

## Using Harm Minimisation to empower and keep young people safe at Leavers

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**Background:** In Australia, mass gatherings at beachside locations mark the end of secondary school for young people, with WA's 'Leavers' event in the South West region drawing approximately 8,000 to 9,000 attendees annually. Historically, young people attending express concerns about responsible drinking, exposure to illicit drugs, and sexual harassment, presenting significant opportunities for health promotion. For over two decades, WAAC has facilitated a sexual health and alcohol and other drug (AOD) harm minimisation approach as part of the annual Leavers response in partnership with the WA Police Force (WAPOL), and 12 other government and non-government agencies to ensure a safer and more successful celebration.

### Approach:

WAAC leads outreach involving harm reduction messaging and education on healthy relationships, sexual health, blood-borne viruses (BBV), and AOD use. Additionally, WAAC managed the 'Chill Out Tent' in the Entertainment Zone, providing a space for Leavers to recuperate and receive support, with referrals to paramedics if necessary. In 2023, the team included professionals and students from various fields, such as nursing, health promotion, teaching, youth work, sexology and counselling. A total of 39 WAAC volunteers and staff supported approximately 8,713 Leavers interactions. Volunteers are seen as peers, being recent high school graduates who can relate to the experiences of Leavers.

### Outcome:

WAAC distributed about 14,200 condoms, 3,300 harm reduction resources and merchandise items, and recorded 6,029 meaningful interactions discussing sex, AOD, and LGBTIQ+ topics. Positive feedback from Leavers and stakeholders highlighted the value of engaging with trained peers comfortable discussing sexual health, sexuality, STIs and BBVs, and AOD.

### Innovation and Significance:

For over 20 years, WAAC has closely engaged with Leavers, gaining insights into the issues, trends, and priorities affecting young people. The peer-based approach facilitates meaningful engagement, providing a supportive environment. Additionally, volunteers benefit from accurate, up-to-date information and skills essential for educating. This empowerment fosters cohorts of young professionals capable of breaking stigma and discrimination in their future careers within human services. Finally, the unique model of harm minimisation led by WAPOL, stepping back and engaging in agencies who are experts in their fields to ensure safety rather than having a heavy handed 'policing' approach should be continued to support future cohorts of young people.

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