

Whānau Āwhina Plunket volunteers win 2022 Minister of Health Volunteer Award

A dedicated team of Whānau Āwhina Plunket volunteers has taken out a win at this year's Minister of Health Volunteer Awards.

The volunteers for the 'Breastfeeding Works!' breastfeeding peer support programme in South Canterbury won the Outstanding Achievement award in the Health Care Provider Service Team category in yesterday's presentation ceremony at Parliament.

Whānau Āwhina Plunket Breastfeeding Peer Counsellor Administrator, Megan McNeill, coordinates the programme. She says the award recognises the important role volunteers play in supporting māmā and whānau.

"We're all really excited. It's so wonderful to be recognised and respected on a national level for the work our volunteers do that makes such a difference in the community," Ms McNeill says.

"I hope it inspires other people to take up a volunteering role. We have plenty of opportunities for people who want to get involved in volunteering. It's really rewarding – there's nothing quite like the satisfaction of knowing you've helped someone."

The team of 14 Breastfeeding Works! volunteers work throughout South Canterbury and are trained to provide breastfeeding support to any whānau that needs extra help. This ranges from māmā establishing breastfeeding with a newborn, to those returning to work or looking to move on from breastfeeding. They have supported more than 200 whānau over the past year.

Ms McNeill says the programme takes a holistic approach, supporting whānau not just with breastfeeding, but with feeling confident in their new role as parents.

"Our whole vision is not just breastfeeding education or practical help. It's the wrap-around support we provide whānau throughout their feeding journey by walking alongside them mother-to-mother. We recognise the importance of peer support and the positive outcomes it has for new mothers and our future tamariki of Aotearoa," Ms McNeill says.

"Part of the programme is that every volunteer is a māmā themselves; they've had their own feeding journey and they can relate to that experience. It's so rewarding to see māmā flourish as they build their confidence with their whānau and new baby."

Susie Martin, who volunteers for the programme, says she was inspired to become a breastfeeding peer support counsellor after her own breastfeeding experience.

"For me, it's about giving back. I found breastfeeding hard in the beginning and I sought help, which was so valuable.

“It’s nice to have that empathy and understanding what people are going through. It’s quite special knowing that having been there and done that, I am now in the position to help others,” Ms Martin says.

“This award is the icing on the cake.”

If you are passionate about supporting, guiding and offering advice to other mothers through their breastfeeding journey and would like to train as a volunteer breastfeeding peer supporter, please contact Megan McNeill on megan.mcneill@plunket.org.nz to join the July 2022 South Canterbury training session.

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