has the potential to play a greater role in reducing incidents of trespass on the train network, particularly where the Community Connectors can engage with people who regularly trespass and cause significant disruption. This could have considerable positive impacts for the community and train operations.

Recommendations

Based on the pilot's outcomes, the following recommendations are proposed to refine and enhance the Community Connectors program:

1. Integrate roles such as youth workers and bi-cultural workers to better address the diverse needs of the community, particularly focusing on young people and multicultural groups. Ensure a balance of genders to accommodate cultures where women prefer to engage with other women.

2. Establish dedicated, confidential spaces at the station where Community Connectors can hold private consultations, crucial for dealing with sensitive issues.

3. Continue to develop and refine training programs for Metro staff, focusing on cultural competency, mental health first aid, and conflict resolution to improve overall passenger interactions.

4. Explore and implement a more robust system for tracking program impact, particularly concerning changes in the frequency and nature of anti-social behaviours and the overall wellbeing of the community.

5. Continue to regularly engage with the community to gather feedback and adjust the program accordingly to meet evolving needs.

6. Investigate the feasibility of replicating the Community Connectors program at other stations with similar challenges.

7. Develop innovative funding strategies that engage relevant stakeholders in contributing to the sustainability and expansion of the project.

These findings and recommendations aim to not only sustain but also amplify the positive impacts of the Community Connectors program, ensuring that Dandenong Station remains a safe, welcoming, and inclusive environment for all its users.



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