

# CWA of NSW Awareness Week 3 - 10 September 2016



## The Country Women's Association of NSW

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### Media Release

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#### **CWA calls on improved connectivity for rural and regional NSW**

The CWA of NSW has announced a major push for better connectivity in regional and rural areas as part of its annual Awareness Week campaign – using high profile voices to highlight the impact of the issue on mental health support, access to education and ability to run a business.

Leading children's author Jackie French, Australian of the Year Local Hero Dr Catherine Keenan, SANE Australia's CEO Jack Heath, NSW RIRDC Rural Woman of the Year Sophie Hansen and runner up Aimee Snowden and former Governor of NSW Dame Marie Bashir have thrown their support behind the campaign by being appointed Honorary CWA Members.

The number of rural and regional households affected by poor connectivity is vast, with 88 percent stating they did not have internet services that met their needs<sup>1</sup> and 31 percent reporting poor mobile coverage<sup>2</sup>.

The CWA is quick to highlight this is about more than streaming online content. Not only is there an impact on healthcare, education and business, connectivity is also linked with rural and regional crime rates, and effectiveness of emergency services.

CWA State President, Annette Turner says current infrastructure and service levels are not sufficient, with gaps in mobile reception and internet reliability, cost and bandwidth.

"Rural customers are paying an average of \$9.27 per gigabyte, with some consumers paying up to \$20 per gigabyte. For satellite users the costs are even higher — an average of \$15.96 per gigabyte, with some paying up to \$70 per gigabyte. Download speeds are typically 10 times slower; and users are subject to data limits of just 75 gigabytes per month as part of a fair use policy," explained Annette.

"With today's data-hungry websites and devices, limits are quickly reached. Even after rationing, families can fall short of being able to conduct Skype calls with medical experts, perform basic business tasks and access education resources. This is a real issue for regional and rural Australians and in some cases greatly impacts their day to day life in a way that would just not happen in a capital city."

[1. Better Internet for Rural, Regional & Remote Australia Regional Internet Access Survey Results, 2016](#)

[2. Wellbeing, resilience and liveability in rural and regional Australia: the 2015 Regional Wellbeing Survey](#)

Education and health are two areas where the city country divide is alarming. A recent review of NAPLAN results by the Grattan Institute shows children in regional and remote areas face greater barriers than their city counterparts. Additionally, the National Rural Health Alliance reports a \$2 billion deficit in rural health spending, with \$112 million of that in mental health spending, despite the fact regional Australians die two and a half years earlier than urban Australians and have a 66 percent higher suicide rate.

The recently appointed CWA of NSW Honorary Members cite great initiatives that can bridge such gaps, but many communities can't access them due to a lack of connectivity. Teacher training, videoconferencing health specialists and online forums to tackle social isolation are all opportunities that are passing them by.

As a sufferer of dyslexia, writer Jackie French espouses the importance of quality educational resources.

"Learning difficulties do not have to be a life sentence but they can be magnified by the isolation of living in the bush. With reliable internet services, tutoring can be offered via Skype ensuring kids in the bush get the same help as kids in the cities," said Jackie.

National mental health charity SANE Australia provides professionally moderated online forums which help mental illness sufferers in the bush overcome a lack of services, a culture of self-reliance and a perceived stigma. CEO Jack Heath suggests the initiatives critically complement traditional services, especially when psychiatrists are large distances and long wait-lists away.

"Services like the SANE Forums show why it is essential to increase digital connectivity in the bush – better connectivity translates into less suffering, less suicide and more hope," he said.

Distance agribusiness student Aimee Snowden saw the before and after effects of reliable internet when her family farm near Tocumwal in the state's south was connected to the NBN 12 months ago.

"I couldn't watch lectures. If I needed to watch a video I'd stand on the veranda or travel to the local library," said Aimee, who now participates fully in her degree. The issue also impacted the family's lucerne, cattle and international manufacturing business, with her mother required to get up at 4am on payday to ensure workers received their pay, not trusting the internet during office hours. Now the Snowdens can complete basic business tasks, and access more technology to improve productivity.

Aimee is also the brains behind digital micro-photography project LegoFarmer, which has been promoting agriculture amongst urban families and school children. It is a great example of the power of connectivity in a time when accessing new markets and finding efficiencies is critical to the future of farming enterprises.

Whilst there are some good news stories like Aimee's, Annette believes there is a long way to go.

"It's vital that we bridge the gap between the country and the city – and access to all that is possible on the internet is the first step towards achieving this," said Annette, "The CWA has a proud history of lobbying government and industry bodies to ensure the right decisions are made for regional Australia. During Awareness Week, and beyond, we are calling for an extension of the Universal Services Obligation to include data services in addition to the current framework for telephones; a faster and proper roll-out of the NBN; and infrastructure that is designed with capacity for requirements of the future."

**Ends**

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