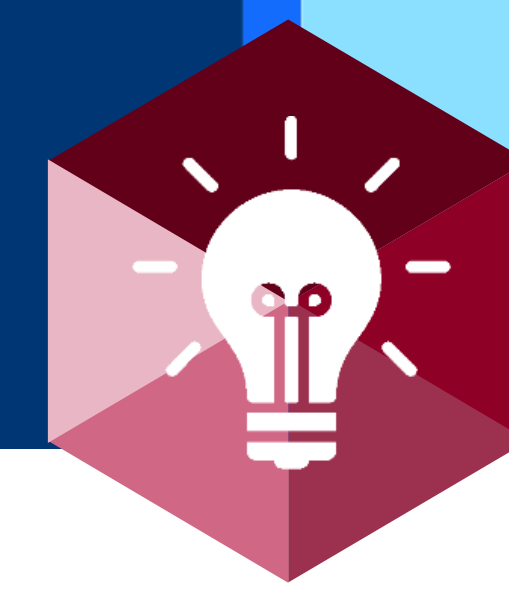
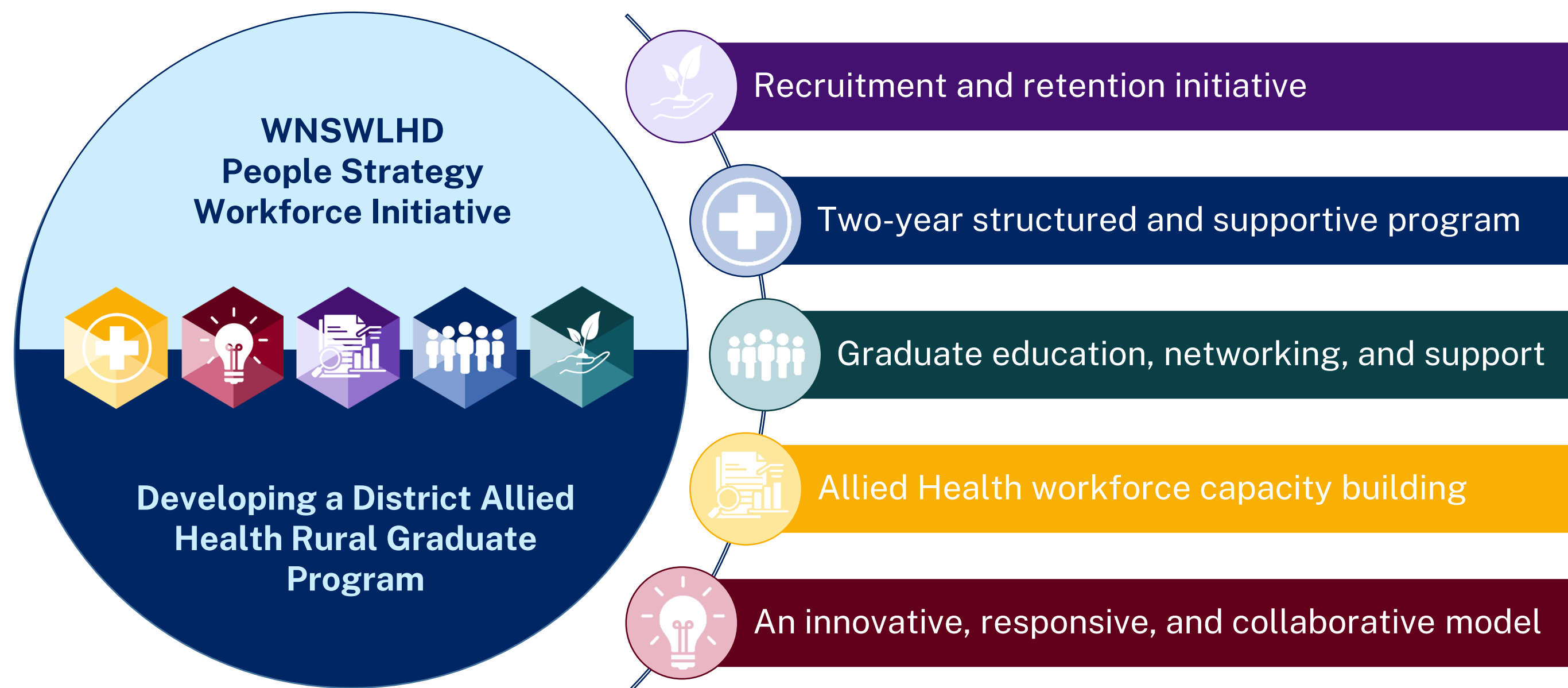




Learners to Leaders: An early career program moving the rural allied health workforce AHEAD



Katrina Rohr, AHEAD Coordinator, Western NSW Local Health District



The **Allied Health Early Accelerated Development Program** (formerly the Allied Health Rural Graduate Program) began in 2023 as an innovative model aimed at improving the recruitment and retention of allied health professionals in Western NSW Local Health District.

This structured and supportive two-year program assists recent graduates transition to the workplace and build professional capability.

The AHEAD Program has expanded from an initial intake of 15 allied health graduates to now **provide support, networking, and education to 60 early career clinicians across ten allied health professions and six sites in 2025.**

“[The program] has provided me with amazing clinical support from my supervisor, preceptor, and other colleagues at different sites. Being a part of the program and attending the workshops has allowed me to increase my knowledge and understanding of NSW Health as an organisation and has provided me with a range of networking opportunities. The workshops have also played a crucial role in increasing my cultural competency, patient safety, and reminded me of the importance of self-care as an early career therapist.” *Georgia Knowles, Occupational Therapist, 2023/2024 cohort*

Strengthening our future Allied Health workforce

There is an increasing demand for allied health services and professionals, and an increasingly competitive market for the allied health workforce. Graduate experience is identified as a critical enabler of the graduate pipeline into NSW Health (Allied Health Rural Workforce Pipeline Report, 2023). The AHEAD Program is unique in its engagement and support of early career clinicians in NSW Health, and includes:

- **Education workshops** to facilitate participants’ professional skill development in areas including leadership, quality improvement, District priorities and initiatives, cultural awareness, workplace wellbeing, and multidisciplinary practice.
- **Graduate supports** including clinical supervision, mentoring, and social and professional networking.
- Support to undertake a **quality improvement project** in Year 2.
- Knowledge of **career pathways** and further development opportunities in the District.

Learners to leaders

The AHEAD Program additionally enables development opportunities for mid-career allied health professionals via an **Allied Health Leadership Facilitation Program**, developed in partnership with Western NSW Local Health District’s Leadership and Capability team.

Participants are upskilled in leadership theory and facilitation as they deliver leadership presentations at AHEAD Program workshops and apply and share learnings within their teams.

AHEAD Program Outcomes 2023 – 2025

Program achievements to date include:

- A yearly graduate **retention rate of over 80%** since commencement of the program (2023: 83%, 2024: 86%, 2025 to date: 97%). 86% of graduates who completed the program continued in ongoing employment in the District in 2025.
- **Expansion** of the program from 15 allied health graduates in five allied health disciplines across three sites in 2023 to support 60 allied health graduates in ten allied health disciplines (dietetics, genetic counselling, occupational therapy, pharmacy, physiotherapy, psychology, radiation therapy, radiography, social work, and speech pathology) and six District sites (Bathurst, Cowra, Dubbo, Forbes, Mudgee, and Orange) in 2025.
- A **96% graduate satisfaction rating** with the program (November 2024).
- Participants reported that the program contributed to their sense of belonging in the District, wellbeing in the workplace, understanding of District services, and competence and confidence as an allied health professional.
- 32 mid-career allied health professionals participated in the Allied Health Leadership Facilitation Program in 2023 – 2025, **building leadership capability** in the allied health workforce.
- Over 90 allied health early career professionals have participated in the program between 2023 – 2025.



An award-winning program: NSW Health Secretary’s Award 2024

Western NSW Local Health District was the recipient of the 2024 NSW Health Awards Secretary’s Award for “Learners to Leaders: Allied Health Rural Graduate Program”.



In 2025, the AHEAD Program is an embedded District model providing support, education, and networking for all early career allied health professionals.



Meet our graduates:



Acknowledgements:

The AHEAD Program has been shaped by the input of many people and teams across Western NSW LHD. The following contributors are gratefully acknowledged for their support of the development and implementation of the program:

- Bathurst, Orange, and Dubbo Allied Health teams
- Karen Smith, Manager Leadership and Capability
- Mary Jackson, Senior Program Officer, HETI
- Health Promotion Team
- Alecia Marr, Safety & Quality Essentials Pathway Coordinator
- Nina Holland, Manager Health Outcomes
- Leesa Willis, Nurse Educator, CREST
- Allied Health Leadership Facilitators
- Alyssa Walter, AHRGP Leadership Facilitation Lead (2024)
- Workshop presenters
- Di Harvey and Beth Schofield
- Allied Health Directorate Team
- AHRGP Governance Committee
- Angela Firth, Executive Director Allied Health

...and our wonderful allied health graduates.

Western NSW
Local Health District



Contact Details

Name: Katrina Rohr, AHEAD Coordinator
Phone: 0498 329 145
Email: Katrina.Rohr@health.nsw.gov.au