

Compeer calls for more men

Program helps mentally ill and volunteers

Volunteers | Michael Howard

MORE than 100 people battling mental illness in Melbourne's east are biding their time on a companionship waiting list due to a shortage of volunteers.

Maroondah residents, particularly men aged 30 to 65, have been asked to commit one hour a week to St Vincent de Paul Society's Compeer program, which couples volunteers with residents battling mental illness.

Program manager Ann Tan said there was an immediate need for more volunteers to provide companionship to people in need, many of whom found it difficult to break into their communities.

"With the closure of (mental) hospitals, people may now be living in better physical circumstances but many may not have the community support they once did," Ms Tan said.

"They have had serious illnesses, like schizophrenia, bi-

polar disorder, severe anxiety or depression. Some people aren't willing to walk out of a room when they start with the Compeer program and it is a gradual process of them getting out further and further."

The program has overseen many life changing connections, with about 80 companions now paired with volunteers.

"Sometimes we match people within weeks, other times we have had people on waiting lists for two years," Ms Tan said.

"We screen and train our volunteers and make sure the volunteer is right for the companion."

Ms Tan said the program was perfect for corporations and businesses pursuing employee programs.

"It's only an hour a week," Ms Tan said.

► **The Compeer Program's next information session will be held February 17. Details: 9895 5886.**

Community friendship goes both ways



Anneke Flinn and her sons Nathan, 3, and Cooper, 3 months, enjoy their company with Nuraya Abdul-Aziz.

Picture: JANINE EASTGATE N31MM904

WHEN things are not going your way, a reassuring word from a friend can make all the difference.

But many socially isolated people have nobody to call.

So when Heathmont's Anneke Flinn was working as a speech pathologist at Melbourne Citymission seven years ago, she felt the need to act.

The 33-year-old signed up with the organisation's Community Friend Program, which matches volunteers with adults suffering mild disabilities.

Mrs Flinn was matched up with Nuraya Abdul-Aziz, from Wheelers Hill. She said it was one of the best things she ever did.

"I had worked with people with disabilities before and I felt it was the right time to give it a go," Mrs Flinn said.

"Nuraya and I started catching up for a coffee each fortnight to see what each other was up to.

"We have been doing it ever since."

Mrs Flinn said the friendship went both ways.

"She was around when I had two children and I have supported her on the phone when people in her family have passed away," she said.

"There are so many socially isolated people out there that need help and if I stopped doing this now it would leave a huge gap in Nuraya's life."

Program co-ordinator Albertine Michael said Melbourne Citymission was looking for female volunteers in the Croydon area.

► **Details: 9385 3222 or cfp@mcm.org.au**

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