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All Good Project

Stories of Care:
The All Good Peer Harm Reduction Service

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Executive summary

Background

Music festivals provide spaces of recreation, celebration, enjoyment of live music, and can contribute economic benefit to the community. However, they can also be sites of risk and risk-taking for festival patrons. People who attend festivals are at higher risk of experiencing alcohol and other drug-related harms as well as other biopsychosocial harms than the general population (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6). Harm reduction approaches, including peer-led initiatives, aim to mitigate these risks, in keeping with the broader principles of harm reduction which focuses on keeping people safe rather than on necessarily reducing alcohol or other drug use. Despite successful models operating elsewhere, there is limited public awareness of harm reduction in the Northern Territory (NT).

MusicNT's All Good Project works with live music venues and festivals across the NT to create safer spaces for staff, performers and patrons. The All Good Project aims to increase safety for patrons including minority groups, encourage equity and diversity, and contribute to ending discrimination and gender-based violence. The project comprises of harm reduction components such as policy and procedure support for music venues, social marketing campaigns, training and education for staff and volunteers, and the delivery of a peer harm reduction service in festivals. MusicNT has been operating the peer harm reduction service since 2023. The service model was first piloted and run by DanceWize at Bass in the Grass Festival in 2021, and then delivered by The Association of Alcohol and other Drug Agencies Northern Territory in 2022 before its handover to MusicNT.

In 2024 the All Good peer harm reduction service engaged 99 volunteers who undertook pre-event and onsite training and reached 13,428 festival patrons over five events. Core service activities included outreach care provided by 'rovers' (i.e. providing brief interventions, provision of resources and referrals to services where required), education and information provided in an 'education space' and sub-medical care provided in a 'wellbeing space' with referral pathways to other services where needed.

Methods

The current study aimed to develop an understanding of the types of care provided by the All Good peer harm reduction service and its impact on NT service users. This report complements the report from Sub-study 2 which focuses more on operational concerns, future improvements to service delivery and the recruitment and retention of volunteers.

- Sub-study 1: Stories of Care
- Sub-study 2: Experiences of volunteering

Both are an extension of a broader evaluation of the All Good Project (funded by Music NT) that includes both qualitative and quantitative methods to understand whether the All Good Project is meeting its stated objectives.

For the current study, we conducted qualitative interviews with festival patrons and volunteers focused on their experience of receiving or giving care, including the role and nature of the service, perceived impacts on patrons and festival systems and opportunities to improve the service in future delivery. Data analysis followed an inductive thematic analysis approach (29).

Findings

The qualitative interviews identified that the All Good peer harm reduction service provided crucial support for intoxicated and vulnerable patrons, particularly in managing drug and alcohol-related distress and adverse outcomes. Volunteers played a key role in early intervention, support, and de-escalation, fostering trust and ensuring patrons recover safely. These services were seen to enhance festival safety while reducing pressure on medical and emergency responders.

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Context

Research has shown that music festival patrons engage in risky alcohol consumption and use illicit drugs at higher rates compared to the general population (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6). Due to the lack of regulation of contents of illicit drugs, specific risks associated with illicit drug use (i.e. hyperthermia, seizures, hyponatraemia, contamination and overdose) continue to be of concern at music festivals both internationally (7) and nationally (8). Nonetheless, these events also offer an opportunity for harm reduction interventions targeted at high-risk groups (9). Harm reduction interventions focus on reducing adverse consequences of drug and alcohol use, without necessarily aiming to reduce the use itself. One approach to harm reduction in festival settings is peer-led harm reduction.

Peer-and-community led initiatives have been incorporated into harm reduction approaches both globally and nationally (10, 11, 12, 13, 14). Across a range of programs in different contexts, peers - individuals with lived-experience of drug and alcohol use - actively contribute to a variety of activities including outreach, peer care, needle distribution, education, and community-based research (11, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22). Peers have played a pivotal role in the creation, implementation, and evaluation of harm reduction services in diverse settings (23, 24, 25, 26) including in festivals and nightlife spaces. For example, in Australia, there are various established volunteer-led harm reduction services (i.e. DanceWize, ConsciousNest, Hi-Ground) that use a peer education and relational care model to provide on-site harm reduction and drug education services in festival, event and nightlife settings. These programs aim to offer brief interventions and sub-medical care, education and resources for harm reduction, health, and safety at festivals and music events. Trained volunteers offer welfare assistance, first response, triage, and referral to medical care as needed. Training is provided to volunteers to recognise and assist individuals showing signs of adverse alcohol and drug use, mental health distress or other biopsychosocial harms. These programs coordinate with existing services, develop training materials for wider implementation, and collect data for program improvement and informing event organisers.

Research has demonstrated that harm reduction measures do not lead to increased substance use but are instead associated with significant public health benefits (27). Most of these models have been operated out of larger capital cities of Australia, such as Melbourne or Sydney, though there has been service provision by these organisations at large festivals in regional towns. For a range of practical reasons, there have been fewer services operating out of smaller jurisdictions despite the potential benefits. In the NT, there is limited public awareness of harm reduction principles and benefits.

In 2021, NT Major Events Corporation (NTMEC) piloted the inclusion of the DanceWize model at Darwin's Bass In The Grass music festival. This pilot program was coordinated through the NT Harm Reduction Advisory Group, a subcommittee of the Sexual Health Advisory Group within NT Health, which has a focus on implementing harm reduction policy in NT services. The Harm Reduction Advisory Group includes stakeholders from a range of organisations and disciplinary backgrounds with expertise in alcohol and other drugs.

For the 2021 pilot, staff from Harm Reduction Victoria and DanceWize NSW (run through NSW Users and AIDS Association) were engaged to coordinate the program with a group of local volunteers recruited to support delivery of on-the-ground services at the event. Stakeholders reported positive feedback from the pilot program (28). Following the success of the pilot program, the Association of Alcohol and other Drug Agencies NT (AADANT) formed a Darwin-based Local Drug Action Team funded by the Alcohol & Drug Foundation. Input and guidance by the NT Harm Reduction Advisory Group ensured ongoing alignment with local priorities. Supplementary funding provided by AADANT and NTMEC assisted the Local Drug Action Team to initiate the development of a local, NT-led AOD harm reduction program with Darwin-based staff and volunteers. The project provided harm reduction and prevention support for Darwin's 2022 Bass In the Grass under shared DanceWize and the AADANT branding. In 2023, MusicNT took over operations of the peer harm reduction service under All Good peer harm reduction service which complements their All Good Project, an initiative that works with live music venues across the NT to create safer spaces for staff, performers and patrons.

In addition to the support of the All Good harm reduction service, NTMEC have implemented several other harm reduction strategies at Bass in the Grass Festival including shade, free water, activation of non-music festival spaces. For the first time in 2024 NTMEC provided a hidden disabilities lanyard program, aiming to improve support to people with disabilities and different needs.

Methodology

The current study aimed to develop an understanding of the types of care provided by the All Good peer harm reduction service and its impact on NT service users. This report complements the report from Sub-study 2 which focuses more on operational concerns, future improvements to service delivery and the recruitment and retention of volunteers.

- Sub-study 1: Stories of Care
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Both are an extension of a broader evaluation of the All Good Project (funded by Music NT) that includes both qualitative and quantitative methods to understand whether the All Good Project is meeting its stated objectives.

The sampling approach follows a purposive sampling method, aiming to obtain deep insights from people with the closest knowledge of the topic. For the current study, we aimed to follow up festival patrons and friend of patrons who used the All Good peer harm reduction wellbeing space at the 2024 Bass in the Grass Festival. To address recognised recruitment challenges, including the small total eligible sample, ethical considerations around recruitment at the time of care given intoxication of most patrons, we used multiple recruitment methods, including direct approach of non-intoxicated patrons and friends, (who were provided with discrete information with researcher contact details) and social media recruitment. Following this recruitment, we had limited recruitment of patrons for these interviews and amended our inclusion criteria to include peer-volunteers to investigate their experience of providing care at the festival service. Information about the study was sent to all volunteers from 2024 by MusicNT, with contact details of the research team. The final sample included patrons who received care in the wellbeing space and peer-volunteers. There were no friends of patrons recruited.

We conducted qualitative interviews with consenting participants between May and November 2024. Participants were invited to take part in a semi-structured qualitative interview via phone or videoconferencing (i.e., Zoom). Interviews were recorded and transcribed. These transcripts were checked for errors and imported into NVivo (v12, QSR) for further analysis. Data analysis followed an inductive thematic analysis approach (29).

Interviews captured the types of care provided and impact on festival patrons, as well as the motivations, challenges and risks associated with volunteering at the All Good peer harm reduction service (the latter of which is the focus of a separate report).

The interviews were framed to participants as being about their experiences, with the aim of improving service delivery. Volunteers were informed that their stories would be conducted by a researcher independent from All Good Project and that their information would be kept confidential.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Menzies School of Health Research Human Research Ethics Committee (2022-4267).

Participants

We interviewed one patron who received care at the All Good peer harm reduction service -wellbeing space - at the 2024 Bass in the Grass festival, and ten people who volunteered with the service at the 2024 Bass in the Grass festival and other additional events.

Pseudonyms have been used to protect confidentiality.

All Good harm reduction service 2024	Participant characteristics	Number of participants	% of total
Qualitative interview participants	Festival patrons	1	9%
	Peer-volunteers	10	91%
	Wellbeing space role	3	30%
	Roving role	5	50%
	Both wellbeing space and roving role	2	20%
	Experience at Bass in the Grass 2024 only	4	40%
	Experience at multiple events	6	60%
	Total	11	100%

Results

The findings are divided into themes that capture important messages about the stories of care provided to patrons, these narratives reflect the unique role that the All Good peer harm reduction service fill in providing harm reduction at NT events. Where appropriate, we include de-identified quotes from participants to illustrate important points while protecting confidentiality.

I think it makes a difference having that caring area there, I think it says something about the festival. It gives comfort to the festival goers and to their parents or their loved ones. I think it's a nice thing. It adds something for sure.

Amelia- volunteer

These participant stories illustrate the essential role of peer support, harm reduction, and emotional care in creating a safer, more supportive festival environment. Volunteers not only provided practical assistance like water, rest, and transport logistics but also offered emotional reassurance, mental health support, and a non-judgmental space where festival patrons could recover and feel understood. The peer-based model of the service allowed people to connect with volunteers who often shared similar experiences, which helped to foster trust and open communication.

Reducing harm from alcohol and drug intoxication

Several stories focused on volunteers stepping in to help those who were intoxicated from alcohol or drugs. Volunteers reported they kept people calm, provided emotional support and provided safe and supervised spaces, such as the wellbeing space, to prevent further harm and promote recovery.

A number of volunteers recalled helping a young man who was heavily intoxicated on ketamine. The man was stumbling and disoriented in the crowd when members of the outreach team (roving volunteers) found him. Despite some initial resistance to receive help, once volunteers described the service and provided reassurance to the young man, he attended the wellbeing space where he rested with supervision and was able to recover before returning to the festival. The young man expressed his gratitude to volunteers for helping him during a time of vulnerability, both later at the festival and later in the community.

[...] he was on, ketamine. He had no idea where he was or what was going on. We took him there [to the wellbeing space], and he had a little rest, and he came good in a little bit, and on the way out, he actually remembered us and came up and said, 'Hey, thanks. Thanks for saving me. That was awesome.' [...] We've actually seen this young man since. I haven't. But other [volunteer] friends have seen this young man. He works locally. So you know, we've seen him. And he's actually come up and said, 'Yeah, that was actually a big thing for me. But, I don't like talking about it very much, of course.' But yeah, he said 'I can really see what help I got, and how grateful I am.'

Amelia- volunteer

Both roving and wellbeing space volunteers recalled providing care to a woman in her late 40's, who was emotionally distressed following a relationship breakdown and intoxicated from alcohol. A volunteer in the roving team found her in a poorly lit area, in a vulnerable state (i.e. alone and with impaired mental and physical capacities from intoxication), with vomit on her shirt and surrounded by people stepping over her without noticing. The rover helped her stand up, provided emotional support, and took her to the wellbeing space for further care. The wellbeing space volunteer provided more direct emotional support, offering comfort, listening, and reassurance as the woman cried. Both volunteers played a crucial role in helping the woman through a difficult emotional and physical state, ensuring her safety and providing her with the care and empathy she needed during a vulnerable moment.

Oh, it broke my heart, the poor thing but at the time, she obviously had a little bit too much and overindulged. She really needed someone just to listen. She did, because she was not in a good headspace at all.

Clarissa - volunteer

The woman was also struggling to operate her phone, further complicating the situation. Peer volunteers arranged for her safe transport home by contacting a phone number from her contacts. The woman, deeply embarrassed by her state, expressed gratitude for the help and left her business card to thank the program and the volunteers later. The volunteer speaks about supporting patrons with access to safe transport "multiple times over". Safe transport is vital because intoxicated and vulnerable patrons face heightened risks of assault, violence, and pedestrian injury when attempting to leave festivals without support. By ensuring safe departures, peer-based services mitigate these dangers, preventing harm that arises when people are disoriented, alone, or reliant on unsafe travel options.

She had a breakup and she'd kind of drank away her sorrows. And yeah, unfortunately had come undone early in the night, at [the festival], you know, falling over in such a spot. And like I said, this person was not a teenager. I mean she would have been, potentially even 50, I would say, certainly she was in her 40s and you know, I mean, just to see the sense of embarrassment that she had. And, you know, it was really quite a difficult moment for her. I think realising that she had been found, essentially passed out with vomit on her shirt, getting stepped over at [the festival]. I think it was a huge eye opener for and obviously caused a bit of an emotional stress for her and panic, that she should find herself in such a state. So, to help get her safely out of the festival, with all her stuff that had fallen down beside her, that probably would have been stolen or potentially lost if it was just left there. To find a number in her phone and to be able to arrange a pick up for her. Yeah. Like that kind of case, I feel like we did that multiple times over. I suppose this one, I just remember so vividly because of the heavily intoxicated state she was in. And just how thankful she was that someone connected the dots on her getting home, that would have been, extremely difficult for her later on in the night. And yeah, I remember her business card being left with me and, you know, guarantees that I would call her so she could say thanks and to give thanks to the program.

Jerry - volunteer

Several volunteers spoke about assisting festival patrons by arranging transport home. Another volunteer described helping a 19-year-old woman who was intoxicated and needed assistance getting home. The volunteer contacted her mother, reassuring her that her daughter was safe and that they would wait with her until her ride arrived. The mother, clearly relieved, came to pick up her daughter, and the volunteer felt a sense of satisfaction in being able to provide support.

To see a relieved mother, you know, getting the call from a sober and responsible adult, volunteer, in this case it was me. That, we found her daughter and her daughter needed to be taken home and where we were, where she could find us. That we will wait with her, until her car arrives, not to rush. You know, there's no stress, she's safe and to see a relieved parent rock up.

Jerry - volunteer

Another volunteer recalled assisting a group of teenage girls, around 14 to 16 years old, who had taken large doses of MDMA. The volunteer was struck by their need for care, as MDMA can cause varying effects, from hyperactivity to sedation which can leave inexperienced users or people without sober carers in vulnerable positions. The girls spent most of the volunteer's shift in the wellbeing space,

eventually moving to the adjacent outdoor chill out area. The volunteer expresses relief that the girls had a safe and supervised space to stay, feeling it likely protected them from potential harm that could have arisen from being in the festival environment without supervision and reduced the risks of encountering unsafe individuals in the larger festival environment. The volunteer highlights the importance of such spaces in safeguarding young festival patrons, providing them with care and protection when they may be vulnerable due to intoxication.

It made me really happy that, like, these young people, these young women, young girls had as safe place where they could go. And I felt like that potentially saved them from. Uh. You know, certain people.

Maisie - volunteer

Preventing harm through brief interventions

Many volunteers reflected on providing early, proactive, nonjudgmental interventions for festival patrons, which overcomes barriers that both people using alcohol and drugs and neurodivergent people commonly describe experiencing when seeking healthcare. Several volunteers described providing brief interventions of care in both the wellbeing space and as part of the outreach roving team, which are an evidence-based approach to providing tailored information about risk and harm reduction strategies which enable patrons to make informed decisions.

Brief interventions are known to have both short term (on the day) effects but also can improve experience of harms in the longer term by informing future decisions (9, 30). The volunteers emphasised the importance of early intervention in preventing harm, whether from heat-related issues, substance use, or emotional distress (such as providing a safe space for recovery), which could prevent harms from escalating further in acuity and change the trajectory of a patron's evening. This early intervention diverts patrons from needing other medical and emergency services, reducing the pressure and burden on the broader system, including when people exit the festival.

A lot of people were intoxicated and some people needed water, some needed condoms, some needed fans, a lot of things. So we were just showing them the way to the tent and some of them we were bringing them with us, people who were like in desperate need of water or a space where they can rest, a space where there's like, not much crowd. So we were bringing them back to the tent. And it was really helpful for them, I could say, because the moment they just sat or laid down in the tent, I could see that they felt safe.

Ari - volunteer

During the festival, peer volunteers provided an outreach service, by roving through the festival grounds, being visible and accessible, and by providing and modelling pro-social bystanding behaviour. At the 2024 Bass in the Grass festival, the roving teams provided thousands of brief and early interventions with patrons using alcohol and drugs (n=1966). In providing this care, roving teams were able to reduce pressure on other health and festival services, provide direct early and preventative care, and support patrons with referrals to appropriate onsite services. These roving teams were also able to provide resources directly to patrons to reduce risks of harm from alcohol and drug intoxication. Further to this, roving teams increased safety in less visible, darkly lit festival areas, through the presence of trained active bystanders able to provide sober and safe supervision throughout the festival grounds.

There's quite a few sort-of instances of particular people that I think we helped a lot that most likely would have fallen through the net if it was just the ambulance, or police services or security being left to deal with it. And in some cases not even found. You know, I think with us rovers, really getting out there into the shady spots, it's quite a big festival and most of us are getting out there into spots where you're not going to see from the commonly walked areas, you know, I think this made a difference as well.

Volunteer - roving

Many patrons sought help in the wellbeing space due to heat stress and dehydration, a risk that is particularly relevant in the NT due to extreme climate. Heat distress plays a key role in exacerbating harms for people using alcohol and drugs (i.e. illness and death), due to the way intoxication can impair the body's ability to regulate temperature. Many inexperienced users are unaware of the acute risks to health that heat can present while using drugs, and hence harm reduction services play a key role in providing this tailored support. Volunteers provided a place for people to rest, cool down, and rehydrate with electrolytes, again avoiding the need for medical and emergency care. After just a short rest, most

felt much better and were able to return to enjoy the festival, an outcome which is important to both festival patrons and organisers. This simple yet crucial support helped prevent heat-related health issues, especially in an environment where extreme temperatures are common.

There are a lot of people who came in, who we're just overheated, pretty exhausted. Yeah, so hot, drinking in the sun and they just, come lie down on the bed or on the couch, or in the bean bags. Maybe sit for 15 minutes, have some electrolytes and then just like feel way better and head back out into the party. And that's also so important in Darwin, partying anywhere, but in the NT the heat is extreme.

Maisie - volunteer

Volunteers also cared for people who were vomiting due to intoxication, which prior to the harm reduction service's operation would have increased the likelihood of a patron being ejected from the site (which can pose additional risks due to vulnerability and the need for safe transport). Volunteers were able to provide clean clothes, wipes, and a safe space for patrons to recover, while also monitoring for any escalating concerns which could indicate the need for more serious medical intervention (which is particularly vital in the case of illicit substances). Volunteers noted how thankful people were for this support.

Sub-medical care: Reducing pressure on other health and festival services

Volunteers highlighted the unique gap that the peer harm reduction service provided to festival patrons, providing sub-medical care and unique skills in addressing mental health, sensory needs and alcohol and drug issues. Volunteers described how their provision of sub-medical care reduced the strain on other festival staff and services, such as paramedics, by deescalating issues before they became emergencies.

The people that potentially that drunk too much or they're taking too many drugs and you know potentially they're freaking out a bit. The ability to look after these people and to just stop it there, to keep them there in the care space until they're feeling better and cleaned up and ready to go back out. You know these kind of things are hard to show, just how useful that is until you take that away and then you go. OK, well, here's those people, you know, freaking out, out there, you know having taken too many drugs or too many mushrooms and look at the problem this makes then, when you've got these 10/15/20/30 however many people all of a sudden having to be dealt with by everyone else and people not knowing where to take them.

Jerry - volunteer

The All Good peer harm reduction service was described as a critical triage service, an intermediary between patrons and other service providers. Volunteers noted that without the peer-based service, many more intoxicated patrons would end up in risky and vulnerable situations with unsafe ways to get home, or in unnecessary tertiary care, or police stations. One volunteer spoke about the prevention of trauma for people who use drugs through being treated inappropriately by medical care instead of peer support.

I don't know how paramedics can deal with some things, something specific, like consumption of substances. Of course I trust in paramedics more than anything. But with this specific topic I'm not sure. [...] people that maybe doesn't have or is not too in touch with festivals and drug consumption, because they come from another field, which has a medicine structure. And that's fine. That's okay. But this is different. And this can be treated in a different way, to avoid a major damage which might happen if a doctor picks you up and takes you to the hospital, and I don't know, wash your stomach because you were intoxicated. Yeah, well, you can avoid that if you just calm down, speak, drink water, go for a walk. I've been in that situation, and I know that there are ways to avoid something not traumatic right?! Because at the end of the day, the only thing we are trying to do is just not create a trauma out of a simple experience.

Delia - volunteer

The wellbeing space also served as a crucial intervention point for individuals who had taken illicit substances and were beginning to panic. This proactive care provided a calm environment where patrons could rest and recover. Volunteers were able to prevent these situations from escalating into more serious mental or physical outcomes by allowing individuals to stabilise before experiencing

severe intoxication, dehydration, or distress-related complications. Many patrons were able to recover safely under supervision, avoiding escalation to medical emergencies or the need for external intervention. Once patrons felt better, they could return to the event without requiring ambulance transport or hospital care.

I think of them in the care space as well, in truly quite terrible states, you know, they've been vomiting and you know, they've been so dehydrated and we even had some replacement shirts and you know some wipes, like the ability to clean someone up in the care space. And I mean you see the just the enormous appreciation someone like this may have, as opposed to having to walk back through the festival and try to make their way home, you know, in this state they were potentially in earlier.

Volunteer - wellbeing space

Peers: Preserving dignity, reducing shame and increasing help seeking

Several volunteers reflected on impactful experiences with people who were distressed and feeling shame related to their mental health issues or intoxication from alcohol or drugs. Volunteers described the importance of peers in providing reassurance and non-judgmental care and how this prevented further mental distress and mental health risk for these festival patrons. Other volunteers described a willingness for people to talk about matters that they were worried could get them in trouble with other agencies such as specifics of what drugs were taken and quantities. This is in line with decades of research which has shown that the experience of stigma in healthcare for people using drugs contributes to lower healthcare use, increased risk-taking behaviour and poorer outcomes in general (31, 32). Again, volunteers described providing brief interventions that encouraged help seeking and referrals to other health services, a strategy which can have both immediate and long-term effects on reduced risk behaviours and increased help-seeking.

He kept saying he felt like a burden and I was just telling him that a lot of us who are volunteering here, like a lot of us are here because we have been in your position so many times over and we believe that you deserve to have a safe space and a place to recuperate when you're partying and it's not something to be ashamed about, sometimes we overdo it. So yeah, that experience particularly stood out. And I guess the thing about it that really stuck with me was how he expressed that, without hearing that and receiving the care and support from the volunteers and team that he did, he thinks that he would have been in a really vulnerable mental health space because of the shame of dealing with this. But he felt so much safer because he was there. And he said that it really moved him. And I heard that from a couple of people who were in really bad ways, particularly with the alcohol, it was mostly alcohol that was sending people in there. And there was another girl who was quite young and she was lying on the floor, vomiting. And when she recovered enough to be able to talk, she said to me that she would have been in such, a bad mental health space that she feels like if she wasn't here, she could have done something really dangerous.

Maisie - volunteer

One volunteer recalled a memorable and impactful experience with a young girl who attended the wellbeing space at the festival. The girl, along with her friend were drunk and sitting in the wellbeing tent when she mentioned hearing voices. After confirming with her friend that the voices were a regular occurrence, the volunteer gently spoke with the girl when she was sober enough to engage. The volunteer's own lived-experience of mental health allowed her to connect with the patron and offer support in a sensitive, non-judgmental way, ultimately leading to a referral and discussion of resources like Headspace for support.

I turned to her best friend and said, “is she hearing voices?” and she’s like “uhh yeah” and I’m like “does she only hear them when she’s drinking? Or are they like, all the time” and she’s like “all the time”. I’m like “is she schizophrenic?” and she’s like “no, she hasn’t been diagnosed, but I think she is”, I asked “has she spoken to anyone about it?”. She’s like “nah, just me, no adults know”. Then when she was in the right frame of mind to talk about it, I said “hey, I noticed that you were saying you were hearing voices before”, she froze and thought she was in trouble, and I said “it’s okay, because I hear them too, and I know how scary they can be, and how demanding and commanding they can be, and it’s terrifying, and you know, the only reason I’m telling you this is because I left it too long before I told someone. It took me a long time to recover from it”. And then she started crying and then we had a long chat about Headspace and where she could go. And that was a really important conversation to have.

Volunteer - wellbeing space

Addressing sensory and neurodivergent needs

The All Good peer harm reduction service was also able to provide tailored support for the sensory needs of neurodivergent festival patrons, which may be separate to or exacerbate challenges experienced for patrons who are also intoxicated. Both of the following stories highlight the potential for people with sensory overwhelm and neurodivergence to be seen as intoxicated instead of appropriate recognition of their sensory needs. Inappropriate support and stigmatisation can further enhance negative experiences and potentially worsen outcomes for these individuals. In the first example, a service user who received care in the wellbeing space highlighted their challenges of navigating sensory overwhelm and the significant relief provided by the All Good peer harm reduction service and the festival’s broader harm reduction program. For this patron, the care provided by the service and the festival’s hidden disabilities program were able to work holistically to support their needs. In the second example, a volunteer describes supporting another neurodivergent patron and drawing on their own lived-experience with autism to be able to support the patron’s needs.

Example 1: The patron, an autistic woman in her early 20’s described feeling overwhelmed by overlapping noise from multiple stages as well as interactions of these sensory inputs with alcohol in her system. The patron described the value of the Hidden Disabilities lanyard that was provided at the festival entry gate, when she attended the wellbeing space. The patron highlighted the effectiveness of the lanyard in facilitating quick communication of her needs when she sought support at the All Good peer harm reduction service.

I was pretty drunk when I first came in. And I've gone up to the stall [Hidden Disabilities stall] and I was like, I have autism. Can I have one of these [sunflower lanyard]? This might actually help me. And I'm so glad I had done that because having that when I couldn't communicate because I was vomiting. I was able to just pretty much pull it out and be like, Look, I've got a hidden disability like I'm autistic, you know even though I couldn't really speak, they [peer volunteers] could understand that I was struggling with not drugs, but more of a sensory thing. [...] It just helped them get me what I needed quicker than having to try and communicate what my actual needs are.

Jess - festival patron, female, 23

The patron described being provided with support for her vomiting, noise cancelling headphones for her acute sensory needs, and later some earplugs and communication cards to keep. The patron described eventually recovering enough to be able to recover and return to the festival.

So then the lady gave me noise cancelling headphones, which really helped I was able to sit is pretty much sat there with the noise cancelling headphones for about five minutes drinking some water. Then they gave me a banana, which was probably a good thing, because I completely forgot to eat, which obviously didn't help. And then I was feeling fine. So I was like trying to figure out a way to return back into the crowd. But I couldn't take the noise cancelling headphones. And then a volunteer had little earplugs. Yeah. So she gave me those and I was fine for the rest of the night after that.

Jess - festival patron, female, 23

Example 2: A volunteer shared an example of supporting a 29-year-old autistic man who was overstimulated, and unable to regulate. The volunteers' own lived-experience with autism facilitated early recognition and tailored support for this patron. The volunteer described the continuous quality improvement approach of the All Good peer harm reduction service in addressing current knowledge gaps around neurodivergence in their training.

He was overstimulated. He was in full on melt down. He couldn't regulate. Some of the volunteers thought he was on something. As soon as I saw him, I knew he was autistic. [...] People said to me after, how did you do that, I said, "he was autistic" and they had no idea. So actually, next year, as part of our training, we are going to do a couple of slides on autism. Just in case someone with autism attends this festival next year and finds themselves overstimulated or having a meltdown, we know how to deal with that, and we are equipped for it. And I thought that was a really nice response from All Good.

Volunteer - wellbeing space

Capacity building that can be applied in the NT more broadly

Several volunteers described using the skills and knowledge gained in their All Good harm reduction training outside of the event itself. For some this centred around increased confidence to intervene as a bystander in other settings to prevent harm. While for others, increased knowledge of consent, alcohol and drug harm reduction and issues around diversity and inclusion were useful in their professional and personal lives. This suggests that the project is contributing to increased capacity to respond to both alcohol and other drugs, and harassment and discrimination that extend beyond the event that volunteers are trained for.

I think it's a great project, and I think there should be more of it. I work at other festivals, and I try to, you know, bring some of the stuff that I learn with these kinds of projects to those others. You know I always talk about consent now, in all my inductions and those sorts of things. And yeah, and pronouns and all the things that we're learning, as you know, getting better at it.

Amelia - volunteer

Conclusion

The qualitative interviews identified that the All Good peer harm reduction service provided crucial support for intoxicated and vulnerable patrons, particularly in managing drug and alcohol-related distress and adverse outcomes. Volunteers played a key role in early intervention, support, and de-escalation, fostering trust and ensuring patrons recover safely. These services were seen to enhance festival safety while reducing pressure on medical and emergency responders.

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