



Servicing the needs of Queensland's seniors

By Xanthe Dines
and Susan Grantham,
Media and Public Affairs Branch



There is a good reason Sunshine Coast seniors are revelling in a renewed sense of freedom – and it is not necessarily to do with making a sea change.

An improved sense of confidence and security for coast-dwelling seniors is thanks in part to the recent appointment of a permanent Seniors Liaison Officer.

Before this a Seniors Liaison Project was devised for the North Coast Region in response to issues of social isolation and fear of crime experienced by seniors.

The Sunshine Coast District Crime Prevention Coordinator, Sergeant Diane Kirkman volunteered to act in the capacity of Seniors Liaison Officer for the Sunshine Coast District to establish the value of the project to the senior community.

The Sunshine Coast Police District encompasses Caloundra City, Noosa and Maroochy Shires and is one of the fastest growing areas in Australia. It is also home to one of Australia's largest seniors' populations.

The 18-month trial involved a Seniors Liaison Officer and Volunteers in Policing (VIPs) working with community members aged 65 and over to reduce the fear of crime and social isolation they experience.

Although the Sunshine Coast has a large population of seniors the reasons for the Seniors Liaison Project are not unique to the area.

Back in March 2004 the Seniors Task Force was set up in Queensland to examine the crime issues impacting on people aged 65 and over.

Chaired by Police Commissioner Bob Atkinson, the task force was made up of 17 government agencies and community organisations.

The focus of the task force was on three core issues - the investigation of crime, the prevention of crime, and fear of crime.

After extensive research - including community consultation - the findings of the task force were tabled in Parliament late last year with all 17 recommendations accepted.

The task force identified a number of factors that challenged the assumption older people were vulnerable to crime and live in fear.

In Queensland the reality is very different - statistically seniors are the least likely age group to become victims of crime.

The lifestyle led by seniors largely contributes to this fact. They are more likely to spend time at home and less likely to interact with offenders.

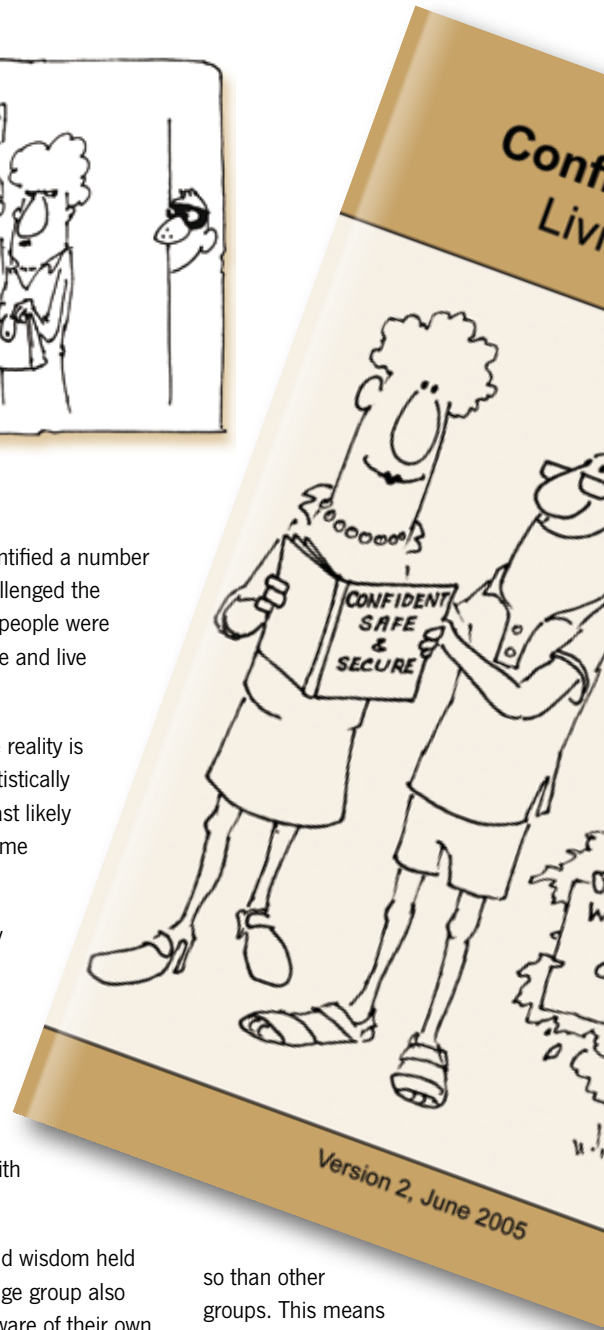
The experience and wisdom held by people in this age group also means they are aware of their own safety and generally do not place themselves in high-risk situations.

But the task force did identify a number of factors working against seniors.

While seniors might be at low-risk of being victims of crime, they suffer the impact of crime more

so than other groups. This means seniors generally take longer to recover both physically and emotionally from a crime.

Seniors also have an increased anxiety about crime if they do become a victim - this was one of the key issues addressed by the Sunshine Coast Seniors Liaison Officer Project.



The primary strategy for the project was for the officers and VIPs to make contact with all victims of crime aged 65 years and over after checking police reports for the circumstances of the offence.

As a proactive measure the officers and VIPs visited retirement villages and seniors' groups to deliver advice on safety and security and engaged with other agencies to address issues impacting seniors.

The follow up phone calls gave the victims support and the opportunity to address safety and security issues. Depending on circumstances a follow up visit was also arranged to discuss home security for the person.

To help with ongoing support a copy of the Seniors Task Force booklet *Confident, Safe and Secure Living in Queensland* was provided to victims.

By creating links with the community and fostering community engagement through proactive strategies the feeling among seniors is now less about fear and more about confidence. And the feedback from seniors on the Sunshine Coast has been largely positive.

Sergeant Kirkman - who participated in the trial - said the feedback indicated overwhelming support for the service to continue.

"Victims felt reassured and were thankful the QPS cared enough to provide advice," Sergeant Kirkman said.

Assessing the project from a regional perspective Project Manager, Senior Sergeant Tony Sinn, Regional Crime Prevention Coordinator, North Coast Region summed up the success of the project by saying that for the client the delivery of the right advice, at the right time, cost so little but meant so much.

"The Seniors Liaison Officer Project has been really worthwhile in many ways, but in particular it has fostered a high level of community engagement through the involvement of Volunteers in Policing," Senior Sergeant Sinn said.

The QPS is committed to enhancing services and following the recommendations of the task force, a State Coordinator for Seniors Issues was appointed to help plan and implement appropriate and effective policing services to senior community members.

One of the recommendations the task force made was to have the Sunshine Coast District Seniors Liaison Project implemented throughout Queensland.

The State Coordinator for Seniors Issues, Sergeant Rodney Bell of the QPS Crime Prevention Unit, has now begun investigating the expansion of Seniors Liaison Officers across all regions.

"The primary aim of developing the project is to work in partnership with community members to reduce the fear of crime amongst seniors.

"The program will cater for seniors in a range of communities - in essence the program is not so much about a demographic, but more about improved community partnerships through education, awareness and community engagement," Sergeant Bell said. ■

