



INNER NORTH  
COMMUNITY  
FOUNDATION

# 2026

## PATHWAYS TO EMPLOYMENT GRANTS PROGRAM

Supporting prosperous, connected and cohesive  
communities in Melbourne's inner north since 2007



# A note from IntoWork Group

## CEO Christine Zechowski

For almost two decades, the Inner North Community Foundation has helped create opportunities and strengthen communities across Darebin, Merri-bek and Yarra. IntoWork Australia is proud to have supported that work since the Foundation was established in 2007.

At IntoWork, we believe employment changes lives. It provides independence, confidence, connection and a pathway to a brighter future. That is why we remain committed to supporting the Foundation's Pathways to Employment Fund, which helps remove barriers and create opportunities for people facing disadvantage.

In 2026, the Pathways to Employment Fund, established in 2007 by IntoWork and Council partners, generated \$260,000 in grants funding that will support community organisations to deliver programs that help people build skills, confidence and connections. These initiatives create opportunities for First Nations peoples, refugees, young people, people experiencing homelessness and others facing barriers to employment.

The strength of this partnership lies in its local focus. The Foundation works closely with

organisations that understand community needs and are well placed to deliver practical, responsive solutions. Together, we are investing in programs that create lasting social and economic impact while helping people realise their potential.

IntoWork's connection with the Foundation continues to be strengthened through the ongoing involvement of our Board, including Director Kevin Breen, whose contribution helps maintain a strong link between our organisations and our shared purpose.

I would like to thank Foundation Chair Carolyn Phiddian, Executive Officer Ben Rodgers, Directors, volunteers, partners and donors for their dedication and generosity. Their commitment helps transform lives and build stronger, more inclusive communities.

We are proud of what we have achieved together and look forward to continuing this important work, creating stronger pathways to employment and brighter futures in the years ahead.

**Christine Zechowski**

Group CEO (Interim)

IntoWork Australia

# Foreword from Foundation Chair

## Carolyn Phiddian

In partnership with IntoWork Australia and collaboration with the Cities of Darebin, Yarra and Merri-bek, the Pathways to Employment Fund provides single and multi-year funding to inner north organisations which work effectively and creatively to break down barriers to employment.

Thank you to IntoWork which, under the leadership of Christine Zechowski, Chair Elizabeth Board, and the rest of the IntoWork Australia Board, continues to be one of Australia's leading providers of employment, skills, education, and support for jobseekers.

This year, \$260,000 is being distributed: to \$180,000 to nine organisations, with each receiving a grant of \$20,000. A further four community organisations will share \$80,000 in previously committed multi-year funding.

We thank Foundation Director, Rachel English, and Merri-bek resident and community leader, Nyukia Tauss for their careful consideration of the applications we received. Grants are being made to support projects which assist in removing barriers preventing vulnerable inner north residents gaining and retaining paid work.

This funding assists these organisations to build people's capabilities and skills and leverage partnerships and collaboration to open employment pathways. We are particularly pleased that more than 90% of applications involved people with lived experience in co-designing programs.

We hope you enjoy reading about the broad scope of activities that will be delivered to address the barriers which disadvantage inner north people on their pathway to employment.

Congratulations to all successful applicants and thank you as always to our partners and supporters who make this annual funding possible.

**Carolyn Phiddian**

Chair

Inner North Community Foundation





Margaret Hecken  
Geraldine Briggs  
Emma Cooper



# Pathways to Employment 2026

– GRANTS OVERVIEW





## BELGIUM AVENUE NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSE

PROJECT TITLE:

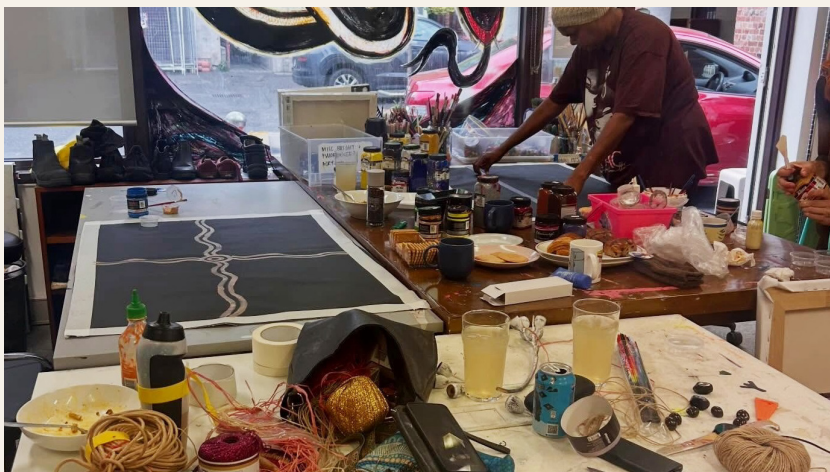
### SUNRISE HOMEWORK CLUB

The Sunrise Homework Club is responding to a need for early, culturally safe pathways into education, employment and community connection for migrant families living in the Collingwood and Richmond public housing estates.

Each week, some 86 children and young people aged 5–18 take part, with many from Oromo, Somali or Eritrean backgrounds. Without targeted, local support, these young people are at risk of falling behind at school, disengaging early, and facing long-term barriers to employment.

At the same time, their mothers, who are central to family stability and children's educational outcomes, often face compounding barriers to workforce participation. For these women, the program provides an accessible, trusted entry point into learning and connection.

While their children attend homework sessions, women participate in informal English conversation, which has already led to increased confidence, further study, and employment outcomes for some of the participants.



*Local Aboriginal artist at work at Blak Pearl Studio*

## BLAK PEARL STUDIO

PROJECT TITLE:

### BLAK PEARL STUDIO VOLUNTEERS PROGRAM

Blak Pearl's volunteer program equips participants with a unique set of skills for work in the community support sector.

A creative studio and gathering place for Aboriginal people in inner Melbourne, Blak Pearl provides a culturally safe space with free access to high-quality art materials. Volunteers are crucial as the first point of contact for the community.

Over the last five years, Blak Pearl has trained over 30 volunteers in providing support to its artists and community. Training centres around building relationships, strengthening community understanding and developing resilience. These are all critical

capacities in a sector where staff turnover and employee burn out are extremely high.

Volunteers develop the ability to collaborate with people experiencing difficult circumstances and disadvantages by exercising patience, maintaining perspective, and holding empathy. Further critical capabilities needed to enter the community support workforce.





*Participants of the EAL Employment Pathways Support program*

## CARLTON NEIGHBOURHOOD LEARNING CENTRE

PROJECT TITLE:

### EAL EMPLOYMENT PATHWAYS SUPPORT PROGRAM

The EAL Employment Pathways Support program will provide targeted, practical support for 40 – 50 local adults with English language and literacy needs who face barriers to employment, training, volunteering, and further education.

Participants will include unemployed or underemployed people, women from refugee and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, people with disability, carers, people with low digital confidence, and people experiencing social isolation, financial hardship, or limited knowledge of Australian employment systems.

Each participant will work with a project facilitator to develop a tailored employment pathways plan. This plan will identify their goals, strengths, barriers, interests, and practical next steps.

One-to-one employment mentoring and job-readiness support will include help to develop resumes and cover letters, prepare for interviews, search for suitable jobs, complete online applications, understand workplace expectations, identify appropriate courses, and build confidence using digital systems.



James William, Killara Foundation

## KILLARA

PROJECT TITLE:

### OUTREACH & DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

The Killara Outreach & Development Program provides a culturally-safe access point for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in Yarra, Darebin, and Merri-bek, to engage with mainstream employment and support services.

The program is led by James Williams, a proud Yorta Yorta, Wiradjuri, Gunditjmara, and Gunai Kurnai man with deep connections to Fitzroy and the inner-north of Naarm. James works to connect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to pre-employment support, training and up-skilling opportunities, mentorship programs, and links

to relevant social and welfare assistance.

Some of the people James works with connect with the Ngarrgu Djerring Training & Employment Intake Program, which provides a culturally safe, six-week job readiness program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young peoples looking to enter the workforce. This can lead to employment at Ngarrgu Djerring hospitality venues or external industry partners.





*Participants of Operation Newstart Northern*

## OPERATION NEWSTART

PROJECT TITLE:

### OPERATION NEWSTART NORTHERN

Operation Newstart assists young people experiencing difficulties around school attendance, mental health and/or educational aspiration and works with the students, families, and schools to promote engagement both at school and in the community.

This strength-based program exposes students to realistic future opportunities so that the young people can become more certain of pathways they can access at school and TAFE.

Operation Newstart Northern will run two programs in 2027 involving students attending local secondary schools in Yarra, Darebin and Merri-bek. Students will take part in camps which will allow them to

undertake activities such as hiking, surfing, mountain biking, caving, and rock climbing.

These experiences introduce strategies for students to build resilience and to develop a more positive mindset to assist future decision making at school and in their career pathway.

The program will also offer careers pathways workshops, TAFE tasters and information relating to VET subjects tailored to the Year 9 and 10 cohort.



*Participants of Outer Urban Projects*

## OUTER URBAN PROJECTS

PROJECT TITLE:

### CREATIVE LEADERSHIP PATHWAYS PROGRAM

Through its Creative Leadership Pathways program, Outer Urban Projects seeks to strategically mentor and employ young artists who often live and work in a continuum of complex cultural, social, economic, and artistic disruption.

The immersive program enables young artists to collaborate with an impressive pool of established creatives, producers, and distributors to develop new markets and connect to new audiences, festivals, programming, employers, and venues.

The program works to develop, retain, and empower talented arts leaders by equipping them with work ready skills, confidence, and resilience.

Some 10 culturally diverse, talented early career artists and arts workers aged 20-32 will participate in an eight-month residency, which will include being linked to external employment opportunities and one-on-one mentoring. Participants will also benefit from access to key venues across Merri-Bek, Darebin and Yarra.



*Participants of the Women's Career Pathways Program*

## BRIDGE DAREBIN

PROJECT TITLE:

### WOMEN'S CAREER PATHWAYS PROGRAM

The Women's Career Pathways program is a fortnightly community-based initiative which supports women at different stages of their employment journey. The program primarily engages women over 30 living in Darebin, Merri-bek and Yarra who are returning to paid work after career breaks, retrenchment, caring responsibilities, or workplace discrimination.

Participants frequently report feeling motivated to work but unsure how to take the next step. Formal employment services can feel inaccessible, particularly for women who do not identify as job-ready but are actively seeking direction.

This program will deliver a series of facilitated group sessions supported by funded guest speakers, alongside light-touch individual support, to assist the women to build confidence and develop job readiness skills such as resume development and interview preparation. Participants will also have access to tailored one-on-one support.

The program will leverage existing partnerships with Melbourne Polytechnic Skills & Jobs Centre, Darebin Council, and the Neighbourhood House network to support participants to connect with further training, employment services, and local opportunities.





*Participants of the EmpowerWorks employment pathway program*

## SISTERWORKS

PROJECT TITLE:

## EMPOWERWORKS

EmpowerWorks is a targeted employment pathway program supporting migrant, refugee and asylum seeking women to overcome barriers to work. Through a holistic, industry-aligned model, the program provides training, job readiness support, and direct employment connections to assist participants to move from isolation and financial insecurity into meaningful, sustained employment.

Delivered through Sisterworks' Carlton North Empowerment Hub, the program focuses on the hospitality sector and supports women across Yarra, Merri-bek and Darebin – all areas experiencing strong growth in hospitality, driven by population

increases and a post-pandemic revival of tourism and café culture.

While employers face ongoing workforce shortages, migrant and refugee women in the program are job-ready, motivated, and eager to contribute. EmpowerWorks is working to bridge this gap by connecting an underutilised talent pool with an industry in demand.



*Young people working to bring others with them*

## YOUTH PROJECTS

PROJECT TITLE:

### CITY OF YARRA PUBLIC HOUSING EMPLOYMENT PILOT PROGRAM

This project will pilot targeted, place-based employment support for young people living on the Collingwood public housing estates.

A dedicated youth employment specialist will work within the local service system, in partnership with the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, using an approach that meets young people where they are, rather than relying on office-based appointments or self-referral.

Through informal engagement and structured one-on-one support, participants will receive practical assistance with resumes, interview

preparation, and workplace expectations, alongside support to build confidence and set achievable goals.

Participants can then potentially be connected into Youth Projects' established pre-employment pathways. CareStart supports entry-level roles in the care sector, while Pathways to Clean Energy provides exposure to emerging industries and entry-level opportunities. Further opportunities to engage in hospitality training and work experience will be available through The Little Social, Youth Projects' social enterprise café.







*Walking new pathways through Breakaway Youth*

## BREAKAWAY YOUTH

PROJECT TITLE:

### BREAKAWAY AND ACHIEVE PROGRAM

Over the past 12 months, the Breakaway and Achieve Program supported a group of young people in their graduate year of the program, with participants embarking on a 17-day road trip into Central Australia.

The trip was both physically challenging and educational, with each experience broadening participants' ideas on life and their place in the world, challenging them to take ownership of their path into adulthood. Many participants expressed interest in returning as camp leaders to champion the next generation of young people.

During the second year of funding, Breakaway Youth will move to the next phase of its work to reduce school disengagement and barriers to employment for 30 young people aged 10-16 years.



*Nature provides a safe space, skills and a sustainable future*

## **SUSTAIN: THE AUSTRALIAN FOOD NETWORK**

PROJECT TITLE:

### **GROWING FOOD JUSTICE URBAN FARMING INTERNSHIPS**

During the first of its three years funding, Sustain used a trauma-informed, culturally safe and non-hierarchical model to deliver its First Nations Food Justice Internship program at Bundoora Park Farm on Wurundjeri Country.

The internship was one of three Sustain internship programs which engaged 23 participants from priority cohorts including First Nations people, young people, and people experiencing psychosocial disability, unemployment and housing insecurity.

The program also created tangible pathways into employment and further opportunities. Through excursions and partnerships with organisations such as the Victorian Indigenous Nurseries Co-op, Farm Raiser and Dardi Munwurro, participants gained exposure to real-world job settings, built networks, and developed clearer career direction in land management, food systems and community services.



*Juno volunteers*

## JUNO

PROJECT TITLE:

### EMPOWER PROGRAM

EMPower supports women and non-binary people who have experienced family violence and/or homelessness to build economic independence and the confidence to recover from trauma.

This program works to rebuild executive functioning skills for participants by setting and achieving small goals across pillars necessary for economic independence such as income and employment; wellbeing; financial management; and career and education.

The Darebin-based program will provide coaching, group work, information sessions and

workshops around financial literacy and employment preparation.





*Second Chance Cycles*

## VACRO (VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE CARE AND RESETTLEMENT OF OFFENDERS)

PROJECT TITLE:

### SECOND CHANCE CYCLES

Second Chance Cycles provides a well-equipped workshop and supportive environment which enables community members and people on community correction orders and day release from prison to volunteer to restore bicycles under the instruction of qualified bike mechanic trainers.

The workshop uses bicycle restoration and customer engagement to foster confidence, develop employment and social skills and improve health and wellbeing.

Participants gain experience and training in bicycle repairs and identifying and solving problems in a work environment. Gaining the use of a repaired bicycle can also assist them gain employment.

# Give with us

The Pathways to Employment Fund is one way the Foundation supports local generosity - now and into the future.

As a strong, independent and community-based resource, the Foundation works to build prosperous, connected and cohesive communities. Our contributions build on the long tradition of Melbourne's north, wherein people collaborate to ensure shared opportunity and choice in life.

Our model allows local donations to be pooled to respond to emerging challenges and to have greater impact for the long term.

Over time, the Foundation has expanded its reach and relevance, with more than 950 people giving gifts, large and small, that have a positive impact on their local community. With \$14 million under management in funds currently under management, there's a growing momentum of partnership with donors of all levels of wealth, demonstrated by over 52 MyFunds giving people and businesses a deeper sense of their own legacy in the region.

Over the past 19 years, the Foundation has given over \$7 million via more than 800 grants to community group across Darebin, Merri-bek and Yarra.



*Breakaway Youth participants*

# Get involved:



## TO CREATE A LEGACY FOR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES IN THE INNER NORTH

A growing number of individuals, families and organisations have established MyFunds that reflect their sustained commitment to the Inner North of Melbourne, and express their priorities as a donor.



## TO INCREASE THE REACH OF EXISTING PROGRAMS BY WORKING TOGETHER

Our donors reflect the diversity of our community. They contribute for different reasons, but are connected by a sense of the importance of place-based giving and philanthropy.

Hundreds of contributions are received every year. Such as through regular workplace donations, gifts in wills, donations to specific causes supported by MyFund or the transfer of assets prompted by wind-up clauses.



## TO SHARE OUR EXPERTISE

The Foundation can point donors to opportunities to invest in our region, provide links to partnerships and programs, and help bring money to life through place-based philanthropy.



## TO VOLUNTEER WITH US

Join our team of talented and committed volunteers who relish sharing their time, talent and networks, to grow the impact and strength of our Foundation community.



## OK... BUT WHAT DO I DO NEXT?

Call us on (03) 8689 1967



The 2026 Pathways to Employment Grant Program is a proud partnership of the Cities of Darebin, Merri-bek and Yarra, IntoWork and the Inner North Community Foundation.

Since 2007, IntoWork has supported the 'Pathways to Employment Fund'. The commitment in 2021 re-affirmed this partnership, with IntoWork providing an annual contribution of over \$200,000 and additional funding that contributes to the core operational costs of the Foundation.

In 2026, more applications were received for the Pathways to Employment Fund than grants available.

If you can, donate today and help people in your local community thrive. Or get in touch to explore how partnerships further extend the reach of the Fund.



**Merri-bek**  
City Council



**into**work









INNER NORTH  
COMMUNITY  
FOUNDATION

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