

# Deafness no barrier to holding court

*Increasing participation in physical activity through community sport and active recreation*

This project is part of a VicHealth funding program known as PICSAR, which aims to increase participation levels in community sport and active recreation amongst people with disabilities and those from low socio-economic, Indigenous and new arrival communities.

## The organisation

Squash Vic, in association with its member clubs and affiliated venue owners, is the body responsible for the governance, management and administration of squash and racquetball throughout Victoria. Squash Vic is also one of the eight member affiliates to Squash Australia, the recognised national body for squash.

The organisation facilitates competition for players from novice to elite level implementing grassroots promotion and development. It is a nationally and internationally recognised organisation, hosting a number of local and national events annually. Squash Vic drives the sports' growth statewide, developing facilities as well as providing advice and resource support.

## The project

Squash Vic aims to increase the number of people with a disability involved in all aspects of squash. Squash Vic is developing partnerships to engage with a broader range of disability groups and disability sports agencies. New programs being developed aim to include people with a disability at school and community/club level. Squash Vic promotes disability equality through their organisation and services, providing discreet and inclusive mainstream participation opportunities.



Julia Murphy and Kath Ryan conducting squash skills training among children of the La Trobe Squash Club. *Image courtesy of Kath Ryan, La Trobe University Squash Club.*

## Squash bounces back through inclusive programs

### The story

From the 1960s through to the late 1980s, squash was a very popular and highly visible sport across Australia. Squash centres seemed to be in every suburb and country town, and Australia proudly produced the world's top male and female players, Geoff Hunt and Heather McKay.

Towards the 1990s, however, the sport started losing some of its momentum and popularity. Like many sports, squash had to compete with a vast array of new choices people had in their leisure time.

"New indoor activities such as aerobics and different gym classes plus emerging sports became very attractive. Having all these new recreation options available definitely took its toll on squash in this period", explains Fiona Young, Executive Director of Squash Vic.

Secondly, as squash is a sport that is primarily privately run and owned, many of the facilities were located on prime real estate. This increased the sport's vulnerability as rising land values saw many centres being sold off to make way for apartment blocks and commercial interests.

More information about Participation in Community Sport and Active Recreation (PICSAR) is available on the VicHealth website at: [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/picsar](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/picsar)

Determined to get its bounce back, Squash Vic wanted to get the word out that squash is an inclusive, affordable, accessible and fun recreation option. It then decided to actively recruit new population groups and started with a program directly targeting people who were deaf or hearing-impaired.

The organisation partnered with a number of agencies who worked directly with people who are deaf or hearing-impaired to develop and pilot *The Deaf Friendly Squash* program. Six squash centres from across Victoria were chosen to participate in the program and to become a *Deaf Friendly Squash Club*.

Becoming a *Deaf Friendly Squash Club* involved training club/centre staff in the basics of AUSLAN (Australian sign language), identifying schools in the area with children who were deaf or hearing-impaired, running school squash clinics and hosting 'open' days for children and their families. The aim was to eventually have a network of deaf-friendly squash activities around the metropolitan area.

One of the clubs that participated in the program was the La Trobe University Squash Club. The club initiated a number of activities to attract new members who were deaf and hearing-impaired. Julia Morris, a sports lover who is profoundly deaf, had never played squash before. On the encouragement of a coach at the La Trobe club, Julia gave squash a go. Two years later she is now a coach at the club and has assisted Squash Vic with school clinics, a deaf sports day and other promotional activities.

Julia's involvement in the club was in the club was her first her first time playing sport in her local community and the first time she had played with hearing people.

"I enjoyed meeting hearing people. Being at the club has helped me become more confident with people who are not deaf. Last year my coach suggested I do a Level 1 coaching course and help her coach the juniors. At first I thought it would be hard

as it was outside of my comfort zone, but once I understood the information my confidence increased. I am finding it fun and enjoyable and I love working with the kids," Julia said.

The *Deaf Friendly Squash Program* didn't result in the sustainable deaf-only program of activities that Squash Vic had intended; but it did provide valuable learning for the organisation.

"Even though the deaf-only program didn't attract enough people to make it sustainable, we have learnt a lot. We learned that one of the most important reasons people play sport is for social interaction. The players who were hearing-impaired and keen to keep playing squash were able to continue through mainstream squash programs that had a strong social vibe. This shows that many clubs are inclusive and welcoming", Fiona Young says.

The program has given Squash Vic more confidence to target other population groups that it had not previously engaged. A future program in conjunction with Local Employment and Training Services will offer traineeships to people who are long-term unemployed or wanting to return to the workforce. The traineeships will introduce people to the tasks involved in administering and promoting a squash club.

"The *Deaf Friendly Squash Program* opened our eyes to the benefits of being a more inclusive sport. We are now excited by the thought of targeting groups that traditionally haven't played squash," adds Fiona Young.

For more information on Squash Vic go to: [www.squashvic.com.au](http://www.squashvic.com.au)  
Telephone: (03) 9682 2199

## PICSAR

Sport and active recreation organisations are well placed to assist VicHealth in addressing the health inequalities that result in poorer health outcomes for many groups in the community.

They have a tradition of providing opportunities for individuals and groups to:

- participate in physical activity,
- connect with other members of the community,
- feel part of their local community, and
- develop knowledge and skills that can be used in a range of contexts.

The Participation in Community Sport and Active Recreation (PICSAR) Program comprises three funding programs:

- State and Regional Grants
- Active Participation Grants
- Active Club Grants

The first two programs are long-term investments that work with State Sporting Associations, Regional Sports Assemblies, statewide peak agencies and regional organisations to increase participation in physical activity in specific target populations.

A learning snapshot from the independent evaluation being conducted by Monash University/ ARTD Consultants shows that:

1. partnerships are perceived as beneficial to program delivery
2. it is important that staff (paid or voluntary) have the required skills to implement activities
3. sports at all levels should consider adapting policies and activities to provide greater flexibility to promote inclusion.