

Evaluating and optimising a suicide awareness training and peer support intervention for the Victorian construction industry in collaboration with Incolink.

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Suicide among construction workers is 1.7 times higher than that of other male workers and is likely influenced by work and employment conditions, interpersonal relationships, attitudes toward help-seeking, mental health stigma, alcohol and drug use, sleep, and physical activity. Incolink's Bluehats Suicide Prevention Initiative provides a multi-level suicide prevention intervention: on-site general awareness sessions for all workers (GAS), suicide gatekeeper training for workers who volunteer to become Bluehats (who then provide support for workers on sites), and clinical services when needed. The Suicide Prevention Post- Doctoral Fellowship over 2021 and 2023 undertook an evaluation to support its implementation, understand its effectiveness, and optimise its impact to contribute to a reduction in the suicide rate in the construction industry.

Between May 2021 and December 2022, 1136 workers completed an online survey before and immediately after GAS training. Seventy workers then completed an online survey before and immediately after their subsequent Bluehats training. Both GAS and Bluehats trainees completed measures regarding belief in suicide myths, and confidence and intentions to support a colleague struggling with stress, mental health or suicidal thoughts (adapted from past research). Bluehats trainees completed additional measures regarding intentions to seek help for personal problems (GHSQ), conformity to masculine norms (CMNI), and psychological distress (K6). For GAS trainees, significant positive improvements were found post-training in their endorsement of suicide myths and in their confidence and intentions to support a work colleague. For Bluehat trainees, significant positive changes, above those reported by GAS trainees, were found in endorsement of suicide myths and in their confidence and intentions to support work colleagues.

In 2022, interviews were conducted with 22 Bluehats, 8 industry stakeholders, and 5 Incolink staff members to understand the impact of Bluehats, experiences of the Bluehats, the way in which Bluehats is implemented, the context of Bluehats in the industry, and opportunities for improvements. Bluehat interviews focused on understanding the capability, motivation, and opportunity that influence their support of workers. Participants reported high levels of motivation and capability as a result of lived experience, training, satisfaction from helping others, and, when it was present, an environment wherein they felt valued. Participants highlighted the critical contribution of physical and social opportunities to their capability to support work colleagues. Workplaces where time and space were provided for conversations, management actively promoted mental health and Bluehats, and where Incolink maintained an active presence were optimal. Interviews with stakeholders and staff further spoke to the impact of worksites on the impact of the Bluehats program.

Surveys and interviews with workers who have received support from a Bluehat are still underway – with challenges to recruitment throughout the COVID pandemic. This is an important component to the research to understand the impact of the program on workers themselves.

In summary, this research identified a range of positive impacts from the Bluehats program and opportunities for improvement which are being incorporated into a redevelopment of the program by Incolink to meet the change needs of the construction industry. These findings are also relevant to other efforts in workplace suicide prevention programs nationally and internationally.