

Winning project targets volatile substance abuse

Chroming and the abuse of other easily available substances is a serious and potentially life threatening issue facing many of the State's communities.

Chroming is defined as when people sniff chrome based paint.

In July 2003, police from the Raintrees Police Beat in Cairns noticed an increase in incidents involving the abuse of volatile substances such as paint aerosol cans and methylated spirits in their area.

Members of the community and the local Wuchopperen Health Services said this was also a cause of increasing anti-social behaviour and high levels of truancy.

A team from Raintrees Police Beat, led by Senior Constable Michael Musumeci, determined that juvenile crime and behavioural issues in the area could be a result of easy access to these volatile substances.

"We identified that there was a problem, but that it was something which would need a broader solution than just reactively policing the situation," he said.

The Raintrees Shopping Centre, in the Cairns suburb of Manunda, has more than 40 specialty stores and several supermarkets and discount outlets where these substances are available.

Project KIT-VSM was developed as an initiative to resolve the issues arising from volatile substance misuse.

In January 2004, a conference was held at the Police Beat with managers from Woolworths, The Warehouse, Overflow and Action supermarkets, and members of the Cairns City Council Youth Action Group and Wuchopperen Health Services gave a briefing on the social and health effects of using these substances.

An agreement was reached with the retailers to remove these items from the shelves or ensure they were stored in a secure area.

Two-litre bottles of methylated spirits were removed from stores in the shopping centre, while other types of products were moved to areas directly in front of or under the control of counter staff.

"All of the stores were really helpful and their response to the project was overwhelmingly positive," Senior Constable Musumeci said.

"The aim was to give retailers control over their stock and to educate them on potential signs that a customer could be affected by volatile substances.

"It reduced the availability of things like aerosols and methylated spirits as they could not be shoplifted because they were securely stored, and potential abusers could not purchase them.

"The retailers have also had an opportunity to train their staff and put in place their own procedures for selling these products," he said.

Local media, including ABC Radio, the Cairns Post, WIN and



Senior Constable Michael Musumeci (centre) receives the Crime Prevention Gold Award from Police Minister Judy Spence and Commissioner Bob Atkinson for Project Kit-VSM.

Seven Television, also attended the conference. This provided positive coverage for the Queensland Police Service for taking a "hand in hand" approach with the community in dealing with an important subject.

The Warehouse support manager Chris Paki said it had not been easy for the stores, with staff being abused for not supplying people who are obviously under the influence of a substance.

"Thanks to the support of the police, the amount of abuse and visits from some regulars has ceased to be a problem.

"The program being run from the Raintrees Police Beat, especially with the meeting and the educational pamphlets that were handed out, has given us extra tools to deal with the less desirable element when they come into the shop," he said.

Wuchopperen Health Services Drug and Alcohol Coordinator Jan Robertson said the project had led to highly responsible changes in retail practices regarding the sale of methylated spirits and other volatile substances at the Raintrees Shopping Centre.

"Hopefully through the media attention the project received these retail practices will become a replicated model across far north Queensland," she said.

The final phase was to have two officers inducted as Adopt-a-Cops and a PLO (Police Liaison Officer) added to the project. This helped address key issues involving road safety, substance abuse and crime prevention. A Police Liaison Officer also now conducts foot patrols on Thursday nights with Wuchopperen and Cairns City Council youth workers in targeted suburbs.

Project Kit-VSM was conducted without any financial costs to the Service. The success of the project was recognised with the QPS Gold Award for Excellence in Crime Prevention.

In presenting the award, Commissioner Bob Atkinson said the officers involved in the project "are to be commended for their dedication in finding creative solutions to policing issues".

By Brett Davis, Media and Public Affairs Branch.