



Working Families Regional Case Study

Family Day Care – a flexible solution to balancing work and family in Colac Otway Shire

Assisting the balance between work and family responsibilities is a focus of the Colac Otway Shire. People with families make up the bulk of the population it services and flexible Family Day Care is proving one of the best tools in meeting these needs.

The Colac Otway Shire covers a largely rural area in the south west of Victoria and Colac is the main industrial and commercial centre. With an overall population of approximately 20,000, employment is provided through primary production, tourism, fishing, timber, food processing, manufacturing and a large local public sector servicing the area.

As Co-ordinator of Children and Family Services for the Colac Otway Shire, Christine Gurrie has a good understanding of the issues and difficulties facing people trying to balance their work, family and community responsibilities in a regional area.

And as a working mother whose job requires her to be on call at all times to deal with families in crisis situations, she also understands the pressures facing employees whose working conditions and hours don't always fit those of their families.

Christine's responsibilities include overseeing the provision of support services to families in the area such as child care, maternal and child health, disability support, respite care and foster care.

Families with young children make up a major population group in the area. Christine Gurrie says that while the employment situation in the area is currently good, incomes maybe low, putting additional pressures on families trying to make sure they can work and manage their families.

While balancing work and family responsibilities is an increasingly significant concern for employees, employers and the broader community, in regional and rural Victoria, there are additional factors for consideration.

Often there are added difficulties with accessing supportive infrastructure such as transport, training and quality child care.

One of the most important services available to families in the Colac Otway Shire is Family Day Care, which provides children from birth to 12 years with quality child care in private homes. Parents pay an hourly rate and, as the care takes place in a home environment, the hours can be flexible and worked out between the carer and the parent to meet their working needs.

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Parents have such options as full-time, part-time, occasional and before and after school care. Kindergarten sessions, shift work and 24 hour care are also provided.

And while this service is currently meeting the needs of many local families, Christine concedes that there is a waiting list of 15 families wanting to use the service.

“The Family Day Care service is sought after because it can provide care on a 24 hour a day basis. We have a lot of people who work shifts such as nurses and police officers and we have a lot of people employed at local factories that need to be at work by 6am. Mainstream child care centres don’t cater for these people, so it is vital that we have a functioning Family Day Care scheme.”

And while Family Day Care is affordable for most people in the area, especially if combined with child care benefits, Christine Gurrie believes that the cost of child care will continue to be an issue for working parents, unless there are changes to make it more accessible and affordable for people working or undertaking further study.

Lessons Learnt

- That affordable, flexible child care and services are vital to the ability of families in regional areas to balance work and family.
- That it is possible, for child care services to be flexible and meet the needs of parents undertaking shift work.

Contact for further information

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The Work and Family Balance in Regional Victoria Project

Industrial Relations Victoria and Regional Development Victoria recently carried out an investigation into work and family balance in regional Victoria by looking at four areas – Bendigo, Colac, Horsham and Latrobe City. The study was aimed at identifying the impacts on, and issues surrounding, work and family balance and the services to support working families.

Data was collected and consultation was undertaken with local stakeholders. Employee focus groups and employer forums were also held to provide a comprehensive picture of the current situation.

This study found that:

- Many families in regional areas have work and caring responsibilities, either for young children, dependents or ageing parents.
- There is growing awareness in these areas of the need to balance work and family life.
- There is the additional “community” factor in regional areas, not only is balancing work with family responsibilities a key issue, people are also concerned about their ability to volunteer their time.
- Fewer job opportunities in these areas mean families are less able to choose the mix of jobs and mix of caring opportunities that they require.
- The availability and quality of child care is a significant impact on regional families’ ability to juggle work and family needs.

The study also found that there was an awareness among many regional businesses and organisations that their ability to retain and attract loyal, effective staff was increasingly linked with their ability to provide family friendly provisions such as flexible hours, employee choice rostering, quality part-time work and, in some case, assistance with child care.

For further details about the Work and Family Balance in Regional Victoria Project, see www.irv.vic.gov.au

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