

Ian Gardiner has been a volunteer in Sunraysia for 45 years and says it keeps him young.

Picture: Ashlee Falvo



## Devoted to helping others

By Ashlee Falvo  
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At the ripe old age of 81, Merbein's Ian Gardiner credits one thing with keeping him active - volunteer work.

Mr Gardiner was one of the volunteers recognised at Sunraysia Community Health Services' (SCHS) afternoon tea this week, coinciding with National Volunteer Week.

Mr Gardiner has spent about 45 years giving back to the community through his volunteer work with SCHS as a member of the Community Advisory Committee and with Merbein Rotary, and says it's been extremely fulfilling.

"I think everyone should volunteer when and if they can," Mr Gardiner said.

"It's a wonderful way to be a part of the community you live in and I know, for me, it keeps me young and active.

"It definitely keeps the brain ticking."

Mr Gardiner said organisations throughout Sunraysia need volunteers.

"It's very rare that you would contact an organisation and they'd say, 'no thanks, we don't need any help,'" he said.

SCHS chief executive officer Simone Heald said the work of volunteers, particularly those who donate their time in the palliative care services, often goes unnoticed.

"We are so very grateful and proud of the work our volunteers provide," Ms Heald said.

"They don't realise the impact they have, not just on

the patient, but the family as a whole, and for that, we thank them."

Ms Heald also sung the praises of those who volunteer on the SCHS Consumer Advisory Committee, such as Mr Gardiner.

"They regularly volunteer their time for meetings and at our Easter Appeal and other fundraising events," she said. "They could be spending time with loved ones, but their passion for SCHS sees them raising funds when required, and that's marvellous."

SCHS is looking to expand the range of ways volunteers are engaged across their services.

If you would like more information about volunteering, please contact 50 22 5444.

By Marina Haquin  
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THE Mildura branch of the Office of the Public Advocate (Mildura) has been in a desperate search for local volunteers for more than three months.

The statutory authority, which promotes and safeguards the rights and interests of people with disabilities, has been unable to support mental health patients in Sunraysia since one of their local volunteers fell ill.

The call out for more volunteers comes as part of National

Volunteers Week, where the work of volunteers is being acknowledged across the country.

"Under the community visitor program, volunteers visit mental health wards in pairs to make sure patients' human rights are being upheld, that they're getting a voice," Volunteer co-ordinator DI Cahill said.

"One of the two community visitors in Sunraysia fell ill so the pair haven't been able to perform their role for the past three months."

With some of the patients in mental health wards being as-

signed under the Mental Health Act, therefore not being placed in institutions on their own free will, the role of the community visitor is even more important.

"If it wasn't for our community visitors, there's really no one to give them a voice.

"The pairs of volunteers talk to every patient in the mental health unit who want to speak to them," she said.

"They do visiting on a monthly basis, it takes between eight and 10 hours a month.

"At the conclusion of the visit, they write a brief report detailing

the findings of the visit, which is passed on to the institution."

Yet, despite the importance of the role, the call for new community visitors has so far remained unanswered.

"Anyone who wants to make a difference in the life of others can get involved," Ms Cahill said.

She said the organisation was willing to perform training in Mildura if they received enough interest from local people.

Volunteers play an important role in a community, even more powerful in rural areas where they are often the source of es-

sential services.

With more than 120,000 not-for-profit community organisations operating in Victoria, many relying entirely on volunteers, that commitment is vital for the continuation of those services.

In a 2016 report, Volunteering Australia found the biggest barrier to people volunteering was work commitments and out-of-pocket expenses.

However, Ms Cahill said in this case, training costs as well as travel costs to and from mental health institutions would be reimbursed by the organisation.

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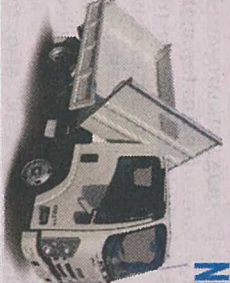
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