

Addressing demand for emotional support during COVID 19 through a nurse-led counselling service

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The Context...

In Victoria, the impact of COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated emotional distress and lengthened waiting times for access to appropriate emotional support for people affected by cancer.

Victoria was one of the world's most locked-down states and subsequently, our Cancer Council 13 11 20 telephone support service saw a sharp increase in callers needing referral to counselling and psychology services, rising from 21% of connections in 2019, to 35% in 2022.

Calls also increased in length and complexity, which reflected the high distress that was and is still being experienced by people affected by cancer.

While Cancer Council Victoria already has a psychology-led counselling service, demand also outweighed capacity.

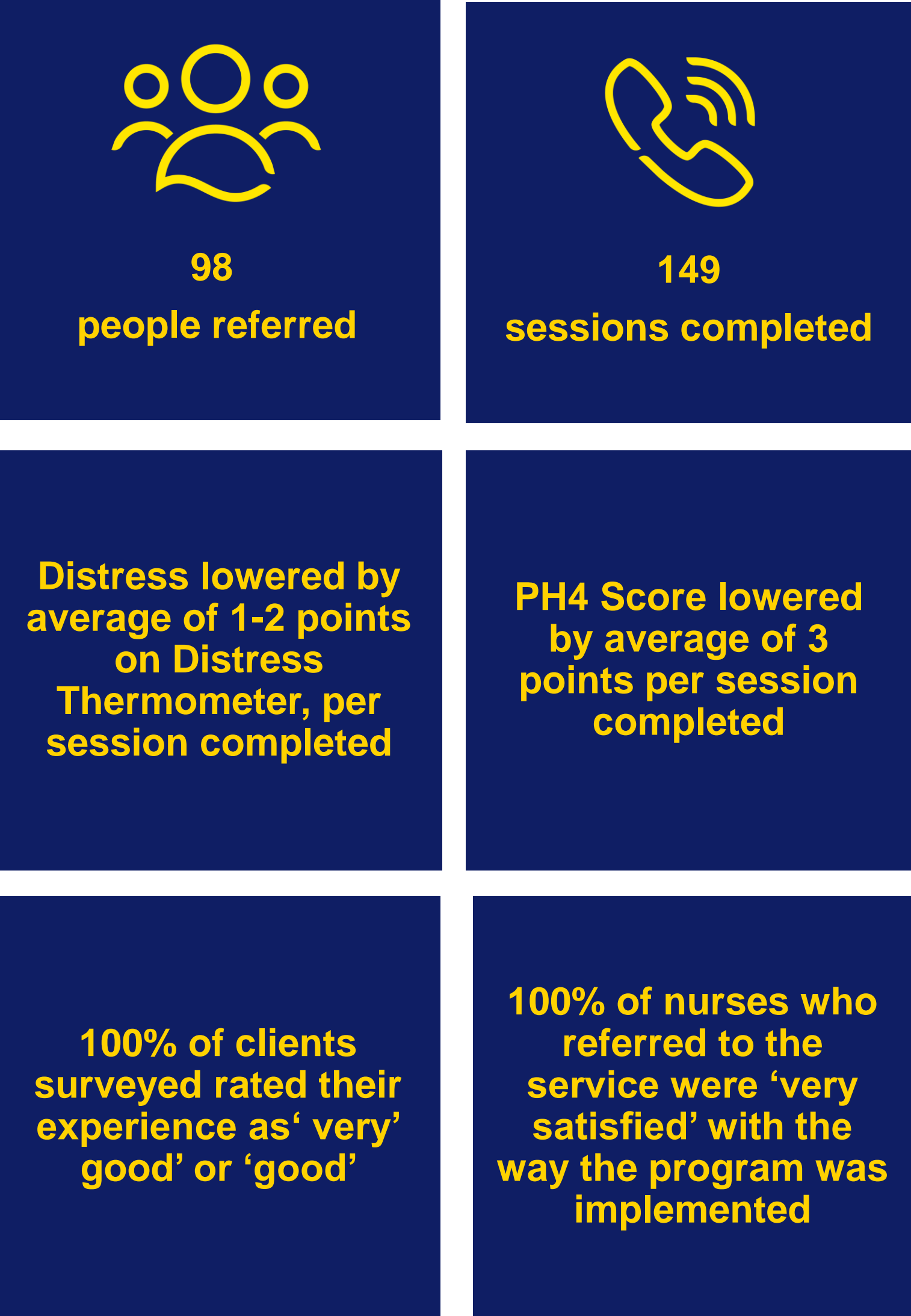
To address this increased demand, Cancer Council Victoria initiated a new model of care through an Nurse-led counselling service referral pathway.

What we did...

- Utilised the experience of an existing 13 11 20 Nurse and qualified Nurse Counsellor
- Implemented a free, nurse-led counselling service as part of a 'stepped care' model of psychological and emotional support
- This service aimed to increase capacity and minimise wait times for psychologist-led services, and support those with lower level, more transient distress
- People could access up to three, 60-min telephone sessions
- Qualitative and quantitative data was collected to evaluate the success of the service over a 6-month period

The outcomes...

Over the 6-month demonstration period:



Demographics of service users...

- 80 (81%) identified as female, 18 identified as male
- 69 (70%) were 'someone with an experience of cancer, 29 (30%) were 'carers, family or friends'
- 65 (66%) of people were from metropolitan areas, 33 (34%) were from rural and regional areas

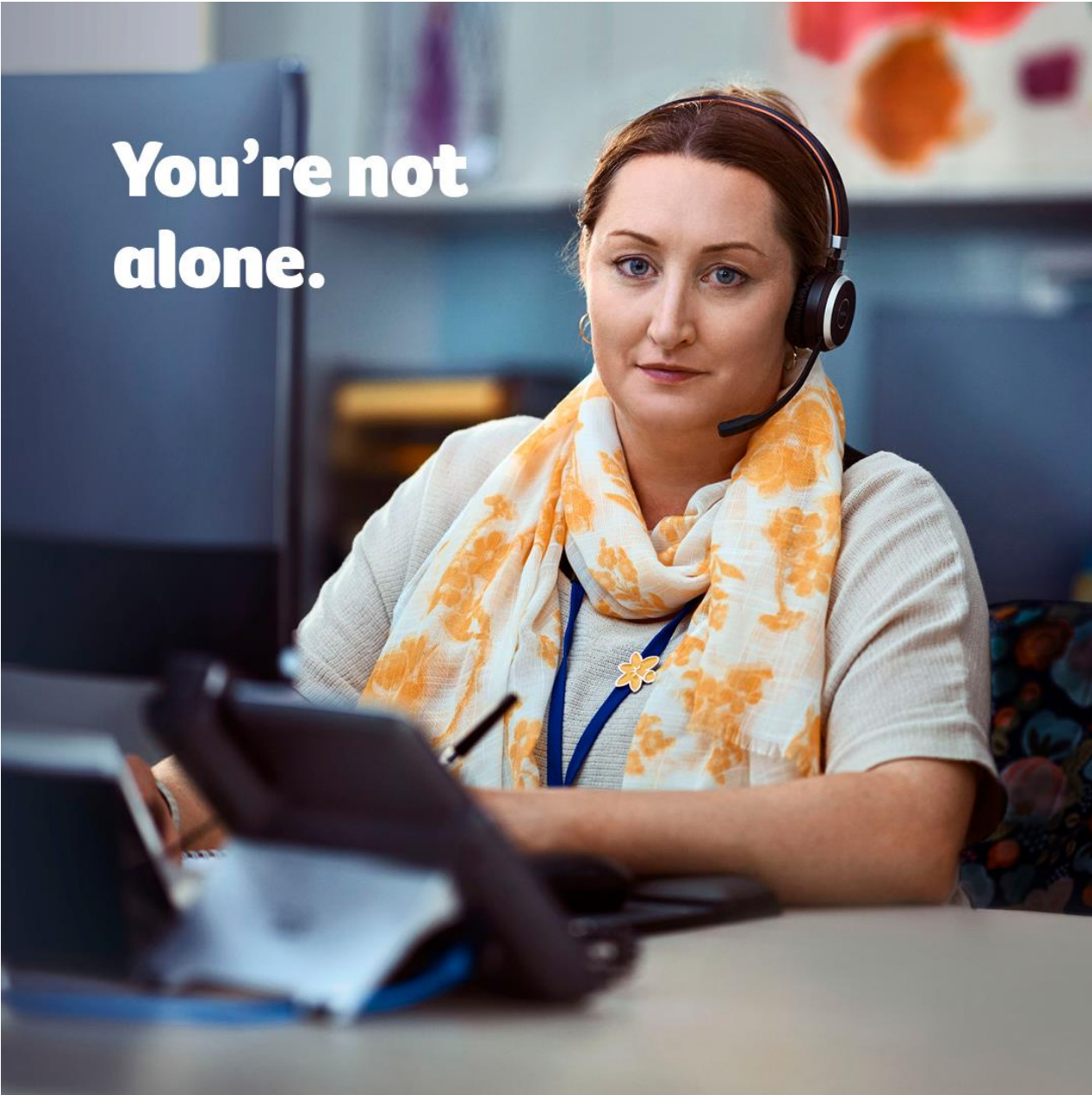
Reasons for referral...

- Adjustment to diagnosis
- Generalised anxiety
- Changes to personal relationships
- Fear of recurrence
- Grief and loss
- Body image and sexuality issues
- Death and dying
- Survivorship issues

Client feedback...

"After counselling, all my worries, concerns and needs were addressed. I never ended a call without feeling at ease or having an answer for my concerns. I would not have managed, perhaps even survived without it"

"It was so accessible, I could do it from home & even though I didn't see the counsellor I felt very comfortable with her, she had really good advice and I trusted everything she was saying to me, and it was free. It saved me having to go to the doctor for a mental health care plan"



Conclusions and future directions...

This service was established in response to the evolving mental-health system crisis that emerged during COVID 19. Stood up rapidly, the service was able to address the needs of those with lower-level distress in a timely way, as a complement to psychology-led services, thus easing pressure on the mental health sector.

Due to its success , the service has now been embedded as an ongoing program with Cancer Council Victoria, with two Nurse Counsellors now employed, and a third to be recruited. The program is seen as a key priority for us, and we continue to lobby for funding to support increased capacity and service expansion.