**Media release:** September 1, 2023

**New $1.7 million funding announced
for Australia-first program in Loddon-Mallee region
offering GreenCare respite to those with dementia and their carers**

Funding of $1.7m from the Australian Government has been received for an Australia-first program in the Loddon-Mallee region to use escapes in nature to improve the quality of life for people living with early-stage dementia (PLWD) and their carers.

The innovative three-year GreenCare Respite project aims to boost relief and wellbeing for people living with early stage dementia (PLWD) and their carers residing in the Loddon-Mallee region of Victoria.

A consortium of like-minded organisations comprising Heathcote Health, Heathcote Dementia Alliance, John Richards Centre for Rural Ageing Research, La Trobe University; Princes Court Aged Care in Mildura and Rural Care Australia will deliver the innovative, new GreenCare Respite project aimed at enhancing the delivery of respite for PLWD and their carers via an immersion in a variety of natural environments and green spaces. The consortium will roll the project out across the Loddon Mallee Region from Bendigo and Heathcote to Mildura and Merbein.

The GreenCare Respite initiative will coordinate therapeutic, dementia-inclusive activities, day programs and overnight eco stays to assist in improving the quality of life of PLWD, while reducing care burden and improving carer wellbeing through ‘time off’. The project will also seek to educate and train business operators, community organisations, accommodation providers and participating respite providers, leading to accreditation and certification as dementia-inclusive operators.

Acting Chief Executive Officer of Princes Court Aged Care in Mildura, Carrie Chappell, said: “Under the GreenCare Respite project, people with dementia could undertake a range of activities including walks in parks, or the bush, do hands-on work in gardens, wineries or orchards. There will be opportunities to stay overnight in nature-based accommodation, while their carers would also enjoy time away to switch off and recharge.”

According to Dan Douglass, CEO of Heathcote Health, “There is evidence that for a person diagnosed with dementia, spending time in nature increases self-worth and autonomy which are often lost following a dementia diagnosis.

“Green care activities such as sensory gardens and horticultural activities can improve wellbeing, mood, and sleep as well as reduce disruptive behaviour and the use of psychotropic drugs. For the caregiver, the GreenCare Respite Project offers time away to rest and maintain social connections and work, as well as the reassurance that the person they care for is also enjoying their time away and being looked after by a trained PLWD care provider, alleviating the guilt of handing the responsibility of caring for their loved one to someone else. But the project also enables people with dementia and their carers to share engaging experiences in nature together which can freshen and enrich the bond between them,” he said.

“GreenCare Respite could also help delay a decision to place a person living with dementia into a fulltime care facility, enabling them to be cared for in their home and community for longer,” Darren Midgley, CEO, Rural Care Australia said. “It’s all about making the lives of people with dementia and their carers more enriched and meaningful.”

Heathcote Dementia Alliance (HDA), a community volunteer organisation, is the project manager for the GreenCare Respite project. HDA President, Sandra Slatter, said: “This exciting and promising new project reaffirms the consortium’s commitment and leadership in providing quality of life which underpins our belief that all aged people, no matter what their circumstances, deserve to feel happy, safe, valued and respected.”

Tshepo Rasekaba from the John Richards Centre for Rural Ageing Research at La Trobe University will lead the co-design and the project’s evaluation. “It is extremely important we listen to and are informed by people with dementia and their carers,” Mr Rasekaba said. “We will be informed by and work with the project steering group and the members of the carer groups and those they care for to design and implement a tailored GreenCare Respite project to suit the individual’s needs and abilities.”

The project will run until June 2026.

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