LEARNER DRIVER MENTOR PROGRAMS – WHAT’S HAPPENING OUT THERE?
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INTRODUCTION
The evidence is clear that Learner drivers need as much on-road supervised driving experience as possible to help them to become safer drivers. Many community groups around Australia are now helping their Learner drivers to achieve this much needed experience by offering Learner Driver Mentor Programs (LDMPs). In addition to seeking road safety benefits, many communities introduce LDMPs to support licensing for employment and increase other opportunities for the participation of local young people.

Youthsafe, with the support of the NSW Motor Accidents Authority, has been investigating the various LDMP models on offer across Australia.

METHODS
A literature search was undertaken in the first instance to assist in identifying LDMPs in Australia and overseas. This was followed by telephone interviews with LDMP contacts and e-mail surveys where telephone interviews were not possible. The interviews were to determine the current status of LDMPs in Australia, as well as their nature and design. Key challenges for LDMP operators and identifying the support needs for these programs were also examined.

A seminar was also conducted in May 2009, attended by groups and individuals involved in, or interested in being involved in organising LDMPs, as well as policy decision makers. The seminar was not only to showcase various LDMP models and explore a number of issues pertinent to LDMP operation, but for participants to actively provide input into future directions for LDMPs and support needs for communities to run a successful LDMP. This input also fed into the results of our investigations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Information was collected on 30 LDMPs and at the time of interviews and surveys, 22 LDMPs were operating and 8 had ceased to operate. Of the LDMPs identified as currently operational, 6 were located in NSW. The seminar was attended by approximately 80 people, with a ‘graffiti board’ and panel discussion used to capture the knowledge, ideas and concerns of participants in relation to implementing and managing a LDMP.

Issues raised through these mediums included recruitment and training of mentors, retention strategies for Learner drivers, road safety, and other community benefits, as well as challenges faced in delivering a successful LDMP. Results also revealed future prospects for LDMPs, ongoing support needs and the various measures of success.

This review has highlighted a community-based model is best suited to meet the specific needs of local communities and engage the community in the program. However an infrastructure support strategy is needed to assist in operational effectiveness and efficiency and reduce the significant ‘reinventing of wheels’ which is currently the norm. A funding strategy and operational criteria linked to funding would be an important part of an infrastructure support strategy.

Program evaluation should also be further developed and integral to the establishment and conduct of LDMPs with flexibility in application so that issues such as meeting specific local needs and supporting road safety are taken into account.

CONCLUSIONS
LDMPs have been identified as a very promising strategy for addressing some of the equity of access issues for Learner drivers in gaining supervised driving experience.

At the same time LDMPs are well placed to maintain a strong focus on road safety for young drivers, which is the main objective of the requirements for supervised driving during the Learner licence stage.