

MEDIA RELEASE – EMBARGOED till 9am Monday 17th May

17 May 2021

Geelong Financial Inclusion Action Plan (FIAP) one year on

Geelong business and organisation leaders have urged locals who are continuing to struggle financially as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic to seek support.

In February 2020, ten pioneering organisations launched Australia’s first city-wide plan to support customers in hardship. Since then, the group has played a critical role in assisting those in the Geelong community who have experienced the worst financial impacts of the pandemic.

Today, the Geelong leaders spoke out on the long-term financial effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, stressing that many people will continue to need help and support to meet living expenses.

Barwon Water General Manager Customers and Community, Jo Murdoch said: “We have seen many people who have never had to ask for help before experiencing genuine financial distress. We want to get the message out loud and clear that help is available so please don’t be afraid to contact us.”

“By working with customers who have experienced job loss, reduced income or a change in circumstances, we’ve been able to identify customer support options to help them through this challenging time.”

Barwon Water is one of 9 local organisations that developed the city-wide Financial Inclusion Action Plan (FIAP) in collaboration with not for profit Good Shepherd. Other Geelong FIAP members include Deakin University, Aware Super, the Give Where You Live Foundation, WorkSafe Victoria, Bethany, MatchWorks, the City of Greater Geelong, and Colac Otway Shire.

Good Shepherd’s CEO Stella Avramopoulos said: “We commend the FIAP members for putting in place real, practical initiatives that will support financially vulnerable people facing challenges such as losing a job and understanding how to access safe, reliable assistance and information.”

“During a crisis like this it is vital that corporations, government and the not for profit sector work together to provide genuine support for those who need it”.

Initiatives by the FIAP members to support financially vulnerable clients include:

- Barwon Water is proactively contacting around 400 customers every week to let them know about the support available, including help with concession card discounts, access to government relief and rebates, payment grants, plans and extensions and referral to financial counselling. The water utility has also expanded its customer support program to include businesses impacted by the pandemic.
- Deakin University's Student Emergency Assistance Fund assisted students facing significant financial distress with emergency grants of up to \$500. Thousands of students were supported in 2020, with options ranging from monetary amounts to Food Vouchers, referral to Deakin Health & Wellbeing programs and links to relevant information. Additional targeted support was provided for international students.
- The Give Where You Live Foundation gave eight emergency grants of \$30,000 each and leveraged additional funding to support both existing grants and the Direct Assistance Voucher program.
- Aware Super delivered 650+ webinars, covering 24 different topics, to help vulnerable members to make best decisions about their financial future especially around early access of superannuation.
- Bethany Community Support provides a free COVID-19 Support Line with qualified counsellors for anyone in Greater Geelong and Warrnambool who needs support with COVID-related impacts on their relationships, parenting, financial stress and wellbeing including needing emergency financial relief, social isolation, and gambling related harm.

For more information on the Geelong FIAP: <https://fiap.org.au/about/fiap-placebased>

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Information on accessing services provided by the Geelong FIAP members

Barwon Water

Barwon Water is Victoria's largest regional urban water corporation.

- Barwon Water's Geelong-based customer contact centre is available between 8 am to 6 pm weekdays on 1300 656 007.
- For more information about concessions, support and payment assistance, including eligibility criteria, please visit <https://www.barwonwater.vic.gov.au/billing-and-accounts/concessions-and-payment-assistance>

Aware Super (previously known as First State Super)

Aware Super is the second largest industry superannuation fund in Australia with a service centre located in Geelong to support local members and employers.

- To access a series of free webinars on superannuation and financial decisions, visit <https://aware.com.au/member/support-and-guidance/education-and-seminars/webinars>
- To speak to one of the service centre agents, call 1300 650 873, Monday to Friday from 8am -6.30pm

Bethany Community Support

Bethany Community Support is an independent, not-for-profit that provides community services for people living in the Barwon and South West regions of Victoria.

The not-for-profit provides people who are experiencing financial stress and harm with access to emergency financial aid and counselling to deal with the impacts of COVID-19. Bethany Community Support's in-person services have adapted to online and remote access during the pandemic.

- The Bethany COVID-19 Support Line provides free support from qualified counsellors to people living in Geelong and Warrnambool who are experiencing COVID-related issues such as
 - financial stress,
 - challenges with their relationships or parenting
 - social isolation,
 - gambling harm,

Call the Bethany COVID_19 Support Line Monday -Friday, 10am -3pm on 03 5278 8122 or visit <https://www.bethany.org.au/bethany-covid-19-support-line/>

Deakin University

Deakin is one of Australia's largest universities with strong global linkages.

- To access financial assistance, please visit <https://www.deakin.edu.au/students/enrolment-fees-and-money/financial-assistance>

Give Where You Live Foundation

Give Where You Live Foundation is a unique, place-based philanthropic community foundation located in Geelong delivering its own programs as well as providing grants to partner organisations to assist the most vulnerable people in their local communities.

- To access emergency food assistance, please visit <https://www.feedgeelong.org.au/where-can-i-eat>

MatchWorks

MatchWorks help thousands of people from all backgrounds, ages and abilities find the right job every year. As one of Australia's largest providers of jobactive and Disability Employment Services, their purpose is to help people lead better lives. They're also part of the genU family, a not-for-profit organisation supporting people with disabilities, the ageing and those experiencing disadvantage.

- Call 1300 13 23 63 to speak to an experienced employment consultant about how they can assist you
- Or visit <https://www.matchworks.com.au/for-job-seekers/>

WorkSafe Victoria

WorkSafe Victoria is the state's health and safety regulator working with employers and workers to create safer workplaces.

- Financial Wellbeing is one of the pillars in WorkSafe's internal employee wellbeing program. Educational programs to improve financial literacy are conducted regularly; and supports for employees encountering financial hardship are provided.

City of Greater Geelong

City of Greater Geelong is the local council which provides leadership and good governance for the municipality as well as services for the local community.

- To access COVID-19 support information, please visit <https://www.geelongaustralia.com.au/covid19/default.aspx>

Colac Otway Shire

Colac Otway Shire is the local council which provides governance for the municipality and delivers various services to meet the community needs.

- To access rates assistance due to COVID-19, please visit <https://www.colacotway.vic.gov.au/My-property/Rates/Rates-assistance>
- To discuss rates please contact Council's Customer Service Centre on 03 5232 9400.

Good Money Geelong – Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand

Good Money community finance stores offer safe, affordable and responsible financial services for people on low incomes.

- To access No Interest Loans, call 1300 770 550
- For financial counselling support, call 1300 148 028