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\$310,000 BOOST TO EXPAND VITAL FIRST NATIONS HEALTHCARE ACCESS

A pilot program to improve health outcomes for First Nations peoples in the New England North West region will significantly expand with HealthWISE receiving \$310,000 of funding from Newcastle Permanent Charitable Foundation (NPCF).

Launched in 2024 with \$70,000 of seed funding from NPCF, the program sees Aboriginal Health Workers (AHW) integrated into pharmacies to reduce the cultural barriers to health literacy and healthcare access.

The first tranche of the program saw an AHW spend one day each week in two pharmacies in Tamworth and Gunnedah, delivering services such as blood pressure checks, service navigation and medication awareness. In less than six months more than 70 First Nations clients were reached.

As NPCF's inaugural multi-year charity partnership in the New England North West region, the funding boost will allow AHW's to be placed in four additional pharmacies over the next three years.

Data from Australian Institute of Health and Welfare research shows that First Nations communities experience a disease burden that is more than double the rate of non-Indigenous Australians, and that contributing factors include living in regional and remote areas and discomfort with mainstream health services

With Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples making up almost 12 per cent of the New England North West population, compared to 3.4 per cent more widely in NSW, HealthWISE Executive Manager Services Sarah Dean said there was huge need for better access to culturally appropriate healthcare.

"Trust and understanding is so important when it comes to giving and receiving healthcare, so providing access to a worker who appreciates the unique needs of First Nations peoples is invaluable," Ms Dean said.

"It's also not just about the physical; having that safe place to talk about how you're feeling, your home life or your financial situation is another important way to identify barriers and take those vital first steps towards better health outcomes."

Newcastle Permanent Charitable Foundation spokesperson Kirrah McClelland said the Aboriginal Health Worker program bridges disparities between locations and cultures.

"By bringing culturally safe care into everyday settings this program is helping to close the gap in a meaningful and practical way, and we're very proud to support an initiative that empowers First Nations people to take control of their wellbeing," Ms McClelland said.