VCOSS Submission to the IGEM Review of 10 years of emergency management reform.

September 2019

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Introduction

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) is the peak body for the community and social service sector in Victoria. VCOSS supports the community services industry, represents the interests of Victorians facing disadvantage and vulnerability in policy debates, and advocates to develop a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

VCOSS welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Review of 10 years of emergency management reform being undertaken by the Inspector-General of Emergency Management (IGEM).

In May and June 2019, VCOSS and IGEM convened a series of consultation forums with community sector organisations across rural, regional and metropolitan Victoria. VCOSS and IGEM spoke with almost 60 people from 33 different community sector organisations about their experiences and reflections of emergencies and how they are managed. A list of participating consultation locations and participating organisations is available at Appendix 1.

Throughout the consultations we heard from people and organisations that had experienced a range of emergency events including:

- 1983 Ash Wednesday bushfires
- 2003 Eastern Victorian alpine bushfire bushfires
- 2006 Eastern Victoria great divide bushfires
- 2009 Victorian bushfires
- 2010 -11 Victorian floods
- 2015 Wye River bushfire
- 2017 Bourke Street and Flinders Street car attacks
- 2018 North Eastern Victoria floods
- 2018 Barwon South West bushfires
- 2019 Campbellfield factory fire
- 2019 Gippsland bushfires

Significant changes have been and continue to be made in Victoria's emergency management arrangements. Major shifts such as the establishment of Emergency Management Victoria, the all-hazards all-agencies approach and the focus on resilience have continued to transform the way the emergency management sector, and Victorian communities, manage and experience emergencies.

Based on the feedback at the consultation forums as well as drawing on VCOSS' previous emergency management research and policy analysis, VCOSS makes the following recommendations to support the continued enhancement of Victoria's emergency management arrangements:

Recommendations

1. Develop a strategic framework to support the emergency management sector to connect with a range of stakeholders, especially community sector organisations
2. Formally recognise, resource and support the role of community organisations in emergency management at all levels, particularly state and local
3. Ensure the role of the community sector is recognised and addressed in the Emergency Management Planning Guidelines currently being developed
4. Develop a community services framework for emergencies and climate change that will build the resilience of community organisations, their clients and their communities
5. Ensure the emergency management sector continues to work in partnership with the community sector to develop planning and preparedness measures that support people who may be vulnerable
6. Recognise climate change and its impacts, and ensure that emergency management policies align with climate change policies to build the adaptive and resilience capacity of the emergency management sector and of all Victorians
7. Ensure emergency warnings, information and advice is accessible and target groups that may be additionally vulnerable or that face communication challenges
8. Ensure that local relief communications are delivered through a central body
9. Ensure evacuation advice is clear and consistent and provides safe place recommendations
10. Review retirement village legislation to ensure it is in line with other jurisdictions and better ensures the safety of its residents
11. Ensure Victorians have access to flexible and fully-accessible local community spaces on days of high risk
12. Ensure that Relief Centres:
    a. have a central point of contact and information
    b. are accessible for people with disability and meet the needs of other diverse community members
    c. are flexible to allow community and social service organisations to participate
13. Ensure that volunteering is recognised and supported across all areas of emergency management
14. Ensure an ongoing strategic focus on recovery

Emergency planning and preparedness

Emergency planning and preparedness refers to the work of state and local governments, emergency services, non-government organisations, communities and individuals to plan for and be prepared for emergencies.

In response to a range of emergency reviews and inquiries, and in contributing to government emergency management policy development, VCOSS has made a number of emergency planning and preparedness recommendations over the past 10 years including:

- Build and maintain networks and relationships with community organisations to share leadership and responsibility
- Leverage the resources, knowledge and skills of community organisations to build resilience
- Build the capacity of community organisations to improve organisational resilience and client emergency preparedness
- Better meet the needs of diverse communities including people who may be disadvantaged or vulnerable

Since 2009, a range of reforms and initiatives have been introduced in Victoria to improve local and state emergency planning and to encourage organisations, people, families and communities to be better prepared for emergencies.

There has been a state-wide focus on shared responsibility, as well as initiatives such as the *Victorian Preparedness Framework*, the *Community Resilience Framework for Emergency Management* and the VicEmergency website and app. There have also been enhanced preparedness campaigns such as the *Summer Fire Campaign* and *Fire Action Week*.

Local governments have been supported through the introduction of the *Local government emergency management handbook*, and the *Emergency management planning for children and young people Planning guide for local government*. Local Government Victoria has been working with councils and the emergency management sector to clarify the role and enhance the emergency management capability and capacity of local government.

Efforts to support the community sector and people who may be additionally vulnerable have included the *Health and Human Services Sector Emergency Management Policy*, the

Vulnerable People in Emergencies Policy, *the Responding to people who are sleeping rough in extreme weather policy* and the *Family Violence Framework for Emergency Management*.

Emergency service organisations have continued to support individual and community planning through outreach and community events with resources such as *Your Bushfire Plan* and *Get Ready*, while not for profit organisations like Australian Red Cross have worked to encourage people and communities to be prepared through outreach and education using resources such as *RediPlan.*

In addition, a wide range of planning and preparedness pilot projects and programs have been introduced across Victoria using funding from programs such as the *National Disaster Resilience Grants Scheme* and the *National Emergency Management Projects* scheme. Many of these have been highly successful but without ongoing funding most have not been sustainable into the future. Some examples include:

- *Community Services Climate Resilience Program* (DHHS)
- *School Curriculum Natural Hazards Resilience Package* (CFA)
- *Building Pyrenees Shire Community Resilience* (Pyrenees Shire Council)

Pilot programs like these are good ways to learn what works and what doesn't. But they don't allow for widespread or long term change, and when they cease they lose traction and intellectual property. In an effort to create a well-defined pilot, boundaries are drawn around people and systems which can exclude factors critical to success. They also risk creating inefficiencies when new programs start down the track. To ensure systemic change, proven projects need to become stable, funded programs.

Build and maintain networks and relationships to share responsibility

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Develop a strategic framework to support the emergency management sector to connect with a range of stakeholders, including community sector organisations

Building and maintaining networks and relationships is a critical aspect to meeting the goals of shared responsibility and leads to better planning and preparing for emergencies. It directly leads to improved recovery outcomes.[1] There is increasing recognition and acknowledgement by the community sector of the importance of building and maintaining networks and relationships for effective emergency planning and preparedness. During consultations, organisations spoke about the link between social connectivity, preparedness activities, and long-term community resilience. One participant stated, "People don't think that they play a role in emergency management, but they do and are already talking about it without realising it. The shift has been made easier by EMV talking about community connections."

Community organisations have a range of existing networks and relationships, although these have not traditionally been linked with the emergency management sector. Many community organisations stressed the role they could play in emergency management, emphasising their connections with and knowledge of local communities, especially people who are vulnerable.

'Strong cross-sector relationships can help to stop (vulnerable) people falling through the cracks. There needs to be touch points into the community, and emergency management agencies need to know what these are.'

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[1] Gibbs L et al, *Beyond Bushfires: Community Resilience and Recovery Final Report*, University of Melbourne, Victoria, November 2016

However, many organisations noted the lack of connection between local emergency managers and their organisations. Several health and disability services reported they had not been approached by their local government for emergency management planning purposes, despite having clear connections with people who may be vulnerable in an emergency. Other organisations stated there is variation among councils in how proactive and connected to their communities they are.

'Developing social networks and connections is something we need to do and it's particularly important for long term recovery. The EM sector could play a facilitatory role in building community resilience. But instructing communities on how to be resilient won't work.'

Stronger links and partnerships are needed, with a focus on improving emergency planning and preparedness. This should include developing formal frameworks for local councils to engage with community, sector and business leaders. It should also include resourcing and supporting both local governments and community organisations to build on existing relationships and to develop new links and partnerships with a particular focus on vulnerable people.

Organisations emphasised that communities do not have a single entry or contact point. They gave examples of the range of knowledge that sits with community organisations, schools, sporting clubs, community groups, bush nurses and others. Organisations stressed the need for the emergency management sector to better recognise and harness the wide range of possible connections with communities.

'It isn't formal structures that hold a community together – it's connectedness.'

Local governments can also build relationships and networks by increasing membership of their Municipal Emergency Management Planning Committees (MEMPCs). Membership of MEMPCs vary across the state. Some include key local community organisations, but other do not. There is often little connection between smaller community service organisations and MEMPs, despite these organisations having contact with some of the most vulnerable

community members. Some organisations spoke of 'lost opportunities' by not being invited to the EM planning table by local government.

Conversely, in some communities, organisations reported that a range of local agencies and organisations participate in local EM exercises, allowing all parties to build knowledge and relationships.

'We need a regular forum of organisations who don't know how emergency management works. These are the people we need to get together. '

Building networks and relationships between the emergency management sector and the community sector can deliver mutually beneficial outcomes. Trust is critical during an emergency, and developing and maintaining trust takes time. Many organisations spoke about the value of face-to-face conversations and interactions in building relationships. All organisations expressed a desire for networking opportunities.

'How can we systematise the relationships between the emergency management and community services sector?'

Organisations noted that demographic and population changes can be a challenge to building social connections and emergency preparedness. Many organisations spoke about the need for community activities that promote awareness of emergency risks for people who move from the city to rural areas. Some organisations highlighted that this is also relevant to peri-urban areas.

Organisations acknowledged that developing and maintaining connections and networks can be challenging for councils with limited staff and resources. Many organisations also noted the absence of community development workers as having 'hurt community connectivity'. Some organisations suggested that effective emergency planning and preparedness be viewed as community development.

IGEM has stated that collaboration will play an increasing role in emergency management governance, resilience building, capability and capacity development, and effective response

and recovery performance. It states that a strategic framework would help guide, support and provide benchmarks for the sector as it collaborates with cross sector organisations.[2]

'We need to redefine emergency management governance arrangements to bring them closer to people, organisations and the community.'

Leverage the resources, knowledge and skills of community organisations to build resilience

RECOMMENDATIONS

Formally recognise, resource and support the role of community organisations in emergency management at all levels, particularly state and local

Ensure the role of the community sector is recognised and addressed in the emergency management planning guidelines currently being developed.

The National Strategy for Disaster Resilience acknowledges that non-government and community service organisations are at the forefront of strengthening disaster resilience. It states that Australians often turn to these organisations for support or advice, and that their dedicated work is critical to helping communities to cope with, and recover from, a disaster.

Many not-for-profit organisations have experience and expertise in areas including community engagement and education, and various facets of service provision.

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[2] IGEM, *Connecting and collaborating with the private sector and community organisations*, 2019

Importantly, their existing networks and structures reach far into communities, and can effect real change.[3]

The Strategy commits Australian governments to continue to partner with these agencies and organisations to spread the disaster resilience message and to find practical ways to strengthen disaster resilience. It states:

> Working together and drawing on the expertise and capacity of various partners produces far greater results than do individual efforts alone. Partnerships across and within governments, businesses, the not-for-profit sector and the community, will create a well-informed, integrated and coordinated approach to increasing disaster resilience. The result will be a more resilient nation.[4]

Research is increasingly recognising the importance of community organisations and their role in emergency management, particularly given their relationships with people who may be vulnerable. Recent research includes:

- The University of Sydney's *Disability Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction* project that highlights the importance of collaboration with local community sector organisations
- The Bushfire Natural Hazards CRC's *Emergency Volunteering 2030 project*; *Preventable residential fire fatalities in Australia July 2003 to June 2017* report and the current *Catastrophic and cascading events: planning and capability project,* all of which acknowledge the role of community sector organisations as important to building resilience and contributing to more effective emergency management.
- Recent Queensland and Victoria IGEM reports that have similar findings and/or make similar recommendations.[5,6]

The community sector brings a range of skills and experience including:

- high-trust partnering relationships with agencies spanning the three tiers of government
- experience in building resilience
- existing networks and connections

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[3] Council of Australian Governments, *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience*, COAG Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, Canberra, 2011

[4] COAG, *National Strategy For Disaster Resilience*, Council of Australian Governments, 2011

[5] Queensland IGEM, *Efficacy of Recovery Governance*, 2019

[6] Victorian IGEM, *Review of connecting and collaborating with the private sector and community organisations,* 2019

- significant levels of community trust and legitimacy
- community engagement and strengths-based approaches
- unique assets, resources and skills
- a deep understanding of local communities
- a focus on people who may be vulnerable or disadvantaged
- the willingness to contribute to disaster resilience.

There is increasing recognition across Australia of the role of the community in emergency management and at national, state and local levels. Peak bodies are already playing key roles in emergency management. For example the Councils of Social Service have undertaken work directly related to emergency management, including:

- **Victorian Council of Social Service** - since 2009 has provided emergency management policy and advocacy advice, consults with the community sector and local communities, engages and communicates with the community sector, and collaborates with the emergency management sector (2009 – present)
- **Australian Council of Social Service** – in 2013 researched the community sector's capacity to adapt to climate extremes and subsequently developed the Resilient Community Organisations toolkit with and for the community sector to help organisations measure and improve their resilience to disasters and emergencies (2013 – present)
- **Queensland Council of Social Service** - provides information and feedback to and from governments in emergency events and also more recently in climate change adaptation (ongoing)
- **Western Australia Council of Social Service** – from 2017 managed a project to build the resilience and capacity of community organisations in emergencies (2017-18)
- **South Australian Council of Social Service** – currently works with the SA State Government to clarify the roles and responsibilities of community service organisations providing services to people at risk in emergencies.

Community service organisations consulted highlighted the critical link between health, wellbeing and disaster resilience. They emphasised the role they play in supporting the broader resilience of people, families and communities and their increasing roles in disaster resilience.

For example Neighbourhood Houses were consistently identified as helping to build resilience through providing opportunities for connection and through community development, as well as targeted emergency planning and preparedness (as well as relief

and recovery). Recent research shows that Neighbourhood Houses continue to play an important role in engaging and connecting disadvantaged people and those at risk of social isolation, including people with disability, older persons and concession cardholders.[7]

Neighbourhood Houses are able to respond to the circumstances of their community and are increasingly being used as safe places. As a place where people gather informally, they become a source of advice and information and are potentially a great conduit for info dissemination. The Cann River, Buchan, Morwell and Swan Hill Neighbourhood Houses were some of those highlighted as playing active roles in developing and supporting the resilience of their local communities.

Some organisations identified that the EM sector could play a facilitatory role in building community resilience but noted that instructing communities on 'how' to be resilient won't work.

VCOSS recommends the emergency management sector recognise the expertise that is located in community sector organisations and draw on this expertise to build resilience, particularly the local level.

Build the capacity of community organisations to improve organisational resilience and client emergency preparedness

RECOMMENDATION

Develop a community services framework for emergencies and climate change that will build the resilience of community organisations, their clients and their communities.

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[7] Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, *Connecting a diverse Victoria*, 2019

VCOSS has highlighted the need for community organisations to build their organisational resilience. Community sector organisations provide a range of support services that many people will rely on at some point in their lives. They are at the centre of communities and deliver a wide range of services at a local level. They are embedded within the communities they support and are a critical component of our social infrastructure, particularly for people who face disadvantage.

Resilient community organisations can adapt to and cope with challenges like extreme weather and natural disasters as well as the slower impacts of climate change. If well prepared, community sector organisations have the willingness, specialist skills, assets and capacity to make a major contribution to the adaptive and resilience capacity of their clients and the community more broadly.

Research reveals a lack of capacity among organisations to manage disruptions to essential services such as power, water supplies and telecommunications networks. High levels of under-insurance, including for business continuity, are also common among community organisations. Barriers preventing organisations taking these actions include a lack of sector-specific information, as well as inadequate capacity and financial resources.[8]

Resilience building needs to be targeted to the specific strengths, needs and capacity of community organisations. This includes acknowledgement of their aims and values, their role in supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged people, as well as their role in communities and their role in emergencies.

Building the resilience of the community sector will allow it to be better prepared for emergencies, support vulnerable clients with emergency planning, and ensure timely delivery of support services to people impacted by emergencies. It can also support the sector to work more closely with the emergency management sector to build client emergency preparedness and community resilience.

The Victorian government's *10 year Community Services Industry Plan* (CSIP) and first two-year *Rolling Implementation Plan* also commit to developing the ability of community service organisations to prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies, for themselves and the people who use their services.[9]

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[8] Mallon K et al, *Adapting the community sector for climate extremes*, National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility, Gold Coast, 2013
[9] DHHS-VCOSS, *10 year community services industry plan* and *10 year community services rolling implementation plan*, 2018

Throughout the CSIP consultations, organisations stressed the need for resources and supports to increase organisational resilience and capacity so that they can continue to provide crucial services on a day to day basis as well as before, during and after emergency events.

Better meet the needs of diverse communities including people who may be vulnerable or disadvantaged

RECOMMENDATION

Ensure the emergency management sector continues to work in partnership with the community sector to develop planning and preparedness measures that support people who may be vulnerable

VCOSS has recommended a better understanding of the needs of diverse communities for more effective emergency planning and preparedness. Throughout the consultations organisations provided feedback and insights into two areas in particular: people who are additionally vulnerable in the context of emergencies and people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds.

Vulnerable people

The community sector is highly skilled at working with people who are disadvantaged or vulnerable. Community organisations work closely with clients and families to reinforce the qualities and skills that people have to cope or manage daily stress and to navigate through different life situations.

The emergency management sector can work with the community sector to engage people who may be at greater risk during an emergency, and to build their resilience to emergencies and disasters, using approaches that support their strengths, abilities and potential.

Following recommendations made by the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, the Victorian government developed the Vulnerable People in Emergencies (VPE) policy. The Vulnerable Persons Register (VPR) is a part of this policy.

During the consultations there was considerable discussion on the VPR, with almost all organisations agreeing that it is a critical part of emergency evacuation procedures and should be maintained and expanded. Comments from organisations included:

- *We are a disability service provider and prepare emergency plans for our clients. We have nominated some clients for the VPR, however there are people with intellectual disabilities and mobility issues who are highly vulnerable but are not eligible.*

- *The VPR did not activate during recent bushfires even though it should have.*

- *As a local community health centre we are aware of the VPR but don't know a lot about it.*

- *Consent is an issue for the VPR – there are many people who should be on the register that are not. It is not a user-friendly process and there are many caveats that people need to sign. It is very difficult for some people with disabilities to understand and consent to.*

- *The VPR was used in Wye River Fires effectively and VicPol worked well with our organisation.*

- *I think there is more awareness of the VPR but there is confusion as to who the primary provider is. Some providers have no local presence.*

- *There are people in our community who are highly vulnerable but not eligible for the VPR for evacuation support.*

- *The VPR doesn't pick up all vulnerable people - for example those who are elderly and isolated. Many of these people do not use mobile phones or social media. Consent is also an issue.*

- *Our organisation used to nominate people for the VPR but we haven't done so in 3-4 years. This role was managed by the local Community Nurse Manager but she left and no one has picked it up. I'm not even sure how to access information about it.*

- *The VPR doesn't take into account collective vulnerability, for example retirement villages. There are lots of people who, for affordability reasons, are retiring to the country but they have few local connections.*

- *How can emergency managers and emergency service organisations work with Neighbourhood Houses to build a plan for vulnerable people?*

- *It's not that people are inherently vulnerable; it's the system that creates vulnerability for some people. This could be remedied with pertinent questions. For example – do not tell people to leave, ask them if they have access to emergency transport.*

The VPE and VPR have been under review by DHHS since 2017 and further analysis of these from a community sector perspective can be found in VCOSS' *Submission to the Review of the Vulnerable people in emergency policy Discussion Paper.*

Culturally and linguistically diverse communities

Throughout the consultations many organisations noted that emergency planning and preparedness activities are ineffective at targeting culturally and linguistically diverse communities (CALD) communities, particularly those who are new to Australia. In particular, organisations stressed the importance of advising people where to find relevant emergency planning and preparedness information.

> **'A Chinese couple with a young boy arrived in our relief centre – they had no idea fires were burning in the local area and had been directed to the relief centre by police.'**

Organisations noted that levels of awareness in CALD communities regarding hazards and risks are lower than in the mainstream community. Some organisations also stated that CALD community members may have already experienced a disaster, war or trauma, and that further emergency events can trigger retraumatisation. In addition, some CALD community members distrust people in uniforms and may not have a full understanding of the roles of these services in Australia. Others highlighted tourists and the language and communication barriers they can face in accessing or understanding emergency information and warnings, with some pointing to emergency communications in New Zealand as effectively targeting tourists.

Organisations stated that the strength in CALD communities is their existing community connections, and highlighted the opportunity to recognise and harness these.

'Communication through social networks is important and can be very effective, especially for the CALD community.'

There is increasing research and practice to improve emergency management for CALD communities across Australia, although these tend to be project-based and are yet to be embedded within the emergency management sector. Key to reaching diverse communities is to work with the organisations that represent them or work with them on a day to day basis, including community sector organisations.

Ensure climate change and emergency management policies are linked

RECOMMMENDATION

Recognise climate change and its impacts, and ensure that emergency management policies align with climate change policies to build the adaptive and resilience capacity of the emergency management sector and of all Victorians

There is an increasing interdependency between disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation.[10] The 2019 Joint Statement by emergency leaders recognised that:

- Bushfire seasons are lasting longer and longer.
- The number of days of Very High to Catastrophic bushfire danger each year are increasing across much of Australia, and are projected to get even worse.
- Opportunities to carry out hazard reduction burns are decreasing because warmer, drier winters mean prescribed fires can often be too hard to control – so fuel loads will increase.
- Higher temperatures mean that forests and grasslands are drier, ignite more easily and burn more readily, meaning fires are harder to control.
- 'Dry' lightning storms are increasing in frequency, sparking many remote bushfires that are difficult to reach and control.

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[10] Crosweller, M, National Resilience Taskforce, *Australian Journal of Emergency Management Volume* 34, No 3, July 2019

- Fire seasons across Australia and in the northern hemisphere used to be staggered – allowing exchange of vital equipment such as aerial water bombers, trucks and firefighters. The increasing overlap of fire seasons between states and territories and with the USA and Canada will limit our ability to help each other during major emergencies.[11]

More than 80 per cent of Australians are concerned that climate change will result in more droughts and flooding.[12] Victorians are worried about environmental events that will affect them including:

- 65 per cent concerned about severe storms and floods
- 68 per cent concerned about severe bushfires
- 80 per cent say climate change is influencing the frequency of these events.[13]

A recent VCOSS survey found that 36 per cent of people working in Victorian community organisations think about climate change in their work frequently or always and that more than 43 per cent had been affected by extreme weather or disaster in the past 12 months. The most common impacts reported by these organisations included:

- Staff transport was interrupted (50 per cent),
- Clients access to services was affected (46 per cent),
- Demand for services increased (42 per cent),
- Staff were absent from work (37 per cent)
- Staff's heath was affected (25 per cent).[14]

The link between climate change and emergency management is increasingly being recognised. Longer bushfire seasons, increased storms and increased precipitation in some areas will see the emergency management sector busier than ever. Under the *Climate Change Act 2017* the Victorian government has committed to:

- Help the community to understand and manage the risks and impacts of climate change
- Develop climate change adaptation plans and build disaster resilience across Victoria

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[11] Emergency Leaders for Climate Action, *Australia Unprepared for Worsening Extreme Weather*, April 2019
[12] The Australia Institute, *Climate of the Nation 2019*, September 2019
[13] Sustainability Victoria, *Victorians' perceptions of climate change*, 2017
[14] VCOSS, *Resilience of community sector organisations*, 2019 (Survey not yet released).

- Encourage adaptation action across all policy areas and sectors of the economy.[15]

It is important that policies relating to both climate change and emergency management recognise their interdependencies and work cooperatively to build the adaptive and resilience capacity of the emergency management sector as well as Victoria's people, communities and organisations.

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[15] *Climate Change Act 2017* (Vic)

Emergency response and relief

Emergency response refers to the work of emergency service organisations and others who respond to emergency events. Emergency relief refers to the work of local councils, non-government organisations and others who provide immediate, short term relief for people impacted by emergencies.

VCOSS has made a number of recommendations over the past 10 years on ways to improve emergency response and relief. Key recommendations have included:

- Ensure emergency warning information and advice is timely, accurate and accessible
- Ensure evacuation advice and procedures are timely and accurate.

Since 2009 there has been a range of changes designed to improve the capacity and capability of organisations that respond to emergencies, as well as changes to better meet the immediate relief needs of people impacted by emergencies. These changes have included introducing an all-communities, all-emergencies approach, the establishment of the VicEmergency website and app that provide emergency warnings and advice, along with the *Vulnerable People in Emergencies Policy* that is designed to improve the safety and support the evacuation of vulnerable people in emergencies.

Changes have also seen the introduction of sheltering or safe place arrangements, a focus on the needs of animals and pets, and the introduction of Australian Red Cross' *Register. Find. Reunite* service. There has also been a stronger focus on the psychological needs of people immediately following an emergency event with enhanced services available during relief.

Ensure emergency warnings, information and advice is timely, accurate and accessible

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensure emergency warnings, information and advice is accessible and target groups that may be additionally vulnerable or that face communication challenges.

Ensure that local relief communications are delivered through a central body

VCOSS has recommended that emergency warning systems communicate effectively and in a timely manner with the whole community – particularly targeting people who are vulnerable or who may face communication challenges.

Many organisations noted significant improvements in emergency advice and warning information. Most were familiar with and utilise the VicEmergency app, and were familiar with information and advice being provided through CFA and other channels. Many organisations spoke about the importance of accessing information and advice via radio, however highlighted difficulties in accessing FM radio signals, particular in rural and remote areas.

Organisations themselves were keenly aware of emergency warning information and advice and used the VicEmergency app and other channels to inform decisions for both staff and clients.

Organisations also stated that communities were increasingly responsive to warnings and advice, particularly messaging around leaving early and Safe Havens. Organisations agreed that CFA's messaging that immediate help might not be available is clear and unambiguous and that people understand the implications. However some organisations suggested that the *Stay or Go* messaging gave mixed messages.

While most organisations praised the VicEmergency app, some noted areas for improvement. Mobile blackspots and slow or no internet access were problematic for some. Others noted that the community has varying levels of digital literacy and access to the internet and that many people, including older people, do not use smart phones.

> *'Messages assume a lot of factors are in place – language, decision-making abilities, and resources like cars or money.'*

VCOSS has recommended that local relief communications be delivered through a central body that combines emergency management services, government of all levels and local community service organisations. The central body would ensure emergency relief communications:

- begin as early as possible
- are linked to an event-specific website and Facebook page that show all available information and are updated regularly

- specifically address the needs and concerns of local communities
- be expressed in clear, consistent, plain English
- be tailored to local communities and delivered to the various groups within communities
- be provided in easy-to-understand formats with the aid of visual comparisons
- include practical information and advice.

It is important to consult with local community organisations during the preparation of relief communications. This can help ensure that messages are relevant to and will reach all population groups, including people who may be vulnerable or disadvantaged and people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Ensuring local community organisations are provided with relevant advice and information on an ongoing basis enables them to continue to provide up to date information to staff and clients as well as the community more broadly.

Ensure evacuation advice and procedures are timely and accurate

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensure evacuation advice is clear and consistent and provides safe place recommendations

Review retirement village legislation to ensure it is in line with other jurisdictions and better ensures the safety of its residents

Communities must also have access to and specific information about the nature of threats to support decisions and actions around evacuation, particularly for those requiring assistance. Consultation participants reported:

- *During evacuation people don't know where to go.*

- *In Terang the first thing people noticed was the glow in the sky. People started evacuating without the right information, they should never have evacuated. The CFA did not want the community to evacuate, so they said nothing. But people saw the smoke and left. They didn't know there were three different fires.*

- *People doing what they thought was the right thing by evacuating – there was a line of cars heading to Warrnambool but another local fire posed danger to evacuees. There was no advice NOT to evacuate.*

- *When people with a disability or the elderly and frail evacuate where do they go? Hospital can't take them because they are not sick, but evacuation or relief centres are not set up to meet complex medical or other needs. The DHHS evacuation plan is not user friendly – we made our own plan for clients using what knowledge and info we had.*

Some organisations expressed concern about emergency and evacuation planning for older people. Emergency planning concerns about older people tend to concentrate on residential/aged care facilities, overlooking the fact that most older people in Australia live alone in their own homes or with family, with one quarter of older people living alone in a private dwelling.[16] For many older adults, home is where they feel safest.

Older people residing in high density areas, such as social housing or retirement villages, can be cut off from help. If there is no strong sense of community, homebound older people may be invisible to neighbours, rendering them extremely vulnerable in a disaster. A building with no elevator – or an elevator that breaks down in a disaster – may further isolate older adults. If connections to family or friends are fragmented, older adults can be further left to fend for themselves. The risks to older people were highlighted during the September 2019 Sunshine Coast bushfires when firefighters were forced to form a shield around an aged care facility while residents were trapped inside.

Organisations highlighted that many people living in retirement villages are highly vulnerable. Many are frail, do not have mobile phones, and are often not connected with their local community. Unlike other states and territories, Victoria has no legislated evacuation or emergency planning requirements for retirement villages. VCOSS urges a review of legislation to better support and ensure the safety of the increasing number of older people who live in retirement villages and in other shared settings such as social housing.

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[16] Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Where and how do Australia's older people live? Reflecting a Nation: Stories from the 2011 census*, ABS, 2011

'Evacuating people with disabilities is a problem. In Terang we identified there was no safe place to evacuate to. People required access to power there was generators but not enough fuel to keep them running.'

Make sure relief centres are accessible and appropriate for all community members

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensure Victorian have access to flexible local community spaces on days of high risk

Ensure that Relief Centres:

- have a central point of contact and information
- are accessible for people with disability and meet the needs of other diverse community members
- are flexible to allow community and social service organisations to participate

There was considerable discussion across all consultations on the experiences of relief and Relief Centres.

Relief Centres are activated when an emergency event reaches a particular threshold. However many organisations highlighted that while people are encouraged to leave early on high risk days, many people living on low incomes or people who are socially isolated do not have anywhere to go. Organisations indicated that people need local, accessible spaces that are flexible, informal and 'less bureaucratic' so that people and community can contribute services and material goods such as food. Some organisations suggested using community hubs like Neighbourhood Houses or local libraries, but emphasised that these would need additional funding to undertake these roles.

'There were people from our local aged care sitting on hard plastic chairs in the Relief Centre for hours with no food.'

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Many organisations highlighted that Relief Centres do not cater for diverse needs, in particular for women, people with a disability, people fleeing or surviving family violence and older, frail people:

- *Relief centres and community meetings can be problematic for families with intervention orders – only half the family can attend, leaving the other half missing out on vital information and advice.*

- *Women may not have access to female service providers/carers facilities which can be problematic for example in cases of family violence.*

- *Not all needs are catered for in relief centres – there needs to be a greater diversity in relief centres.*

- *Relief centres are not always accessible for people with disabilities, physically or in the provision of information.*

> **'Information is not readily available for people with an intellectual disability or the Deaf. We need Auslan for warnings, relief centres and community meetings.'**

Many organisations pointed out that local community organisations with specialist services can provide significant support and advice to people accessing relief, particularly people with a disability or people who are disadvantaged or vulnerable. But this assistance is not always sought or accepted. For example, one child and family organisation reported they had been 'uninvited' from the local MEMPC, and that offers to assist in Relief Centres were refused time and time again.

> The 2019 bushfires in Gippsland saw Gippsland Disability Advocacy roll up our sleeves and offer support…I made several telephone calls that afternoon to Latrobe City councillors and the CEO, who had advised that a local Relief Centre was being opened at Kernott Hall in Morwell.

The Relief Centre essentially became a refuge for people impacted. Somewhere to attend, feel safe, get valuable support and information. My message to key Latrobe City personnel who were beginning to start managing and open the Relief Centre was, "I can guarantee you of the people impacted a number of them will have a disability and will include carers of people with a disability. Do you have an issue if Gippsland Disability Advocacy attend and have presence at the Morwell Relief Centre?" The response was "Yes please, absolutely."

Latrobe City were brilliant and very quickly Latrobe City staff, councillors, local Lions' Clubs, Country Women's Association, Red Cross, Department of Health and Human Services and the Victorian Council of Churches were all in attendance to provide necessary supports.

Gippsland Disability Advocacy worked closely with the key services and credit to all involved they were wonderful at referring people with a disability impacted to us.

We engaged directly and advocated for 16 families with a disability. Everyone impacted had the opportunity to engage with DHHS and receive necessary relief finances. We sat with each of these families prior to the meeting with DHHS and were subsequently able to discuss the process and advocate accordingly. Similarly, we sat with many of these families and worked through immediate supports, provided comfort and support.

The feedback was positive, and other services at the relief centre stated that people with a disability felt more comfortable and at ease in talking to a disability advocate.

A wonderful spin off with regards to being at the relief centre was working with an elderly couple with the gentleman being the President of the state-wide Polio Self Advocacy Group. Our organisation has been able to assist him and his group with peer support and general administration and it's a wonderful connection.

> My key message to Disability Advocacy organisations is don't be afraid to collectively become involved, build those networks and relationships so that in times of crisis you can be included.
>
> To departmental and council representatives my key message is to consider your local Disability Advocacy service when planning and preparing for emergencies.
>
> *Extract from presentation by Adrian Terranova, Gippsland Disability Advocacy, 2019 VCOSS-MAV Emergency Management Forum, Melbourne*

Organisations also noted that emergency management staff deployed in Relief Centres must have the appropriate skills and knowledge to undertake these roles, and receive adequate debriefing and support. Staff may be dealing with people who are stressed or traumatised.

Coordination of relief efforts was a major theme. Organisations stated that different services and groups assemble quickly and there can be a lot of confusion about who is responsible for what service. Organisations suggested that Relief Centres have a central point of information to direct people to relevant services and groups.

> 2000 people came through our Relief Centre looking for advice and information (not relief). These were people new to our community who had never really experienced an event. The Council did really well. The Relief Centre had areas for talking, sleeping, a kitchen area, tables with services. Communication was the key to its success. Red Cross talked to all agencies and helped keep everyone up to date. The cooperation was a huge success.

Organisations stated that Relief Centres need better coordination, communication and disability support. They emphasised that coordination mechanisms should be taking place in 'peace time' so that relationship and knowledge develops and continues, and that it is important to use local people with local knowledge. Organisations stated:

'People gathered in the relief centre with their pets. They were shocked and confused. The Mayor stood up and explained who did what and who to go to for advice and information. He provided great leadership and coordination role.'

- *The council did well in its response to the fires, in particular in how well they set up the relief centre so that it provided everything people needed (including access to library next door). The council managed communication well.*
- *In relief centres it can be difficult for councils to provide up-to-date information, because it can be hard for them to get info from the emergency management sector about what's going on. One example was given of the people trying to prepare/run a relief centre only finding out that their community was being evacuated when they saw it on the VicEmergency app.*
- *Since 2010 local government staff have turned over three times. During the recent fires there were no local government people who had experience with major bushfire. Because there was no loss of housing, environmental staff were sent to manage the community. No lessons were learnt and similar mistakes to those made in 2009 occurred. Relationships have been severely damaged, and this may have impacts in future emergencies.*
- *I understand that there is a hierarchy of command but VicPol and DELWP were arguing about who was responsible for decision making on some things. Again a centralised coordination and communications function would have been useful.*
- *Organisations in relief centres do not work together – there is very little collaboration or cooperation. Accurate information can be hard to find.*

'Whatever the response is will heavily dictate how recovery goes''

Invest in support and enablers for volunteering

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensure that volunteering is recognised and supported
across all areas of emergency management

Volunteering extends across the arts, education, emergency services, sports, environment, health, aged care, disability, community and social services, the private sector and other vital programs. Volunteering is a vital part of Victoria's social, economic, cultural and environmental fabric, and delivers immense value to Victoria, for communities, places and individuals. In 2011 volunteers provided an economic contribution worth around $23 billion to Victoria, and this is set to reach $42 billion by 2021. In addition to the direct economic benefits provided by a volunteer workforce of more than 1.5 million Victorians, volunteering has many direct and indirect benefits in building the strength and resilience of Victorian communities.[17]

Volunteering in the 21st century is changing, with just some of the trends including:

- An uneven growth in volunteering. Rates of volunteering have grown in sport, religion and education but have declined in community services and emergency management
- Volunteers wanting roles that are flexible, require shorter hours or a shorter term commitment
- Volunteering competing with greater work and caring responsibilities
- Volunteers are less likely to stay for many years in a single role
- The frequency of natural disasters requiring a ready supply of skilled emergency volunteers.[18]

The government and sectors who rely on volunteering are not keeping pace with these changes. In the emergency management sector alone, improving governance structures, particularly at the state level, is considered essential to meet the future needs of volunteering. This includes investing in the provision of supportive and enabling

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[17] Ministerial Council for Volunteers, *Volunteers in Victoria: Trends, challenges and opportunities*, 2017
[18] Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *National Volunteering Strategy: Australia volunteers: Inspiring the volunteer in you*, 2011

infrastructure for volunteering such as state-wide data-bases which can enable engagement, recruitment and preparation of volunteers from across regions to support local government and communities.[19]

Community organisations reported:

- *The critical role of Australian Red Cross volunteers in supporting emergency preparedness and building community resilience*
- *Many areas have reached a limit of volunteering. People's lives are busier and more demanding. The structural dependence on volunteers in rural areas is not sustainable and volunteers are getting older. What will happen in 10 years' time?*
- *It can be very hard to recruit volunteers further west.*
- *Our multicultural organisation has recruited 300 people who would like to be emergency services volunteers but haven't found a way to make it happen*
- *Community-led is not part of the reform. It is ages old, and the development of volunteer services arose out of communities wanting to 'help themselves'.*
- *Red Cross Australia had a successful volunteer recruitment drive recently. We now have two different streams of volunteers: response and proactive (i.e. those that can be called on for sudden response and those that can't). The ease or difficulty of recruiting volunteers can vary among regions. We do tend to get more females than males.*
- *It can be hard to recruit volunteers in areas that are sparsely populated. These sparsely populated areas are sometimes also places where there is less community connectivity because people don't come into town often.*
- *People in small town and communities play a lot of roles and juggle responsibilities with paid work, CFA, caring for children and elderly parents, looking out for neighbours. They are stretched very thin.*

> *'The role of volunteers in raising awareness and building resilience needs acknowledgement and resourcing.'*

Improving cooperation and collaboration, supporting and formalising links and partnerships between community sector organisations and the emergency management sector are key to

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[19] Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC, *Volunteering into the future – disaster events, local governments & communities: Conference paper*, 2018

harnessing the benefits that the community sector and volunteers can bring to emergency management.

In 2018 the Ministerial Council for Volunteers released a range of strategic priorities for volunteers, providing a platform for future policy development and design across the volunteering community in Victoria. The Victorian Government has since committed to develop and implement a Volunteer Strategy to support and enhance volunteerism in Victoria, with a final strategy to be released in late 2021.

Ensuring that all organisations who play a role in emergency management clearly understand their roles and responsibilities, and are resourced to fulfil, them will lead to improved emergency management as well as meaningful and effective support to local individuals, families and organisations impacted by emergencies.

Emergency recovery

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensure an ongoing strategic focus on recovery

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Emergency recovery refers to the work of governments, local communities and others to help restore the lives of those people impacted by emergency events.

Since 2009 there has been a range of changes to the way that governments work with local communities to support them as they recover from emergencies. These have included arrangements to support community recovery across four main areas – the social, built, economic and natural environments. Emerging work from the state government is focusing on resilient recovery - connecting community systems and networks to plan for and support wellbeing, liveability, sustainability, viability, and community connection outcomes for a safer and more resilient future. Local governments also now have access to the *Disaster Recovery Toolkit for Local Government.*

VCOSS has made a number of recommendations over the past 10 years to the emergency management sector on ways to enhance emergency recovery. Key recommendations have included:

- Develop a comprehensive psychosocial framework for recovery
- Recognise the impacts on the wider community and increased demand for community services.

Throughout the consultations organisations provided feedback on the recovery of communities that had been impacted by recent emergencies:

- *There are a lot of legal issues for people with tenancy, documentation, insurance claims, powers of attorney, family violence and a whole host of other issues. It can be really overwhelming for people and they really need support.*

- *12 months on from the fires and people still haven't rebuilt, with insurance and class action issues still playing out. While people were able to access short-term counselling they now need longer term support and someone (like a case manager)*

who can walk with them and help them navigate things like legal/insurance, finance, rebuilding etc.

- *A lot of people don't know what recovery programs are out there and don't come forward. In addition many people don't know how to navigate the service system.*

- *People are suffering – we're seeing mental health issues leading to suicide.*

- *Our local council used an old CFA van to drive around to farmers during the recovery period to provide information and support, because they knew that the farmers wouldn't come into town for centralised meetings. It helped build trust in the council among the community, and it built relationships.*

- *Local government struggles with recovery planning. Recovery is not exercised.*

- *Often the support is required further down the track. The farmers in our area needed support 6-12 months after the incident.*

> ### *'There appears to be little in the way of recovery activities for the city – for example Bourke Street.'*

- *We see a general increased demand for services especially counselling.*

- *Things are worse now than immediately post the event*

- *Farmers can be especially slow to process what has happened – we're seeing them 'falling apart' 6-12 months later and it's the teens in families who are picking up the slack by taking over responsibility for farming duties often at the expense of going to school.*

- *Class action and insurance processes can re-stress people. It's really difficult having to retell your story over and over. Looking at pictures of dead stock or destroyed fences and buildings can really re-traumatise people.*

- *The immediate Psychological First Aid is great but where are people referred after that? What is available? Is it funded? Our community desperately needs counselling, AOD and other services.*

- *Better recovery planning needed with a range of stakeholders.*

- *Bushfires can mean a lot of money coming into communities. We need to make sure vouchers are for local businesses. There's very little compensation or funding available for small businesses and they can really struggle to stay afloat.*

Five years after the 2009 Victorian bushfires, communities were in varying states of recovery, with the smallest and most cohesive communities before the fires typically making the most progress in their recovery.[20] While there was progressive recovery at community level over time, there was also evidence of delayed impacts on individual mental health and extended impacts at five years post bushfires.[21] Ten years after the bushfires the impacts continue to be felt by many, and further research is currently being undertaken by the University of Melbourne to better understand these.

VCOSS stresses that a greater focus be placed on the recovery period by the emergency management sector, and that the long term nature of recovery be recognised.

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[20] Hubbard, B *Report to the Victorian Government of the 2009 bushfire-affected communities five-year consultation*, 2014
[21] Gibbs, L et al, *Beyond Bushfires: Community Resilience and Recovery Final Report. November 2016*, University of Melbourne, 2016

Appendix 1

Consultation forums were held in the following locations in May and June 2019:

- Melbourne
- Geelong
- Ballarat
- Bendigo
- Warrnambool
- Wangaratta
- Morwell
- Bairnsdale

Organisations that participated in the consultations that helped inform this submission include:

- Australian Association of Social Workers
- Australian Multicultural Alliance
- Australian Red Cross
- Ballarat Community Legal Centre
- Bendigo Community Health Centre
- Callignee and Traralgon South Emergency Committee (CBEM)
- Calvary Care
- Cann River Community House
- Colac Area Health
- Cooinda Terang Inc
- DHHS
- Echo Youth and Family Services
- Emerald Neighbourhood House
- Humanist Society of Victoria
- Gippsland Disability Advocacy Inc
- Gippsland East Local Learning and Employment Network
- Glenelg Southern Grampians Primary Care Partnership
- Karden/Melba Support Services
- LaTrobe Community Health Service
- LaTrobe Health Advocate
- Lions Club
- Lord Mayors Charitable Foundation
- Melbourne City Mission

- Merri Health
- Quantum
- Resilient Melbourne
- The Salvation Army
- The Tipping Foundation
- Uniting (Victoria and Tasmania) Ltd
- Upper Murray Regional Neighbourhood House Network
- Upper Hume Primary Care Partnership
- Western District Health Service
- Women with Disabilities Victoria