

Sports participation can improve mental health

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(Upper Hutt, New Zealand) Sports and art programmes should be first-line methods for improving mental health among New Zealand's disadvantaged, says the head of one of Australia's largest recreational charities, RecLink.

CEO Adrian Panozzo is visiting New Zealand this week as a keynote speaker at the Fourth Mental Health Promotion Hui Aotearoa, organised by the Mental Health Foundation and being held at Orongomai Marae in Upper Hutt on August 7-8.

RecLink Australia is an organisation which uses sport and the arts to improve the lives of individuals and communities experiencing drug and alcohol addictions, mental illness, social isolation, homelessness and economic hardship. It connects over 200 community agencies across Australia with its programmes, including remote regions of the Central Desert.

"Interventions aimed at improving mental health often focus on immediate need – personal safety, diagnosing illness and preparing treatment plans," Panozzo says. "Our observations over a 17-year period show access to sport and art programmes can also be a primary method to improve the lives of people who may still be experiencing extreme and chronic episodes of homelessness, poverty, addiction and unemployment.

"However, traditional models of delivering community sport and art programmes don't encourage or support participation by those with complex mental health issues, or people with extreme socio-economic disadvantages."

RecLink's programmes have the support of the Australian Government, and were described by Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd earlier this year as an innovative form of social inclusion.

One of its most high profile successes is the Choir of Hard Knocks, a choir of 50 homeless people based in Melbourne which was introduced to millions of Australians as the subject of a Logie Award-winning ABC television documentary in 2007.

"Mental health promotion is a broad field which aims to change social, economic and physical environments to improve health for all people," says Judi Clements, Chief Executive of the Mental Health Foundation.

“As a nation which places a high priority on sport as a marker for social inclusion, New Zealand can learn a lot from Reclink’s unique and successful approach to improving mental wellbeing among the most disadvantaged in society.”

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