

First aid for the homeless



Percy is from a small community in outback South Australia. The community's local pool provides children a source of entertainment and relief during days filled with searing heat. Unfortunately it's only open for a couple of hours a day, and not during the hottest part. This is what enticed Percy to take up the offer of a first aid course with Red Cross College.

Percy said that adults who have a first aid certificate are allowed to bring their kids to the pool and supervise them outside of the opening hours.

Partnering with Adelaide's Hutt Street Centre, which supports the homeless, Red Cross provided free basic first aid courses for people who were homeless or at risk of homelessness. The course, titled Streetwise First Aid, was held in Adelaide's parklands to provide a welcoming and realistic environment.

"I've always avoided first aid," said Percy. "There's so many negative things that I thought you'd have to do as part of the course, things that I thought would be intimidating for me. But it has been totally relaxed and not intimidating at all...I thought you'd be under immense pressure, but it's not like that."

The Red Cross basic first aid course was adapted so that no reading or writing material was used. The course was delivered completely through verbal instructions, demonstrations and role-playing by mentors who were volunteers from Hutt Street, Red Cross and other agencies in the homeless sector.

Percy found their presence added to the delivery of the course.

“The mentors help get everyone comfortable and guide you through it,” he said.

Phillip was another participant. His motivation to get a basic first aid certificate was to help him get a job.

“I’ve been off work for four years,” he said. “I’m committed to getting off Centrelink. I want to live off a weekly wage, I want to be independent.”

Phillip worked at a brick manufacturer for 20 years, but personal issues saw him lose that job and more. He is now involved with other agencies that are supporting him to get back into the workforce and regain his independence. For Phillip the first aid course is an extra step towards gaining employment.

“I’ve done first aid training in the past, but my last certificate has expired. This has been a good opportunity for me to refresh my skills. By doing things like this, I’ll increase my chances of getting a job,” said Phillip.

This is the first time Red Cross College has offered the training to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in this informal and flexible format. The idea came from clients of the Red Cross Intensive Tenancy Support program which supports people who are at risk of homelessness, who indicated that this training would be of use to them.



Jody Sachs, Red Cross team leader for Intensive Tenancy Support, said she was pleased to see the way people were benefitting from the basic first aid course.

“The initial purpose was to train people so they can help each other out when they are living on the streets, but also to build up their skills so they can help anyone they come across who might be needing first aid assistance. This could be a

jogger in a park with a sprained ankle, or someone having a heart attack in the street.”

“Having people who live on the streets trained up in first aid challenges the stereotype and perception of homeless people. It’s just one way of demonstrating that these people have skills and the ability to contribute to society too.”

Jody said that by delivering the course in this informal, flexible way, Red Cross has also changed the perception of first aid training.

“The participants were interacting with each other and the mentors, laughing, having fun and weren’t bogged down with paperwork and textbooks,” she said.

“For someone like Percy who was intimidated by the thought of doing the course, we’ve proved to him that learning first aid is simple, enjoyable, and because he now has a first aid certificate he can help kids in his community access the pool when they need it most.”