

Heart Foundation Walking: A guide to implementing safe, accessible and sustainable free walking groups across Australia through partnering with the community.

Michelle Wilson

Heart Foundation National Project Manager  
Australia

**Qualification of the presenter:**

Michelle Wilson has a Bachelor of Science (Health Promotion) from Curtin University in Western Australia. She has been at the Heart Foundation for six years in various active living and walking positions. She is currently the National Project Manager for Heart Foundation Walking. Her previous experience includes working as a regional health promotion officer, Indigenous health and as a personal trainer.

**Proposal:**

Heart Foundation Walking: A guide to implementing safe, accessible and sustainable free walking groups across Australia through partnering with the community. Michelle Wilson, National Heart Foundation, Australia. Introduction: Evidence suggests only half of the Australian adult population is undertaking sufficient physical activity to benefit their health. Amongst those least likely to be physically active are older people, people living in rural and remote communities, women and people who live alone. Local government is a key stakeholder in helping Australians become more active. Aim: Heart Foundation Walking (HFW) is Australia's largest network of free community based walking groups. Launched nationally in 2007, it aims to increase participation in physical activity by partnering with community organisations to deliver walking groups locally. Methods: HFW establishes partnerships with Area Coordinators with local governments, health and community organisations to develop walking groups in their region. Utilising the HFW train-the-trainer package, volunteer Walk Organisers are trained and recruited to lead walking groups. Walk Organisers are provided with insurance cover and CPR training as well as audit tools to assess the walkability of their walking routes. All HFW members can participate in the Walker recognition Scheme to assist with motivation and goal-setting. Training, resources and support were evaluated through phone and online methods to evaluate the effectiveness of up-skilling local government workers to deliver HFW. Results: Over 30,000 people have been involved with walking groups through the Heart Foundation. HFW has 318 partnerships with local Area Coordinators and is successfully operating in 240 local government areas across Australia including rural and remote locations. It engages over 11,000 active participants and 1250 volunteer Walk Organisers each month. HFW groups have a six month retention rate of 81% and 12 month retention rate of 70%. These rates are considered world's best practice and are largely due to ownership and support at the community level. HFW is successfully targeting those least likely to be active including: women (81%), older people (average age 54yrs), people with lower income (36 %) and people who live alone (22 %). HFW evaluation has identified the following key elements in establishing walking groups in the community: 1) following a community development model by forming partnerships with local agencies including endorsement from management and mayors; 2) quality training, support and resources for Area Coordinators and volunteer Walk Organisers; 3) Walker Recognition Scheme for participants; and 4) ongoing marketing and communications support from HFW. Conclusions: Findings suggest HFW provides an appropriate framework for engaging and supporting local communities to establish sustainable walking groups and increasing levels of physical activity in the Australian population.