



In some ways, the community action campaign to “fight” the proposed closure of HELIMED was a great relief to senior management, who in some cases silently supported the community action campaign. The “Save HELIMED” group capitalised on their earlier fund-raising work, development of strong community and industry links, and the development of a high media profile throughout Gippsland. The disaster that was the Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race in the late-1990s was a stroke of luck for the survival of HELIMED. The performance of the HELIMED crews and the accompanying national and international publicity made the early closure of the service practically impossible.

Despite the direct pressure on the regional ambulance service to close HELIMED during the term of the former state government, the service survived and is now thriving as part of a state-wide ambulance helicopter service managed through the Metropolitan Ambulance Service. The community campaign may have also had a significant role in the election of two of the three independent members of Parliament from Gippsland in the 2000 State election. The Kennett Government fell as a result of their inability to win these key parliamentary seats.

Much of the credit for the survival of HELIMED can be attributed to community support for the service and the willingness of its supporters to take community-based political action. The supporters of HELIMED built on the existing support networks that the HELIMED group had established over many years. This included a strong level of staff and community support for the service, service clubs and industry groups throughout Gippsland, and the regional media. These networks, a great deal of determination and some serendipity in the form of the Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race disaster enabled a loose coalition of supporters to undertake an effective media campaign and to engage in a political lobbying campaign to save HELIMED.

The policy implications of this experience for rural and regional communities are that they cannot assume that existing health services will be maintained without their active support. The positive message from this story is that coalitions of community groups can ensure the survival and enhancement of valued health services if they are united and engage constructively in the political process. Investing in community participation and establishing a public profile before threats become evident is worth the effort. And community groups should not be afraid to engage with and use the political system to advance their cause to either establish or maintain their health services. Well-managed community action can be an effective force in the maintenance of services in rural and regional communities.



