

More than food for young people at risk

'Cafe cards' program to start locally



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AN initiative which provides subsidised nutritious meals to young people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness will be introduced locally, thanks to a funding boost from charitable organisations.

Wangaratta-based North East Support and Action for Youth (NESAY) will develop the "café cards" program which feeds vulnerable young people (aged 15 to 25) in a socially inclusive way, by allowing them to access local cafes with friendly staff and nutritious food on their menu.

NESAY executive officer Leah Waring said the organisation secured \$29,940 in funding from The RE Ross Trust, \$5000 from Central Hume Primary Care Partnerships and \$2000 from the William Angliss Fund along with local donations.

She said the café meals program is similar to the "pay it forward" concept which is building momentum overseas and in Australia.

The way it works is that a young person is referred to the program and if approved, receives a café card similar to a coffee loyalty card.

With this card they can purchase a meal of up to \$15 at participating cafes, with the young person paying \$3 while NESAY funds the remaining cost.



COFFEE AND CONVERSATION: NESAY executive officer Leah Waring and project officer Melissa van Bergen look forward to being able to provide nutritious meal options for young people at risk of homelessness in Wangaratta.
PHOTO: Emma Hillier

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Project officer Melissa van Bergen said being able to select what, where and with whom they eat can be a very powerful, motivating and engaging tool.

She said the program was re-

searched and designed by "Time for Youth" in Geelong, with other programs now being replicated in Melbourne and Ballarat.

"Beyond the benefits of receiving a nutritious meal, a study in the city of Yarra found that it improved participants' confidence and social skills and enhanced community cohesion," she said.

"Existing programs have found there are many positive outcomes, not only for the young person receiving a nutritious meal, but also for the

participating cafes."

Ms van Bergen said cafes reflect positively on the experience, feeling proud to be contributing to improving a young person's life, while staff involved in providing referrals have found it a good way to engage young people who may otherwise be reluctant to communicate with others.

The program will be developed over the next few months with the aim of launching mid-year and local cafes who would like to get involved are welcome to contact NESAY on 5720 2201.