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Empathy in action: schools program to tackle ageism and foster respect for older people

Catholic Health Australia, Meaningful Ageing and Mercy Health Foundation are inviting schools to participate in a free educational program for secondary school students that aims to foster values such as empathy, compassion and respect for older people.

Launching in October to coincide with key dates including International Day of Older Persons and Grandparents Day, the Accompaniment Program '*Learning about Ageing with Dignity through reflection and scripture*' offers a flexible curriculum with four modules that can be tailored to fit various schedules, ranging from standalone workshops to a week-long series.

Through reflection, scripture study, brainstorming, roleplay, and other interactive activities, students will explore themes such as ageing with dignity, respectful care, and the unique challenges faced by the elderly.

Participants will gain insight into the discrimination and stereotypes that older people encounter and learn how to become compassionate companions to seniors in their communities.

Additionally, students have the option to earn a leadership certificate by completing 30 hours of volunteering in an aged care centre or organising a school fundraiser to support Mercy Health's Ageing with Dignity initiatives.

Mercy Health Foundation's Chief Executive Officer, Rebecca MacFarling says: "Discrimination against and negative biases about older persons are important issues in Australia, with more than 70 per cent of respondents to a recent survey agreeing that ageism is a serious problem for our country.

"Fostering a sense of compassion and understanding in young people is crucial to building a more inclusive and respectful society. This Accompaniment Program provides students with a meaningful way to engage with and support older members of their communities, and over the long term will also help tackle ageism.

“We are proud to collaborate with Catholic Health Australia and Meaningful Ageing on this initiative, and we look forward to seeing the positive impact it will have on both the students who participate and older people in our communities.”

Catholic Health Australia CEO Jason Kara says: “We are excited to work with the Mercy Health Foundation and Meaningful Ageing to launch this Accompaniment Program in October, a month that encourages us to honour and reflect on the important contributions that older people make in our communities.

“This program goes beyond educating students about the challenges faced by the elderly, and aims to cultivate future leaders who are grounded in compassion, integrity, and respect for all.

“Students who engage in this program will not only learn to understand ageing and the challenges that come with it, they will also be empowered to advocate for their elders and contribute positively to their communities throughout their lives and future careers.”

Approximately 500 secondary schools across Australia are invited to participate in the program. It is recommended that the program be championed by the mission or faith head, or a Year 9 and 10 religious education teacher.

Schools interested in participating in the program can contact Winnie Tsang for more information at Winnie.Tsang@mercy.com.au or [Sign Up Now \(raiselysite.com\)](https://raiselysite.com)

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