

Physical activity and responsible dog ownership promoted through Council walking group



Many Australians are insufficiently active despite the fact that physical inactivity is a major risk factor for many diseases and poor health conditions. Increasing physical activity not only benefits the health and quality of life of individuals, but contributes to a healthy and vibrant community while reducing the cost burdens associated with poor health.⁴² Walking groups are a simple and inexpensive way to foster community spirit and encourage local residents to exercise.

Prior to the "Follow my Lead" program launch in February 2006, the City of Stirling identified that seniors, women and young people were not being catered to in community programs, leading to high levels of inactivity.

The Council designed "Follow my Lead" to encourage and promote physical activity, general health and well being, establish sustainable walking groups, promote the use of City of Stirling resources and endorse socially responsible dog ownership.

One of the significant features of the program is that while dogs are welcome, residents do not have to be a dog owner to get involved, they just need the drive to get active by joining one of the many "Follow my Lead" walking groups.

The walking groups encourage new friendships and companionship along with giving dog owning residents the opportunity to exercise their dog at the same time.

"Follow my Lead" Project Coordinator Kelly Yates of the City of Stirling reports that the project has gone from strength to strength in its three years of operation. There are currently 17 walking groups which meet regularly, with two more in the process of getting established. The groups differ in size but on average have about eight people in each group. The "Follow my Lead" program is overseen by one coordinator and 11 volunteer group leaders who run the groups. All volunteers are trained by the City of Stirling.

When reflecting on the benefits of the program Kelly says, "The benefits include creation of volunteer led self sustaining community walking groups and an increase in the recreational use of public open spaces and parks."

Overall, the "Follow my Lead" program benefits not only participants, but the community as a whole. "It has deterred graffiti and antisocial behaviour while providing a safe and friendly environment for the community," she said.

Participants also view the program positively.

"The main benefits they perceived were an increase in motivation to exercise.... an increase in fitness levels, general well being both mental and physical, increased feelings of community and safety and an increase in social activities."

Kelly Yates, City of Stirling



Benefits of Council based walking programs

- Combines encouraging physical activity with pet responsibility and community connectedness
- New friendships created through walking group participation
- Provides new volunteer positions that come equipped with professional training opportunities

Tips

- Recruit and train walking group leaders and members
- Promote the program through the local paper, brochures, community exhibitions, local vets and pet stores, Council website and newsletters
- Provide maps for suggested walking routes
- Outline guidelines for appropriate exercising and owning of pets

Web Links

"Follow my Lead" at Stirling Council
- www.stirling.wa.gov.au