

Introduction

B YOU (art4me, study4me, health4me)

BYOU is consortia initiative of Belong Blue Mountains and Blue Mountains Women's Health and Resource Centre. The initiative promotes inclusion as central to participation.

Young people must be able to see & feel acceptance. BYOU is a suite of integrated intervention strategies directed at increasing sustainable social cohesion, self-reliance and mutual community participation, for vulnerable young people at risk of disengagement from school & active citizenship. Achieved through purposeful social media & creative arts in it's Artspace & simultaneous access to Study Hubs- BYOU builds a network of linked interventions providing acceptance, safety & structural supports to remain in education and/or employment pathways. A hub & spoke model will offer BYOU programs in Blaxland, Katoomba & Lithgow. Existing strong connections with local high schools readily facilitate educational pathways, including tutoring & life skills development. Access to therapeutic staff & focused mentoring enables early identification of mental health issues & supports to manage the impacts, allowing these young people agency.

Investment

We are asking government to invest \$600,000 over 2 years to deliver a suite of services across Blaxland, Katoomba and Lithgow.

	Amount (\$ exc GST)	Amount (\$ exc GST)	Total funding	Approx% of total
Financial year	2022-2023	2023-2024		
Sydney-Outer West & Blue Mountains, NSW	\$200,010.00	\$200,010.00	\$400,020.00	66.67
Central West, NSW	\$99,990.00	\$99,990.00	\$199,980.00	33.33
	\$300,000.00	\$300,000.00	\$600,000.00	

Why Invest?

Aligning with government priorities

This proposal aligns with the Federal Government's priorities, namely its commitment to reforming mental health and the 5 pillars of support; education, and its commitment to tackling sexual, domestic and family violence. Equally it aligns with government's commitment to investing in young people demonstrated through its National Youth Policy Framework.

Modelling commissioned by the NSW Government under Their Futures Matter confirmed that of all vulnerable groups in NSW, investment in children and young people with mental health issues is one of the best value choices in terms of improved outcomes for individuals and to society as a whole.

The Risks

The Productivity Commission Inquiry Report noted that the mental health of children and families should be prioritised and that it is good value investment.

We know that the demand from young people and their parents, for services that meet their particular needs, have been consistently growing across the country. This increase in demand has been further exacerbated by COVID-19. Atkinson et al argue that expanding community based mental health services for young people, is a key strategy for reducing mental health Emergency Department (ED) presentations, self harm hospitalisations and suicide deaths in young people.¹

Structural poverty, lack of access to services, disengagement from education are all indicators of child social exclusion (CSE). CSE is a measure of social & material disadvantage in which children lack the opportunities & resources to participate fully in their communities & feel connected. Services in the Blue Mountains area have experienced an increased demand & for mental health services for young people.

One in seven young people aged 4-17 years have a mental disorder.² A further study indicated that 50% of children with mental illness continue to struggle in adulthood with another study showing that 50% were not receiving the professional help they needed. Significantly, 65% of parents in

¹ Atkinson, J.A., Skinner, A., Lawson, K., Song, Y., and Hickie, I., 2020. Road to Recovery: Restoring Australia's mental wealth. Camperdown, NSW: University of Sydney Brain and Mind Centre.

² The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents: Report of the Second Child and Adolescent Mental Health Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing Australia (2015)

Australia did not feel confident about identifying the signs of social & emotional problems in their children.³ A recent Mission Australia Youth Survey 2020 showed that close to one third (32.4%) of young people said they were either extremely or very concerned about school or study problems & more than double the proportion of females were extremely/very concerned about coping with stress (56% compared with 25% of males).

A Planet Youth survey in 2019 of the Blue Mountains area showed that 16% of students reported feeling unsafe at school as well as showing that girls (17.8%) had a lower participation rate in after school activities compared to boys (34.1%). Further to what is recorded, local community services are finding that data gathered from young people for multiple purposes is not yet reflective of the anecdotal level of engagement with trans, non-binary & gender fluid teens. MYST, Platform Youth Services, Headspace, Belong Blue Mountains & BMWHRC all report an increase in engagement with this target group.

In Lithgow HS, 15% of young girls in Years 9 & 10 are seriously disengaging from school. This cohort is of particular concern because they are too young to leave school but have reached an age at which successful reengagement with school activities is very difficult & met with strong resistance. Additionally, of this cohort, 25% have a mental health diagnosis. The remainder of the cohort present with mental health symptoms but do not have established diagnoses. These students are disengaged from school &, rarely attend classes. Similarly, when looking at children under 15 in the Blue Mountains & Lithgow, 15% were affected by mental illness. When looking at children & young people between the ages of 15 & 18, 21% were affected by mental illness in Lithgow. Additionally, Lithgow has a high proportion of Aboriginal &/or Torres Strait Islander people at 5.8% & the majority of these people are children & young people. Indeed 55% of the ATSI population in the Nepean Blue Mountains is under 25, significantly higher than the state average of 28.6%. In the Nepean Blue Mountains district, Lithgow had the highest proportion of low income households compared to the state average & has the lowest SEIFA ranking of the Nepean Blue Mountains LGAs (DCJ Data).

The Blue Mountains Safe Communities Consultation Report, which canvassed views from Glenbrook to Lithgow, found that of the 541 community members who participated (66% of responses were from young people aged under 19), the recurrent themes were that individuals wanted social & community connection; child & youth friendly spaces; safety & people treating each other well. Local High Schools are reporting their concerns with keeping young people engaged & similarly concerned with the students' lack of literacy & numeracy skills as well as the lack of confidence required to

³ National Mental Health Commission Report: <https://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/>

believe they are capable of more. High Schools additionally are highlighting the need for services, external from the school to provide an alternative space for learning & connectedness. Partner organisations such as Zonta have also identified high schools in the lower mountains as needing support for students who are particularly marginalised & excluded. The existing Artspace program which operates from BMWHRC in Katoomba has regular engagement from Katoomba High School students. The BYOU project will extend this evidence based program across the Blue Mountains & Lithgow LGA's. During COVID, this program was run via zoom with a Doctor being available for telehealth as well as therapeutic staff being available to speak with young people individually in breakout rooms. What COVID demonstrated was increased demand across the breadth of the Blue Mountains - not just Katoomba with young people joining from as far as Penrith.

During this time, young participants were also telling our services that they were struggling with school work, struggling to gain & maintain access to reliable internet as well as having access to equipment & a safe place to study & meet with their friends. This was not limited to COVID. A recent survey of young women in the Blue Mountains highlighted that they did not feel safe in public spaces & it was not unusual for them to alter plans based on their safety fears (Report to BMCI November 21). Workers canvassed the views of participants about a study hub. The idea was met with enthusiasm & highlighted the need to build network supports for young people.

How BYOU will respond to these issues

- Art4me Co-ordinator 21hrs
- Study4me Tutors 21hrs
- Health Support Worker 21hrs

The BYOU project team will address these needs across the Blue Mountains & Lithgow LGA's by offering safe spaces in established Belong Blue Mountains & BMWHRC community services able to support & facilitate soft entry to relevant local support services & activities for at risk and vulnerable young people, support and facilitate learning through the Study4Me project component (3 groups per week 30-45 participants/wk), creative expression as an outlet for enhanced wellbeing through Art4Me (3 groups/ 30 students/wk), and therapeutic supports through the Health4Me arm (weekly clinics each site), offering accessible and culturally appropriate psychological, physical and emotional well being support services and health clinics.

BYOU operates within an inter-sectoral framework applying Early Intervention & Prevention (EIP) Strategies to encourage behavioural change. The BYOU project methodology is aimed at socioeconomic empowerment, violence prevention & poverty reduction, as well as coordinated

responses between service providers & systems. The WHO notes that the involvement of services beyond those focused on mental health is critical within a prevention & early intervention approach. This includes health, family & community services, but even more broadly it includes sectors such as sports, arts & business education, labour, justice, transport, environment & housing.

B YOU is a ground level program that works with young people through different placed based modalities to build capacity, peer connectedness & knowledge about support services & programs. It also builds self-reliance, wellbeing & mental health. The different modalities consist of purposeful social media; Artspace (Art4Me) & facilitated & technologically supported Study Hubs (Study4Me). These modalities then can branch into health specific services that are on the sites & easily accessible.

Early intervention & prevention approaches aim to keep young people safe by changing attitudes & building the skills of young people at risk of disengagement & marginalisation. BYOU, which additionally operates on a Hub & Spoke model, further demonstrates a willingness to meet young people/families where they are most comfortable via outreach services. The BYOU model provides opportunities to engage & work with a wide range of young people to; strengthen knowledge, skills & awareness; promote behaviours to keep young people safe & build peer-support around issues of healthy/unhealthy relationships. Schools & teachers play an important role in identifying emerging changes to the mental health of students & can provide referrals to therapeutic interventions offered by BYOU. Partnerships with schools also extend school resources, build awareness of student mental & physical health & wellbeing, available services in the community & strategies that help.

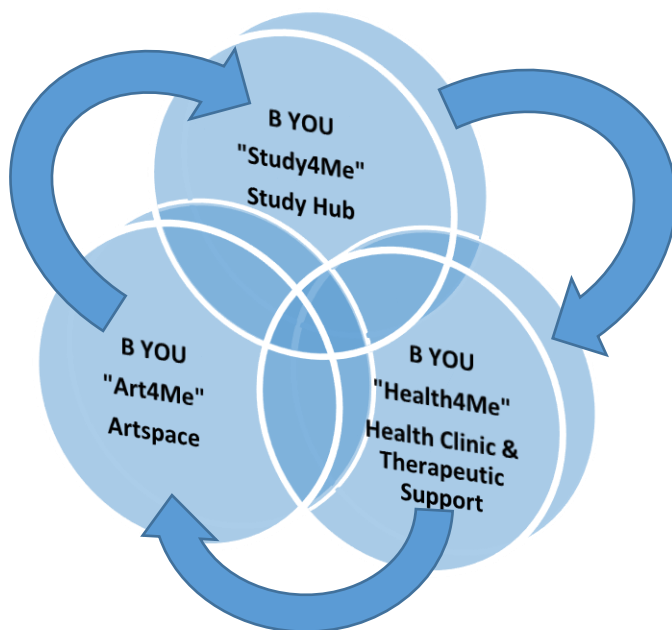
Through partnerships with local high schools, BYOU is able to access vulnerable young people & introduce them to the services & resources of relevant providers. We are equally able to bring centre resources into the school to enhance young people's awareness, skills, knowledge & options. Counselling & group work enhance young people's mental health, their capacity to keep themselves safe & to make informed decisions for themselves and express agency. By working collaboratively & maintaining effective organisational partnerships, we are able to identify emerging trends & needs, develop & implement new strategies, make better use of existing resources, more effective approaches to accessing otherwise hard to access populations such as high schools students.

Current experience with social media platforms have shown us that it is a preferred mode of initial communication for the young people who connect with our service. A qualified artist builds highly engaging social media assets that attract young people & that platform is used to provide

information about services & programs. It also provides the means by which young people can connect discretely with service providers to canvas their concerns & seek information about available support services. The social media is a springboard to both the Artspace Art4Me project component & the Study Hub Study4Me component .Young people can access either or both & interchangeably. We know from existing relationships with Lithgow & Katoomba High Schools that the need for this type of pathway is high & presents an opportunity to share life skills as well as educational & personal supports. Artspace & the Study Hub groups use principles of mutuality & peer support to increase self-esteem, strengthening resilience & promote a sense of control over one's environment (Knight & Gitterman, 2014). Artspace incorporates trauma-informed approaches to build safety, trust, choice, collaboration & empowerment (Harris & Fallot, 2014).The Program, combines arts, mental & physical healthcare as part of an early intervention approach that promotes help-seeking behaviours, self-confidence & self-esteem. It reduces social isolation amongst vulnerable young people. Young people who attend have access to a Doctor & Registered Nurse who can provide advice & information about mental health, sexual health & general health issues. Additionally, participants have access to therapeutic support. This can take the form of one on one counselling, group discussions & access to additional warm referrals. Information, advice & referrals link clients to services (internal & external) & empower them to act through a greater awareness of services available to meet their individualised needs. The young people who connect with the services offered, are instantly part of a community - be that through Instagram which is regularly moderated, Artspace which provides a creative outlet & access to health & therapeutic support, & the Study Hub which provides material assistance as well as access to a range of learning possibilities including tutoring & access to a range of training opportunities.

BYOU will use the PWI-SC (personal wellbeing index) & the DASS21 (depression scale) as evidence based tools to measure behavioural changes in participants. In addition to the measurement of individual wellbeing the program seeks to build capacity in individuals which can be measured by increased;

- consistent attendance at & engagement in school activities;
- knowledge of relevant services that can assist with their needs;
- knowledge of relevant services that can assist with educational &/or employment pathways;
- literacy & numeracy;
- financial literacy;
- self-reported increased connectedness to their community.



As a result of partnerships with MYST, Belong BM, MOCS & Thrive, as well as membership of Youth Mental Illness & Substance Abuse Network (YMISA) & the Stronger Families Alliance, the BYOU consortium members are well connected to the issues impacting young people & their feedback is reviewed & incorporated at all times. These partnerships - which depend on regular consultation with young people, have reported the following direct feedback from young people:

- An increase in risk taking behaviour such as alcohol & drug use
- A lack in effective mental health supports when dealing with suicidality or suicidal ideation
- A lack of LGBTQ+ specific programs
- Issues when it comes to access to technology & internet to stay connected to services & education during lockdowns
- Issues when it comes to kids being locked in with potentially unsafe family dynamics/surroundings
- A lack of safe public spaces for young women & queer people
- A lack of community engagement & understanding of young people
- A lack of YOUTH lead initiatives & programs
- A lack of programs focusing on the support & wellbeing of parents/family members supporting young people

Artspace as an initiative, has been provided by BMWHRC since 2004, with the Art4You extension of BYOU further facilitating access by young women to health services at the BYOU sites and the BMWHRC in particular. The driving themes emerging from Artspace and underpinning BYOU are:

- Encouraging engagement & accessing care
- Equity of Access
- Social Inclusion
- 'Holding' & recovery: Trauma sensitive care
- Creativity as therapy: artistic process & shift in identity
- Safe learning

A qualitative evaluation of Artspace conducted between 2016 -2017, showed that it was particularly beneficial for those young people who had considerable exposure to social adversity & trauma & were experiencing related serious health impacts. Artspace facilitated their recovery by enabling equitable access, social inclusion, & creating a 'holding' environment through the directly therapeutic benefits of artist led, arts processes (Brooks M, Hooker C, Barclay L, 2019). Young women who have accessed Artspace describe it as a 'welcoming & safe place' & that while they would not have (for example) gone to a counsellor by themselves, doing that through Artspace made it possible.

Since 2021, Artspace has been delivered by a young artist & 'social influencer' with significant growth occurring in the program, from an average of 3 regular clients to 29 in Katoomba alone, with a minimum attendance of 11 sessions. Demonstrating the increased connectedness participants feel when the facilitator is younger & the support staff (including therapeutic staff) are younger. Again, it reflects the need to identify with the service provider. This increase was replicated during COVID when young people beyond Katoomba equally engaged in the program on a regular basis virtually.

The introduction of Instagram for the Artspace activity has attracted 120 new followers. Young people are actively engaged in the creative processes chosen, their feedback (sought through regular surveys, social media feedback and engagement), around the general program outcomes & the safety of the space where the creative art activity is conducted, has been high & consistent. They were also consulted about the name of this proposed project with the consensus being BYOU. Interestingly, they stressed the importance of capitalisation for the project title, highlighting the significance of 'identification/identity'. Artspace participants advocated for inclusion of a Study Hub, reporting on the challenges of a safe study space. This is particularly the case for non binary & trans young people. In addition, both Katoomba & Lithgow High Schools have been advocating for increased service delivery for their Schools, citing concerns over the fact that there are no alternative learning providers or sufficient support programs. High Schools see the need for additional programs for young women over longer periods of time that can help to address their complex mental health & learning needs.

BYOU is looking to expand current services in Katoomba, while establishing additional services in Lithgow & Blaxland. BMWHRC has premises in Lithgow within walking distance from the High School & a Registered Nurse is already available to provide a health clinic from the site. Belong BM has established community & neighbourhood services across the lifespan, with sites and a service footprint across the length of the Blue Mountains & Lithgow LGA's, with strong and diverse community connection and a strong profile in consultation.

The Belong BM & BMWHRC consortium allows the BYOU suite of services to be implemented across the 2 LGA's. Relationships are already strong with Lithgow High School & Katoomba High School where BMWHRC counsellors and Belong Blue Mountains Community Workers already have an established relationship & have been delivering services for several years. Counsellors have been attending 1 day per week at Lithgow High School as well as supporting the Love Bites Program. At Katoomba HS a stronger relationship has developed evidenced by partnership programs like International Women's Day events. Both Belong BM & BMWHRC have strong reputations across the Mountains & this initiative is supported by partners & schools alike.

In addition, Belong BM has expertise in IT education & support services to provide workshops for young people who may be interested in coding & therefore expanding access to skill building. BYOU will work closely with High Schools & other service providers in Blaxland, Katoomba & Lithgow to build a network of partners that will facilitate access to services for young people.

Conclusion

This investment would bring urgently needed services to young people who are feeling even more burdened as a result of COVID-19. BYou provides the opportunity to create possibilities where there might otherwise be disconnection and isolation. We have demonstrated the need across Blaxland, Katoomba and Lithgow as well as the evidence that programs such as art4me and study4me can provide significant connectedness and social inclusion for marginalised young people. We would welcome the chance to further discuss these initiatives with government.