

---

# VICTORIAN FLOODS REVIEW

---

3 June 2011

VCOSS Submission



# ABOUT VCOSS

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) is the peak body of the social and community sector in Victoria. VCOSS works to ensure that all Victorians have access to and a fair share of the community's resources and services, through advocating for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society. VCOSS members reflect a wide diversity, with members ranging from large charities, sub-sector peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups and individuals involved in social policy debates.

VCOSS is committed to living out the principles of equity and justice, and acknowledges we live in a society where people are interdependent of one another. VCOSS respects the land we live in and recognises the Aboriginal custodians of the country. VCOSS is committed to reconciling all injustices with Aboriginal Australians. The VCOSS vision is one where social well being is a national priority, and:

- ❑ ensures everyone has access to and a fair share of the community's resources and services;
- ❑ involves all people as equals, without discrimination; and
- ❑ values and encourages people's participation in decision making about their own lives and their community.

**Authorised by:**

Cath Smith, Chief Executive Officer

© Copyright 2011 Victorian Council of Social Service

**Victorian Council of Social Service**

Level 8, 128 Exhibition Street  
Melbourne, Victoria, 3000  
+61 3 9654 5050

**For inquiries:**

Carolyn Atkins  
Deputy Director  
E: carolyn.atkins@vcoss.org.au

Jess Fritze  
Policy Analyst  
E: jess.fritze@vcoss.org.au

# CONTENTS

About VCOSS .....	1
Introduction .....	3
Overview .....	4
Summary of recommendations.....	5
The impact of flooding on communities: unique challenges and context.....	7
Relief and recovery.....	8
Psychosocial recovery .....	8
The need for community development approaches.....	9
Insurance .....	10
Housing and relocation.....	10
Response .....	11
Warnings, public information and communication of risk.....	11
Evacuation.....	12
Impact assessment.....	12
Grants .....	13
Coordination, data management and funding .....	13
Coordination of relief and recovery effort .....	13
Mismatch between scale of incident and responsible agencies.....	14
Funding arrangements.....	15
Data management, efficiency and privacy.....	17
Learning from emergencies: response and recovery evaluation .....	17

# INTRODUCTION

VCOSS welcomes the opportunity to respond to the *Victorian Flood Review*. VCOSS congratulates the Government for initiating this Review and the Panel for its efforts in engaging flood affected communities directly in consultations. This review process allows for a wide range of stakeholders to provide their feedback on the flood response and recovery efforts with the opportunity to reform policy, funding and operations to improve outcomes for communities in future events of this type.

In the preparation of this submission VCOSS has consulted with community sector organisations in areas affected by the floods of late 2010 and early 2011. VCOSS is currently planning a series of roundtables with community sector organisations (CSOs) and local governments working with flood affected communities, and will also make the outcomes of these discussions available to the Review.

# OVERVIEW

The extensive flooding which affected much of northern, western and central Victoria in late 2010 and early 2011 has had profound impacts on communities and has tested Victoria's emergency preparation, response, and recovery systems. The representatives of community sector organisations (CSOs) whose feedback contributed to this submission praised the extraordinary effort and commitment of emergency services, local, state and federal government departmental staff and community members in responding to the floods under difficult circumstances.

In addition, many reflected on the increased coordination, improved communication and strong response and recovery frameworks which have been developed following the 2009 Victorian Bushfires. The general conclusion is that the revised systems, processes and relationships now in place facilitated a better response for affected communities.

Key points raised included:

- ❑ the positive impact of effective preplanning, strong engagement and relationships with key community stakeholders in providing a coordinated and effective response;
- ❑ the critical role of case workers in assisting affected community members with insurance, access to grants and referral to other services;
- ❑ wider recognition within government of the long term impacts of emergencies on communities and processes in place to support longer term recovery; and
- ❑ the importance of using service models appropriate to affected communities such as rural outreach.

However, a number of issues were identified which need to be addressed to ensure that support is available to those still experiencing the ongoing economic and social impacts of the floods and to ensure that Victoria is better prepared for future events.

In particular CSOs highlighted the need for:

- ❑ funding arrangements for the provision of recovery support services such as counselling and case work that provide greater certainty to CSOs and are finalised more quickly following an emergency event;
- ❑ adequate resourcing to support local emergency planning and partnership with key local community sector organisations and other community stakeholders;
- ❑ funding and service delivery arrangements that allow CSO's to flexibly respond to community support needs as they arise in the medium and longer term;
- ❑ responses which incorporate community development approaches to recovery including funding neighbourhood houses in their role as community hubs.
- ❑ better and more authoritative warning and communication systems to support community response and minimise impacts; and
- ❑ a review of the division of responsibility between local and state government in disaster planning response and recovery to align better with resources and capacity.

Flood is a slow burn crisis with lasting social and economic impacts. Sustained, long term and flexible economic and psychosocial supports which address both individual and community support needs will be critical to prevent escalating impacts and to support community recovery.

# SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

To support communities recovering from the Victorian floods and to build capacity to respond to future emergency events VCOSS recommends that the Victorian Government:

- ❑ support reforms to the insurance industry, consumer information and advice which improves access to affordable insurance products which provide adequate coverage for flood damage;
- ❑ continue to fund case workers and financial counselling services to provide advice and advocacy to flood affected communities and following future emergencies;
- ❑ continue to invest in employment and apprenticeship support for affected communities;
- ❑ ensure that floods responses programs, investment and policy adequately addresses the impacts of the failure of the insurance safety net in the medium and long term;
- ❑ ensure that housing support programs prioritise an appropriate response to individual circumstances rather than pre-established timelines;
- ❑ consider options for further supporting households with the costs and impacts of relocation and those living in damaged houses;
- ❑ consider options for assisting households living in damaged houses to manage energy bills over winter;
- ❑ ensure that communities have access to timely, accurate and specific information about the nature of threats to support evacuation for those requiring assistance and minimise damage to property;
- ❑ develop and implement better and more authoritative warning and communication systems to support community response and minimise impacts;
- ❑ review evacuation procedures for aged care facilities to increase coordination, iron out implementation issues and ensure clarity of roles;
- ❑ ensure more coordinated planning for the evacuation of vulnerable population groups outside residential aged care services;
- ❑ ensure that up to date local socio-economic, demographic, infrastructure and asset information is available for individual communities to be incorporated in impact assessments and recovery planning;
- ❑ revise impact assessment methodology to take into account delayed impacts from flooding so that the extent of damage is fully captured;
- ❑ continue to build on the Victorian Psychosocial Recovery Framework in emergency recovery but revise implementation to ensure more timely delivery of response services;
- ❑ continue to provide psychosocial support to frontline staff;
- ❑ continue to provide mental health first aid and community mental health forums but earlier in the recovery process;
- ❑ continue to support for the use of rural outreach models in funded recovery activities;

- ❑ provide timely funding to neighbourhood houses in areas affected by emergency to ensure they are able to provide essential community support and information;
- ❑ ensure that psychosocial support services are able to flexibly respond to emerging needs in the medium and long term;
- ❑ investigate options to further simplify grant applications and ensure flexible options for assessing eligibility for other support;
- ❑ continue to support case worker positions following emergencies;
- ❑ review the role of local government in emergency management, especially for large scale disasters to ensure that the division of responsibility between local and state government in disaster planning response and recovery better aligns with resources and capacity;
- ❑ increase funding for emergency management staff within local government to ensure capacity for effective planning, communication and community engagement and a consistent response across the state;
- ❑ support and resource key CSOs to participate in emergency planning, networks and training;
- ❑ ensure that government staff in emergency management positions have the skills necessary to lead responses at times of emergency and work with people in crisis.
- ❑ revise funding provision for essential community recovery services to ensure timely confirmation and transfer of funds to CSOs providing recovery services;
- ❑ review funding for recovery activities to ensure that management, supervision and organisational infrastructure costs are adequately accounted for;
- ❑ revise the funding arrangements for emergency management activities, particularly those that take place across more than one local government jurisdiction;
- ❑ review data management and referral systems to ensure that existing systems and best practice privacy is in place as much as possible; and
- ❑ ensure that debriefing and evaluation processes occur at the local, regional and state level.

# THE IMPACT OF FLOODING ON COMMUNITIES: UNIQUE CHALLENGES AND CONTEXT

Flooding is a slow burn crisis with long term and pervasive economic and social impacts. The damage to property, loss of livestock, machinery and fencing as well as inundation of homes, businesses and community facilities has had a profound affect in many communities.

Due to the nature of flooding and the number of flood events over a relatively short period of time, a single local government area could be experiencing preparation for inundation, immediate crisis, relief and recovery phases simultaneously. This, combined with flooding of transport infrastructure, presented particular challenges for those involved in emergency management on the ground.

The social and economic context in which the Victorian floods occurred also presented specific challenges. The floods occurred in areas which had experienced over a decade of financial hardship from prolonged drought that left many local households and businesses carrying high levels of debt. The floods also had different socioeconomic outcomes across communities with some people benefiting from high rainfall and bumper (if damaged) crops while others lost livelihoods, productive assets and homes.

In addition, the timing, scale and profile of the Queensland floods limited the availability of philanthropic support to Victorian flood affected communities.

Representatives from health and community sector organisations (CSOs) have consistently reported to VCOSS that they have concerns for the long term economic and psychosocial recovery of individuals and families affected by the floods – partly due to the loss of hope that the floods represented following the breaking of the drought. Many people are still dislocated from their communities, living in their damaged homes or temporary accommodation and facing uncertain financial futures. Consistent with current research on the psychosocial impacts of disasters, there is an expectation that impacts on communities are likely to spike six months and twelve months and longer after the events with a higher demand for support services at these times.<sup>1</sup>

In this context, key issues of insurance, housing and relocation continue to have significant impacts on affected communities.

## Relief and recovery

### Psychosocial recovery

Addressing economic and psychosocial recovery of communities following emergencies is critical both in ensuring that people are able to get back on their feet and in preventing disaster impacts escalating. Research literature supports the critical importance of community development approaches and supports which are tailored to the different support needs of men and women, as well as children and young people.<sup>2</sup> There is also evidence that psychosocial support interventions are particularly important for communities and individuals already experiencing disadvantage, social or economic stress prior to the emergency event.<sup>3</sup>

The development of the *Victorian Psychosocial Recovery Framework* has been an important step in improving responses to the social and community impacts of emergencies. CSOs consulted for this submission commented that, in general, the Victorian emergency management system has a robust and responsive approach to community recovery. There appears to be greater understanding within government of the long term nature of recovery and the importance of engaging communities in decision making than following previous events. This is shown by earlier commitments to funding recovery services at the local level with timeframes more closely reflecting best practice, rather than the very short term funding initially offered following the 2009 Victorian Bushfires.

The employment of Flood Recovery Officers and case workers was viewed as particularly beneficial in the context of the floods, drawing on rural outreach models that act as a gateway to other services as required. These workers have been able to offer additional support in assisting with insurance claims and supporting access to the range of supports available.

Increased funding to support counselling services, case management, financial counselling services, rural financial counselling and mental health first aid training are all welcome initiatives. There was strong feedback that the greater clarity and knowledge about the types of support needed to assist communities following large scale events facilitated a coordinated response. However, a number of CSOs suggested that these supports need to be in place earlier following an emergency event to better support communities. For example, mental health first aid training provided by Beyond Blue and community mental health forums have been a highly valued intervention. However, it was highlighted that these interventions would be more effective in the first weeks following an emergency event rather than several months later. This was also identified following the 2009 Victorian bushfires.

Regions where lead agencies and response roles were able to be designated quickly, either due to effective pre-planning or strong local relationships and communication, were able to offer more support to their communities earlier in the recovery process.

The formal provision of psychosocial support to frontline staff, many of whom were affected by the flooding themselves, was seen as a particularly important intervention and one which is often overlooked in emergency management.

The use of rural outreach models developed by and for rural communities was seen a valuable approach to psychosocial service delivery. Outreach through phone calls and home visits has provided an important and culturally appropriate mechanism to provide both direct assistance and referral to ongoing support both for issues directly associated with the floods and underlying financial, health or social issues. These models have also

been effective in engaging people who typically do not access support services or benefits.

The formal evaluation of the psychosocial response to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires undertaken by Australian Healthcare Associates for the Department of Health would be a valuable resource for the Panel in considering the most effective approaches to support affected communities and inform reflection on the incorporation of learning from this event into current policies and processes.

#### **Recommendations:**

- ❑ **continue to build on the Victorian Psychosocial Recovery Framework in emergency recovery but revise implementation to ensure more timely delivery of response services;**
- ❑ **continue to provide psychosocial support to frontline staff;**
- ❑ **continue to provide mental health first aid and community mental health forums but earlier in the recovery process; and**
- ❑ **continue to support for the use of rural outreach models in funded recovery activities.**

#### The need for community development approaches

It is important to understanding the demographics of affected communities so as to more appropriately target recovery efforts. For example, in Castlemaine, some residents inundated by flooding were permanent residents of the local caravan park and had very limited resources to fall back on when their homes were flooded. Groups in the community who are already disadvantaged or socially marginalised may require different responses to those who have strong family and community networks which they are able to utilise in an emergency.

Neighbourhood houses have functioned as critical places of information and support, particularly in smaller communities with limited social infrastructure. Despite this, neighbourhood houses were not able to secure even modest requests for additional funding to support coordinator positions as had been provided following the 2009 Victorian Bushfires. This meant that coordinators effectively had no choice but to extend their role in a voluntary capacity. Neighbourhood houses play a critical role in community recovery. Interestingly, the value of such infrastructure is evident where in one community where a local neighbourhood house did not exist, residents formed their own community space to replicate this important function as a place where the local community can come together for informal support and locate information.

CSOs also emphasised the importance of community development approaches to recovery – especially where there had been sizable differences in impact in different parts of the community or where particular social groups had been substantially more or less affected than the majority. Community strengthening activities are likely to become more important over time as fatigue and frustration begin to affect communities and differences in impact are more noticeable.

#### **Recommendations:**

- ❑ **provide timely funding to neighbourhood houses in areas affected by emergency to ensure they are able to provide essential community support and information; and**
- ❑ **ensure that psychosocial support services are able to flexibly respond to emerging needs in the medium and long term.**

## Insurance

Issues with insurance have greatly contributed to the stress and anxiety experienced by flood affected communities.

Many people affected by the floods have found that their insurance policy does not cover the damage caused by the floods or the insurance payment has been far less than expected. In addition, the processing of claims has been significantly delayed, creating further stress and anxiety. These issues and ongoing uncertainty are impeding the social and economic recovery of communities. Issues about the inadequacy and lack of clarity about flood and water damage coverage have been widely raised in relation to the Queensland floods and other flood events. It was noted by many CSOs consulted for this submission that those who are able to strongly advocate to insurance companies are more likely to receive compensation. This points to the critical role of case workers and financial counsellors who have the skills to provide advice and advocacy on behalf of people who because of trauma, exhaustion, education level or personal circumstances are not able to strongly advocate for themselves. Inadequate insurance coverage and the financial hardship this causes is a fundamental aspect of the context in which local and state government recovery programs and community supports operate, and to which they need to respond.

In this context the additional state and federal government investment in financial counselling services, employment and apprenticeship support has been crucial. Some businesses and households may not have the financial resources to recover from the floods. Additional support options must be considered in these cases.

### Recommendations:

- ❑ **support reforms to the insurance industry, consumer information and advice which improves access to affordable insurance products which provide adequate coverage for flood damage;**
- ❑ **continue to fund case workers and financial counselling services to provide advice and advocacy to flood affected communities and following future emergencies;**
- ❑ **continue to invest in employment and apprenticeship support for affected communities; and**
- ❑ **ensure that floods responses programs, investment and policy adequately addresses the impacts of the failure of the insurance safety net in the medium and long term.**

## Housing and relocation

Housing has been a significant issue in many flood affected areas where there is an extremely limited supply of public and rental housing. While this is not an issue that can be addressed in an emergency management context, it is an important consideration in the planning of recovery supports and services.

Many residents affected by flooding needed to relocate out of their community to stay with family or friends. While this has been an essential coping strategy, the long distances involved are contributing to high transport costs for some families and placing financial strain on some households providing this support.

In addition, a large number of vehicles were damaged during the floods. This presented transport challenges for people in the gap between the floods and the receipt of vehicle

insurance payments. Community transport services in some communities were able to provide support during this time.

The Department of Human Services (DHS) provided housing support to households affected by the floods through the Office of Housing for a period of three months. Some people who accessed this support are now being asked to pay bond and rent despite there being no change in their circumstances. Others who were able to live with family or friends initially are now no longer able to continue this arrangement due to financial and relationship stress and are seeking housing support. It is crucial that the rules and processes around essential supports such as housing retain the flexibility to respond to individual circumstances.

CSOs also identified that a number of residents are living in houses that have no wall or floor coverings, due in part to inadequacy of insurance coverage and delays in processing claims. There are concerns about health impacts as winter approaches and people's ability to adequately heat these houses including concerns about the likely high cost of energy bills due to running inefficient heaters in uninsulated and unsealed properties.

There are ongoing concerns also about continued exposure to mould and the effect of this on respiratory conditions, especially for older people.

#### **Recommendations:**

- ❑ **ensure that housing support programs prioritise an appropriate response to individual circumstances rather than pre-established timelines;**
- ❑ **consider options for further supporting households with the costs and impacts of relocation and those living in damaged houses; and**
- ❑ **consider options for assisting households living in damaged houses to manage energy bills over winter.**

## Response

### Warnings, public information and communication of risk

Accurate, timely and authoritative emergency warning systems are particularly important to community and health services that need to balance the risks of flooding with those of evacuation for frail and ill patients or residents.

CSOs have highlighted that the flood information available to these organisations in some instances was inadequate to ensure that decisions regarding evacuation could be made confidently.

Services relied in some cases on word of mouth information provided by community members or the observations and predictions of staff where authoritative information was unavailable, in one case due to faulty flood detection equipment.

The allocation of funding to repair and improve Victoria's flood warning system is very welcome. Greater engagement with CSOs requiring warnings to support evacuation prior to emergency events will also increase confidence in the system and understanding of key actions required in response.

More adequate early warning systems would also allow residents in areas likely to be affected to remove personal belongings and ensure that vehicles are relocated to areas where they are less likely to be inundated thus limiting the financial impact of the event.

More effective early warning systems are also critical for those who require assistance to evacuate.

**Recommendations:**

- ❑ **ensure that communities have access to timely, accurate and specific information about the nature of threats to support evacuation for those requiring assistance and minimise damage to property; and**
- ❑ **develop and implement better and more authoritative warning and communication systems to support community response and minimise impacts.**

## Evacuation

Evacuation procedures were reported to be generally effective with good systems in place to identify free beds in the aged care system. However, some coordination issues were identified. A number of residential aged care services experienced difficulties in relocating their residents including difficulties accessing sufficient staff, communication issues with patient transport services resulting in residents being transferred to incorrect facilities and difficulties accessing the federal Department of Health and Aging after hours.

Other CSOs commented that greater coordination and clarity of roles was required at the regional level.

One CSO reported that a number of older people who had been living in a private residential facility were brought to their service to be evacuated from the area. While the CSO was able to provide an effective and appropriate response this additional challenge and felt it appropriate in the circumstances, this suggests that a more coordinated approach to evacuation of vulnerable people outside the residential aged care sector would be beneficial.

**Recommendations:**

- ❑ **review evacuation procedures for aged care facilities to increase coordination, iron out implementation issues and ensure clarity of roles; and**
- ❑ **ensure more coordinated planning for the evacuation of vulnerable population groups outside residential aged care services.**

## Impact assessment

Impact assessment that is able to adequately capture not only the level of damage but also the specific context of affected communities is critical in guiding effective and appropriate responses. Processes that are better able to capture up to date information about social and economic conditions of communities affected by disaster and bring this information into response planning will allow for more targeted responses to be implemented in a more timely and effective manner.

Some CSOs delivering response services commented that the rapid impact assessment procedure employed to assess the scale of the damage was a very useful process in attempting to quantify initial impact. However, the effects of flooding, in particular the delayed growth of mould, can make it difficult to accurately assess the number of properties uninhabitable. For flooding, procedures which are better able to update the extent and nature of damage over time may be needed.

### **Recommendations:**

- ❑ **ensure that up to date local socio-economic, demographic, infrastructure and asset information is available for individual communities to be incorporated in impact assessments and recovery planning; and**
- ❑ **revise impact assessment methodology to take into account delayed impacts from flooding so that the extent of damage is fully captured.**

## Grants

While the range of emergency grants available has provided welcome relief to many affected households, CSOs working with communities have found that there are both cultural and practical barriers to people accessing these payments. CSOs reported that people in crisis found the complexity and length of forms overwhelming and required assistance in completing them. Some households had chosen not to access grants despite being entitled to receive them, at least initially. This suggests that windows for accessing grants should be flexible and that the use of receipt of emergency grants as the basis for other assistance should be used with caution as this may exclude some people affected who chose not to access initial grants but may benefit from other supports available to them.

### **Recommendations:**

- ❑ **investigate options to further simplify grant applications and ensure flexible options for assessing eligibility for other support; and**
- ❑ **continue to support case worker positions following emergencies.**

## Coordination, data management and funding

### Coordination of relief and recovery effort

CSOs praised the efforts staff from a range of state and federal government departments as well as local governments in their response to the floods. They commented in particular on the noticeable and welcome improvement in the coordination of relief and recovery efforts in this event. Foodbank Victoria for example spoke of greater clarity in responsibilities and processes and more effective communication between emergency relief providers through the co-location of staff.

A number of CSOs commented on the effectiveness of local emergency plans and the speed and coordination with which recovery centres and temporary medical centres were established.

One organisation commented that their local government had chosen not to activate a full emergency response and that this may have contributed to reduced coordination of recovery efforts in the area.

As in the 2009 Victorian bushfires, a number of key factors appear to influence the effectiveness of local response and recovery. These include:

- ❑ well developed emergency management plans where all key stakeholders have been engaged and share an understanding of their roles and responsibilities;
- ❑ dedicated and skilled emergency management staff located in local council;
- ❑ strong and effective existing relationships between key response and recovery agencies including across levels of government and between government stakeholders and CSOs; and

- pre-existing networks or communication forums which facilitate these relationships.

### **CASE STUDY: Northern Mallee Critical Incident Support Team**

The Northern Mallee Critical Incident Support Team is a network of local CSOs who came together six years ago following a serious road accident in Mildura. The group aimed to ensure that learning from this event, which had a significant impact on the community of Mildura, was maintained and emergency response capacity further developed in the local area. For example, this network has organised regular training in mental health first aid.

The group meets irregularly (as needed) but has fostered the development of strong local relationships between different organisations and key staff to support more coordinated and effective emergency response and recovery.

Stakeholders from the local area commented on the effectiveness of the local response to the floods which affected some 3100 households in the area. In particular, stakeholders commented on the early identification and clear understanding of roles for local government and various community organisations which ensured the smooth operation of the recovery centre and effective referral pathways to supports for people impacted by the flooding.

### Mismatch between scale of incident and responsible agencies

The emergency management system in Victoria relies heavily on local government to plan, prepare for, respond to and assist communities to recover from emergencies. Yet there are huge variations across the state in the resources, staffing and expertise in local governments to undertake emergency management functions. Some local governments with strong rates bases are able to employ numerous dedicated emergency management staff – others, often smaller and relatively resource poor local governments, may not have a single dedicated position. This greatly affects the capacity of local governments to respond in a consistent manner, particularly to large scale emergencies.

Best practice emergency management planning requires strong community engagement to build trust, clarity and understanding of the various roles of different organizations in different types of emergency scenarios. Emergency management at the local level requires a range of skills including planning, stakeholder and community engagement, leadership in times of crisis and, following events, the skills to effectively work with people who have experienced trauma. With inadequate staff, resources and training, it is difficult to ensure that all these skills are available to support local communities.

### **Recommendation:**

- ❑ **review the role of local government in emergency management, especially for large scale disasters to ensure that the division of responsibility between local and state government in disaster planning response and recovery better aligns with resources and capacity;**
- ❑ **increase funding for emergency management staff within local government to ensure capacity for effective planning, communication and community engagement and a consistent response across the state;**
- ❑ **support and resource key CSOs to participate in emergency planning, networks and training; and**
- ❑ **ensure that government staff in emergency management positions have the skills necessary to lead responses at times of emergency and work with people in crisis.**

### Funding arrangements

Funding arrangements effect the capacity of CSOs to deploy staff and provide required support services – and the sustainability of these services once they are established.

The need for social support services and coordination positions - including counselling, case management, support for front line staff and recovery coordination workers - following large scale emergencies is widely recognised. Given this, emergency recovery funding processes should ensure that the providers of these services are identified early and receive adequate funding immediately following an emergency event which can then be subsequently increased to meet any additional demand that emerges.

Stakeholders from local government and some health services praised the flexibility in funding arrangements provided by state government departments. In particular, the decision to allow local governments to define their own Rural Coordinator and Flood Recovery positions enabled local governments to define roles around skills and capacity gaps.

However, a key issue identified by CSOs was the significant delay in confirmation and transfer of funds for support services such as counselling and case work. In some cases, confirmation that funding would be provided, even for services provided at the direct request of DHS, did not occur until over two months after the floods. The transfer of funds was even further delayed.

To compensate for this delay, CSOs utilised existing staff and internal resources to cover costs of service provision, in some cases causing financial strain on the organisation. CSOs which were able to increase the hours of existing staff were able to manage the increased demand, however they identified that where staff are already working at full capacity this is not an option. Where organisations were required to redeploy existing staff this had the effect of blowing out waiting lists for people accessing these services which in turn has created flow on social impact beyond those directly affected by flooding. Other CSOs had to delay the recruitment of staff until funding arrangements had been finalised and confirmed. This is a significant issue in regional and rural areas where recruitment of qualified staff can take longer due to skills shortages. In some cases CSOs reported that they were only now (in late May) able to finalise recruitment of staff due to delays in the finalisation of funding. This ultimately impacts on the support able to be provided in a timely manner to communities.

In addition, in some cases organisations received funding which did not cover the full cost of service delivery, in particular management costs, travel and equipment for staff. This is

especially concerning for services in rural and regional areas where transport is a higher service delivery cost. This issue was already raised by CSOs following the 2009 Victorian bushfires. The particular circumstances of the event also need to be taken into account including the availability of suitable and undamaged venues to deliver services and additional costs that may be incurred by organisations as a result.

State-wide CSOs face additional challenges around funding. Funding arrangements under the Emergency Management Manual of Victoria (EMMV) do not adequately reflect statewide responses. For example, statewide services such as the Red Cross who provide centralised back-end operations to support their role under the emergency management arrangements are then required to recoup the costs of their operations through local governments. This in turn puts additional strain and administrative burden on resource poor local governments that may also be directly experiencing the impacts of the emergency event on their staff and premises.

There is substantial anxiety in some CSOs and businesses that they will not be able to recoup expenditure in a sufficiently timely way and this inhibits involvement in the recovery effort. This is both inappropriate and inefficient. In Queensland, agencies with dedicated and pre-determined emergency management roles are able to monthly bill the state government for the cost of agreed activities. A similar system in Victoria would increase the efficiency of emergency operations and remove the disincentive to participate.

#### **CASE STUDY: Bendigo Community Health Service**

Bendigo Community Health Service (BCHS) was approached by DHS to provide secondary support to both front line staff in flood affected areas, many of whom had themselves been impacted by the flooding, and DHS regional staff. BCHS began taking referrals for this program in early February but confirmation that funding would be provided to cover costs was not received until April.

At the time of writing (late May) the funding had yet to be received. In addition, the funding offered at confirmation for this service did not cover the full costs incurred by BCHS including high travel costs involved in providing support to staff in areas outside the BCHS catchment area and the lack of availability of appropriate counselling spaces in affected communities (due to flood damage).

The cost to the organisation of managing this service and providing professional supervision to their staff has also not been accounted for. This situation has resulted in BCHS having to cover the cost of this much needed service for some time - leading to strain on organisational finances.

This situation where not-for-profit CSOs have needed to rely on internal resources and experienced unnecessary delay in being able to confirm funding for their work – even when it has been requested by local or state government – has created unnecessary financial

stress for organisations and delayed recruitment of staff due to uncertainty. The result is that important recovery services have been delayed in some cases - and waiting lists for non-flood related services have blown out in others – as organisations have struggled to manage this financial strain while meeting the needs of their communities and obligations under local emergency response plans.

**Recommendations:**

- ❑ **revise funding provision for essential community recovery services to ensure timely confirmation and transfer of funds to CSOs providing recovery services;**
- ❑ **review funding for recovery activities to ensure that management, supervision and organisational infrastructure costs are adequately accounted for; and**
- ❑ **revise the funding arrangements for emergency management activities, particularly those that take place across more than one local government jurisdiction.**

### Data management, efficiency and privacy

In some cases existing referral database systems were not utilised by DHS when referring to CSOs. This raises both duplication and privacy issues. A number of CSOs raised concerns about the privacy of personal information in referrals. While it was acknowledged that emergency situations legally suspend some privacy provisions, there was a strong view that this should not occur where alternative communication pathways or processes can be easily employed to protect privacy.

**Recommendation:**

- ❑ **review data management and referral systems to ensure that existing systems and best practice privacy is in place as much as possible.**

## Learning from emergencies: response and recovery evaluation

A number of CSOs noted that it will be critical to ensure that what has been learned about emergency response and recovery from these floods is adequately reflected on, documented and used effectively to drive further improvement in emergency management policies and processes at the organisational, local, regional and state level.

The funding of evaluation capacity, such as funds for research and coordination provided to the Financial and Consumer Rights Centre, has been particularly welcomed by the community sector. This funding will support research into the role of financial counselling and the experiences of people affected by the floods and will be critical in informing future responses.

Further evaluation is required of the psychosocial response, similar to that undertaken following the 2009 Victorian Bushfires.

**Recommendation:**

- ❑ **ensure that debriefing and evaluation processes occur at the local, regional and state level.**

---

## References

<sup>1</sup> Department of Human Services, *After the bushfires: Victoria's psychosocial recovery framework*, Victorian Government, Melbourne, September 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Health, *Community recovery after the 2009 Victorian bushfires: a rapid review*, Victorian Government, Melbourne, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Health, 2009.