

Easing the crisis:

Reducing risks for people experiencing homelessness in disasters and emergency events

9th May 2016

About VCOSS

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) is the peak body of the social and community sector in Victoria. VCOSS members reflect the diversity of the sector and include large charities, peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups, and individuals interested in social policy. In addition to supporting the sector, VCOSS represents the interests of vulnerable and disadvantaged Victorians in policy debates and advocates for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

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Contents

Contents	1
Executive summary.....	2
Summary of recommendations	3
Preventing homelessness	4
Risks for people experiencing homelessness in disasters and emergencies.....	6
Collaborate to include homelessness responses in emergency planning	8
Engage organisations in emergency planning	8
Support organisations to prepare themselves and the people they work with.....	9
Inform people experiencing homelessness of emergency options.....	10
Response and recovery for people experiencing homelessness	12
Organisations need assurance they can access surge capacity.....	12
Cater for specific needs in emergency responses	13
Address urgent housing needs.....	14
Provide trauma-informed relief	15
Providing outreach during and after emergencies	16
Provide long-term recovery for people experiencing homelessness.....	18
Conclusion	20

Executive summary

*'...living as a homeless person is like living a disaster every day—but without the assistance and support given to most disaster survivors.'*¹

Disasters and emergencies such as bushfires, floods and heatwaves affect all Australians, no matter what their background or status. But they don't affect everyone equally. People who are homeless are some of our most disadvantaged and marginalised community members, and are at significantly greater risk from disasters and emergencies. Although vulnerability is beginning to be addressed in some Australian emergency management policies, little is known of the unique disaster vulnerabilities of people experiencing homelessness.

VCOSS has previously found disasters are “profoundly discriminatory” in where they strike, and in their effects.² This report examines Australia and international research literature to identify and describe emergencies' adverse effects on people who experience, or are at risk of, homelessness. It draws on consultations with housing and homelessness organisations and peak bodies to determine emergencies' immediate effects and their longer term challenges.

VCOSS aims to prompt thinking about the experience of homelessness before, during and after an emergency event; the ways emergency events lead to homelessness; and ideas for specific, targeted interventions increasing individual and community resilience to emergency events.

This report draws on consultation with housing and homelessness organisations and established research. We wish to thank the Council for Homeless Persons, a VCOSS member organisations, for their generous assistance in consulting with specialist homelessness services.

¹ S Raskoff, The Disaster of Homelessness, *Everyday Sociology Blog*, 2007.

² Victorian Council of Social Service, Disadvantage and disaster: Social vulnerability in emergency management, 2014.

Summary of recommendations

Collaborate to include homelessness responses in emergency planning

- Collaborate with housing and homelessness service providers in emergency planning
- Clarify and identify mechanisms to support people experiencing homelessness in emergency plans
- Support homelessness and housing organisations to prepare for emergencies, including their own business continuity, and their strategies to assist people experiencing homelessness
- Deliver information about emergencies to people experiencing homelessness

Response and recovery for people experiencing homelessness

- Arrange for organisational capability and funding to meet surges in demand
- Cater for the specific needs of people facing homelessness, including transport, access to possessions and pets, keeping families together, family violence support, and psychological first aid
- Make available adequate temporary and permanent housing to accommodate people displaced by an emergency as well as people already experiencing homelessness
- Train relief centre staff and response services in trauma awareness
- Resource housing and homelessness workers to provide outreach during and after emergencies

Provide long-term recovery for people experiencing homelessness

- Keep trauma-informed follow up services available in the longer term
- Evaluate emergency responses to inform future planning and activity

Preventing homelessness

Homes provides a sense of security, stability, privacy, safety, and the ability to control living space. Homelessness is typically not a choice people willingly make, and is more than simply lacking shelter: 'homelessness' is not merely 'rooflessness'. The experience of homelessness includes missing a stable connection to a network of friends, family and the community. People experiencing homelessness often face high levels of difficulty maintaining social relationships, low levels of social support, and social exclusion.

Several structural factors have contributed to the steady increase in homelessness over time:

- housing affordability in Australia is lower than ever before, especially for low-income earners
- incomes from employment and income support have not kept pace with housing costs
- the services people need to remain well and stable are under-resourced, hard to access and do not always focus on keeping people housed.

Family violence is the single biggest cause of homelessness in Australia. Twenty-five per cent of people seeking accommodation at specialist homelessness services do so because of family violence. A further 15 per cent seek help because of financial difficulties, while 12 per cent are in housing crisis, and another 10 per cent have been living in inadequate or inappropriate dwelling conditions.³ In Victoria, children comprise about one third of people attending homelessness services.⁴ People who are living with severe and persistent mental illness also find it difficult to secure affordable, appropriate and sustainable housing without significant assistance.^{5,6}

Homelessness organisations add prison release, and traumatic life events including the death or suicide of a loved one as immediate causes of homelessness.

Homelessness can expose people to violence, and increase their risk of preventable and chronic health conditions. While some people experiencing homelessness may have pre-existing physical or mental health conditions that contribute to their homelessness, many will experience ill health as a direct result of their homelessness:

Rough sleepers and people who are chronically homeless are more likely to have complex needs such as mental health issues, substance abuse and disabilities. They are also more

³ Mission Australia, *What is homelessness?*, accessed at <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/what-we-do/homelessness-social-housing/what-is-homelessness>, 2015.

⁴ M Kirkman, et al., *Does camping count? Children's experiences of homelessness*, The Salvation Army, 2009.

⁵ Medicare Local Frankston Mornington Peninsula, *Homelessness, housing and health fact sheet*, accessed at <http://www.fmpml.org.au>, 2013.

⁶ L Costello, et al., *Mental Health and Homelessness Final Report*, Mental Health Commission of NSW, 2013.

likely to experience chronic health issues and have a mortality rate three to four times higher than that of the general population.⁷

Organisations identify people who do not fully recover from a natural disaster are at increased risk of homelessness. Much of the response and support following an emergency event is provided on a short-term basis. Organisations reported without longer term support, people are at significant risk of homelessness.

Addressing homelessness before emergency events is the best protection, using strategies such as intervening early to sustain tenancies, rapidly re-housing people who become homeless to prevent them entering a homelessness cycle, and providing permanent supportive housing for those who have experienced chronic homelessness.

Ending homelessness before disasters strike, and in the face of them, requires greater focus on prevention, rather than on addressing homelessness once it has already occurred. This can best be achieved by strengthening the community as a whole, and creating a community culture that supports people experiencing disadvantage every day.

Defining homelessness

The Australian Bureau of Statistics defines a person as being homeless when they do not have suitable accommodation alternatives and their current living arrangement:

- Is in a dwelling that is inadequate; or
- Has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable; or
- Does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations.⁸

The most commonly accepted definition of homelessness in Australia categorises the way homelessness affects people into three broad areas:

- **Primary homelessness** is experienced by people without conventional accommodation (for example, sleeping rough, squatters, living in cars or improvised dwellings).
- **Secondary homelessness** is experienced by people who frequently move from one temporary shelter to another (for example, emergency accommodation, youth and women's refuges, 'couch-surfing').
- **Tertiary homelessness** is experienced by people staying in accommodation that falls below minimum community standards (for example, boarding houses, caravan parks, and forced share arrangements).⁹

⁷ FaHCSIA, 2008. *The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness*. Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia, p.8

⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Information Paper - A Statistical Definition of Homelessness*, 2012.

⁹ C Chamberlain and D Mackenzie, 'Understanding contemporary homelessness: Issues of definition and meaning', *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 27(4), pp. 274-297, 1992.

Risks for people experiencing homelessness in disasters and emergencies

Homeless people are not vulnerable to disasters because they are homeless, but because they are often invisible in existing planning, preparation and responses. That is, vulnerability is an outcome of the interaction of the socially structured nature of existing disaster approaches interacting with an individual's circumstances.¹⁰

Little research is available on the specific vulnerabilities of people facing homelessness in disasters. General risk factors include a lack of resources and access to services, limited social connections, and pre-existing physical, mental and emotional stressors. These can affect people's ability to prepare, respond and recover from disasters and emergency events. People experiencing homelessness are less likely to be prepared, warned, found and evacuated, or provided with adequate support post-disaster.¹¹

American research suggests that in an emergency, risks to people experiencing homelessness include:

- limited access to media outlets to receive emergency communication
- limited resources to take risk reduction measures
- laws or policies that criminalise homelessness and can push people out of public areas, making them harder to reach
- shelters that close during the day
- lack of transport for evacuation
- poor social support networks
- high prevalence of mental illness, trauma and disability.¹²

Emergency events are not only linked to major natural disasters such as bushfires and floods, or to man-made actions. There is an increasing understanding of the toll that both prolonged extreme heat and cold can take on human health. Heatwaves are a particular risk for people experiencing homelessness. People who face homelessness have a high prevalence of mental illness, which triples the risk of death from extreme heat.¹³ Other risk factors include cardiovascular disease,

¹⁰ D Every, *Disaster risk education, community connections and emergency communication with people who are homeless*, CQUniversity, Adelaide, 2015.

¹¹ D Every, Disaster resilience: can the homeless afford it? *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, Volume 29 Issue 3, 2014.

¹² S Edgington, *Disaster Planning for People Experiencing Homelessness*, National Health Care for the Homeless Council, USA, 2009.

¹³ A Hansen, 'The Effect of Heat Waves on Mental Health in a Temperate Australian City', *Environmental Health Perspectives*, Volume 116 Issue 10, 2008.

pulmonary disease, advanced age, living alone, being socially isolated, not using air conditioning, alcoholism, using tranquilisers, and cognitive impairment.¹⁴ These characteristics are more common amongst people who are homeless. A significant percentage of people experiencing homelessness in Victoria also live in urban or suburban areas,¹⁵ where they are at increased risk from heatwaves due to the 'heat island' effect. VCOSS research has found people who live in low-cost housing, including boarding and rooming houses, or who are homeless, face much higher health risks during extreme heat events.¹⁶

Australians are also vulnerable to extreme cold, with 6.5 per cent of deaths in Australia attributed to cold weather, compared with 0.5 per cent from hot weather, and largely due to poor housing quality.¹⁷ People on low incomes or living in poverty are often unable to afford to heat their homes, or may live in low-quality housing such as caravans or mobile homes that lack adequate insulation or heating options. This poor quality marginal housing, along with some low-quality private rental housing, boarding and rooming houses, contribute to the risk of death from extreme cold weather. The weak regulation of rental housing in Victoria contributes to widespread poor housing quality, as there are few requirements for rental housing to be provided at an adequate standard for people to live with dignity and in good health.

Many people experiencing homelessness also suffer from physical disability, mental health difficulties, or dependencies. This leaves them vulnerable on a daily basis, and at greater risk during an emergency event. Housing and homelessness service providers who contributed to this paper reported several other risks in an emergency for people who are homeless, including isolation, limited capabilities, communication difficulties, high and complex needs, reduced support during emergency events, displacement, and rural homelessness.

¹⁴ B Ramin, 'Health of the Homeless and Climate Change', *Journal of Urban Health*, Volume 86 Issue 4, 2009.

¹⁵ C Chamberlain and D MacKenzie, *Counting the homeless 2006: Victoria*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2009.

¹⁶ VCOSS, *Feeling the heat: heatwave and social vulnerability in Victoria*, Melbourne, 2013.

¹⁷ A Gasparrini, et al., Mortality risk attributable to high and low ambient temperature: a multicountry observational study, *The Lancet*, 2015.

Collaborate to include homelessness responses in emergency planning

Engage organisations in emergency planning

Recommendations

- Collaborate with housing and homelessness service providers in emergency planning
- Clarify and identify mechanisms to support people experiencing homelessness in emergency plans

The emergency management sector can build relationships with housing and homelessness organisations to help extend its reach to people experiencing homelessness, whose unique disaster-related needs might otherwise be neglected in response efforts.

Research examining community organisation responses and recovery in emergency events indicates people who depend on services prior to an emergency event continue to need those services after the event, and often have increased needs. These community services provide a critical resource, particularly when emergency management personnel can be overwhelmed by the needs of an entire community.¹⁸ The emergency management sector can network with local communities and community organisations to identify people experiencing homelessness, and consider investing additional resources in support services to help them warn or relocate people experiencing homelessness in the event of an emergency.

Case studies from the United States of America report poor coordination among homelessness service providers, limited or no communication or support provided by emergency management officials, and lack of accountability from all sectors. Recommendations from existing literature include developing interagency plans and formal communication structures, and improving outreach to communicate emergency information to people who are disconnected from the social service system. However, there is minimal guidance available around how these structures and plans might be designed.¹⁹

Organisations consulted for this report stressed that establishing partnerships *prior* to an emergency would enable organisations to understand how to maximise resources to the benefit of

¹⁸ National Healthcare for the Homeless Council, *Integrating Homeless Service Providers and Clients in Disaster Preparedness, Response, and Recovery* Issue Brief, USA 2014

¹⁹ National Health Care for the Homeless Council 2014, 'Integrating Homeless Service Providers and Clients in Disaster Preparedness, Response and Recovery', *Issue Brief*, September, USA, 2014.

individuals and the community. Confusion around the roles of different agencies results in delay in providing services, with possible adverse consequences.²⁰ By working with the broader community, and housing and homelessness services in particular, emergency management services can understand its capacity to support more vulnerable people in an emergency or a crisis.

Understanding the causes of people's homelessness, the diversity of the homeless population, and listening to people's stories will help emergency management organisations meet the needs of people who face homelessness in an emergency. Education increases emergency services' connections with people experiencing homelessness and the organisations that support them.²¹

Organisations consulted noted the importance of pre-planning with housing and homelessness organisations to identify and understand local emergency management plans. One organisation suggested the plan could be widely distributed and displayed in public areas, and could become part of an action plan for working with people experiencing homelessness if a disaster was to occur.

Support organisations to prepare themselves and the people they work with

Recommendation

- Support homelessness and housing organisations to prepare for emergencies, including their own business continuity, and their strategies to assist people experiencing homelessness

It is not only people experiencing homelessness who are vulnerable to emergency events. The organisations supporting them are often unprepared for their disaster-related needs. Up to one quarter of small and medium-sized community organisations might have to close if they experienced major damage and disruptions to critical services.²² Community sector organisations are the shock absorbers for every day adversity, as well as providing 'on-the-ground' outreach in crises for people experiencing homelessness. As these organisations support people's basic needs in the face of disasters and emergency events, the consequences of them closing during or following a disaster or emergency event are potentially life-threatening.

By resourcing housing and homelessness organisations to prepare for emergencies, they will be more resilience in the face of disasters, as well as prepared to attend to the particular needs of

²⁰ Coalition for the Homeless Houston, *Disaster/emergency plan design for those with functional and access needs homeless populations*, USA, 2011, p.10

²¹ Every, D., *Disaster risk education, community connections and emergency communication with people who are homeless*, CQUniversity, Adelaide, 2015

²² K Mallon, et al., *Adapting the Community Sector for Climate Extremes*, National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility, Gold Coast, pp. 286, 2013.

their service users. In VCOSS experience, combining both organisational resilience with planning for meeting the needs of people is often the strongest approach, as it best aligns with an organisations' mission and values.

Inform people experiencing homelessness of emergency options

Recommendation

- Deliver information about emergencies to people experiencing homelessness

Some people experiencing homelessness lack the ability to plan and have poor decision making skills, limiting their ability to take appropriate action in an emergency event. These people may be unaware of hazards, risk underestimating potential dangers, and may be unaware of available options. People experiencing homelessness may difficult to reach, and by using linkage with homelessness services, information may be better communicated and reach further than only providing this directly.

Recent Australian research has also suggested communications used throughout the emergency cycle should:

- Include actions to take, not only actions to avoid.
- Use simple messages
- Be as specific as possible
- Use language representative of the community
- Use trauma-informed communication
- Use basic information for emergency preparedness flyers
- Use large font and include graphics if using flyers
- List shelters that will be open during emergencies
- List pick-up points for evacuation or to a shelter
- Inform people of how to access information about the emergency
- Provide services at the shelter
- Provide basic safety tips.²³

²³ D Every, *Disaster risk education, community connections and emergency communication with people who are homeless*, CQUniversity, Adelaide, 2015.

By work with existing services and systems, people experiencing homelessness can be assisted to understand the 'safer places' concept and to identify those places in each community, as well as evacuation and assistance centres and referral points.

Response and recovery for people experiencing homelessness

Organisations need assurance they can access surge capacity

Recommendation

- Arrange for organisational capability and funding to meet surges in demand

Following an emergency, community service workers are often asked to provide large numbers of people across the community with additional services to support recovery. While important for community recovery, this can divert support away from existing clients of housing and homelessness services, to others in the community affected by the emergency.

One organisation spoke of a hierarchical system, where those 'with more' may actually 'expect more' from service providers responding to an emergency or natural disaster, and be in a position to advocate for greater immediate service response. Emergency events that increase demand for services can monopolise available services for a period of time, preventing, or reducing, the delivery of homelessness support. Organisations also identified a need for additional, one-off funding to provide housing advice, and additional housing funding, following an emergency event. Organisations all expressed the need for quick access to funding for increased community needs and coordination during an emergency event.

In the immediate aftermath of an emergency, many agencies and government departments that provide emergency food and clothing, accommodation, property damage advice and wellbeing support. Organisations consulted for this report advised that for many people experiencing homelessness, this fragmented support can be overwhelming. Organisations agreed that connecting with someone who is homeless due to the effects of a disaster may present an opportunity to help them navigate the assistance available and to reconnect to the community, if they have sufficient resources.

The relocation of many vulnerable members of the community during the mine fire had a significant impact on the availability of housing during the event. VCOSS members told us there were continuing concerns about the availability of low-cost housing and the local response to homelessness. Participants reported that the loss of a number of Caravan Parks in Gippsland has reduced the available options for emergency housing. Whilst caravan parks are not ideal for emergency housing, their reduced availability is flowing onto the availability of all other alternatives.

Cater for specific needs in emergency responses

Recommendation

- Cater for the specific needs of people facing homelessness, including transport, access to possessions and pets, keeping families together, family violence support, and psychological first aid

The heightened risks facing people experiencing facing homelessness require specific skills and knowledge during an emergency response. As they are have few deep social connections, and no private space, the connection to pets and possessions can be strong. Evacuating people experiencing homelessness may require that they can continue to maintain close contact with pets and possessions during transport and in evacuation centres.

Other guidance from American literature includes:

- Have a clear plan mapping evacuation relocation sites for people to live in during the response stage
- Keep existing family units together during a disaster to help children and their parents comfortable and together
- Ensure family violence support is available
- Provide gender-informed services to women and girls by making female case managers available
- Provide basic emotional and tangible psychological support using interventions such as psychological first aid^{24,25,26}

²⁴ Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response, *Disaster Response for Homeless Individuals and Families: A Trauma-Informed Approach*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012.

²⁵ Coalition for the Homeless Houston, *Disaster/emergency plan design for those with functional and access needs homeless populations*, USA, 2011.

²⁶ S Edgington, *Disaster Planning for People Experiencing Homelessness*, National Health Care for the Homeless Council, USA, 2009.

Address urgent housing needs

Recommendation

- Make available adequate temporary and permanent housing to accommodate people displaced by an emergency as well as people already experiencing homelessness

The existing lack of affordable and temporary housing puts increasing pressure on people already at risk, and can force people, including families, into homelessness. This issue only becomes worse after a disaster. As well as supply issues for affordable housing, it causes sharp increase in demand and the associated effect on already long waiting lists. With already under-resourced social housing and homelessness services, QCOSS raised concerns with the Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry that people experiencing homelessness who were already waiting for government services before the floods would receive a lower priority than newly homeless homeowners, tenants and more affluent families that had been flood affected.²⁷

The (family violence) women's refuge was evacuated as it was in the path of fire. We moved clients into motels and hotels but then that area was being evacuated as well and we had to find alternative locations. There ended up being a 3-4 week loss of short-term accommodation for domestic violence refuges as all the hotels and motels were booked out. This put women and children at real risk.

Morwell community organisation – VCOSS Submission to the Hazelwood Mine Fire inquiry, 2014

Organisations suggested local housing and community housing groups could assist with prioritising people for housing vacancies if they are unable to live in their homes due to damage by an emergency. However, this may invite criticism of 'queue jumping' ahead of people experiencing homelessness or inadequate housing, particularly if they have been on housing waiting lists for years.

Organisations reinforced that people experiencing the damage or loss of a home need financial support and financial counselling. People assessed as being able to sustain a tenancy in the private rental market should be assisted with relevant grants, including Re-Establishment Grants, Housing Establishment Funds and bond loan schemes.

Without a broader supply of both temporary and permanently affordable housing, emergencies will stretch an already overloaded housing system to breaking point.

²⁷ QCOSS, *Submission to the Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry*, 2011.

Provide trauma-informed relief

Recommendation

- Train relief centre staff and response services in trauma awareness

Traumatic events like natural disasters are one of the key life experiences that can lead to homelessness. Australian research shows that 70 per cent of homeless people had experienced at least one trauma before they became homeless, mostly during their childhood. For some this childhood trauma was prolonged and repeated, such as child abuse, while for others it was exposure to a single event such as a natural disaster.²⁸

Only about 4 per cent of Australians experience more than four traumatic events during their lifetimes.²⁹ But that figure is 97 per cent for people experiencing homelessness, who often cannot count the frequency of traumatic events they have experienced, due to their great frequency or regularity. Traumatic events include rape, sexual assault, physical abuse, torture and natural disasters. Of those who took part in one study:

- 66% had witnessed someone being killed or badly injured
- 37% had experienced a fire, flood or natural disaster
- 34% had experienced a life-threatening accident and 40% had witnessed one
- 24% had been raped after the age of 16
- 17% had been sexually assaulted after the age of 16
- 17% had been tortured or were victims of terrorism.

The research found trauma precipitates homelessness, exposure to trauma escalates upon becoming homeless, and the frequency of traumatic events significantly increases as periods of homelessness lengthen.³⁰

People experiencing homelessness often have a significant trauma history prior to an emergency, and this can affect their physical and mental health. Workers who provide relief services following an emergency could be trained to be mindful of common triggers for traumatic symptoms, which can include loud noises, small spaces, lack of privacy, and chaotic or disorganised surroundings. Shock, denial, anger, grief, acceptance, and coping are common stages by which people come to

²⁸ M O'Donnell et al., *The Trauma and Homelessness Initiative Report*, prepared by the Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health in collaboration with Sacred Heart Mission, Mind Australia, Inner South Community Health and Vincent Care, Victoria, 2014

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

terms with trauma; a person experiencing homelessness may be experiencing any one, or more, of these stages when a disaster occurs.³¹

Some people experiencing homelessness are migrants or refugees whose homes were destroyed by war or natural disasters in their country of origin. Organisations stress that these people have already experienced displacement, and are at risk of being further displaced in an emergency, which can intensify the effects of previous trauma.

Organisations were concerned that current providers of general emergency relief services, including volunteer staff, are not trained to respond to people experiencing homelessness or trauma, and stressed the importance of support providers avoiding personal value judgments. Organisations suggested volunteers' roles be clarified and supervision and debriefing provided for staff members working with people experiencing homelessness in an emergency.

Aspects of trauma-informed relief include:

- addressing a homeless individual or family's immediate and unique needs
- ensuring homeless individuals and families are physically safe
- providing trauma-specific assessment resources to service providers, such as tools that screen for anxiety, depression, or substance abuse.
- ensuring trauma-informed recovery services can effectively communicate and provide support services to individuals and families experiencing homelessness.^{32,33,34}

Providing outreach during and after emergencies

Recommendation

- Resource housing and homelessness workers to provide outreach during and after emergencies

The discrimination and exclusion that people experiencing homelessness frequently experience, together with mental or physical illness, can contribute to social isolation, distrust, and unwillingness to act. Some people experiencing homelessness live in isolation from the general community. As a result, emergency services or others may be unaware of their existence or location. Some people experiencing homelessness have language and communication difficulties,

³¹ Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response, *Disaster Response for Homeless Individuals and Families: A Trauma-Informed Approach*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012

³² Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response, *Disaster Response for Homeless Individuals and Families: A Trauma-Informed Approach*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012.

³³ Coalition for the Homeless Houston, *Disaster/emergency plan design for those with functional and access needs homeless populations*, USA, 2011.

³⁴ S Edgington, *Disaster Planning for People Experiencing Homelessness*, National Health Care for the Homeless Council, USA, 2009.

including illiteracy. Many may mistrust authority figures and be unlikely to follow directions from police or other emergency services personnel, including those from migrant or refugee backgrounds.

Organisations reported there is no suitably designed system to respond to rural homelessness. Not all geographical areas have homelessness services, and other agencies and organisations that may have contact with people experiencing homelessness or those most at risk of homelessness, may not be aware of available specific homelessness services where they do exist. Rural and regional organisations noted the prevalence of ‘campers’, or people living rough on river banks or in the bush, who are at risk of being displaced during environmental emergencies. These people are outside the reach of traditional emergency communications methods and may not be aware of warnings or threats. Organisations also stressed the challenges faced by communities and individuals in rural areas as a result of other longer term disasters such as drought.

Organisations advised that making people queue for relief and recovery resources does not meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness and is not an effective way of supporting or helping them. Informal, conversational approaches to engaging with people experiencing homelessness are more effective when providing relief and recovery resources. Multi-disciplinary support teams should be available following an emergency to link people with available resources, including assessing and responding to their immediate housing and psychosocial needs. Recovery services should include legal advice and financial counselling.

Organisations suggested a thorough needs assessment be conducted for each person and family experiencing a disaster, to help reduce homelessness afterwards, with follow-up wellbeing checks. If people experience other consequences of the disaster, such as unemployment or a relationship breakdown, early support can reduce their risk of becoming homeless. One organisation suggested community information sessions be held at different locations over an emergency recovery period, to keep support options and communication open for people who may need support in the longer term.

Provide long-term recovery for people experiencing homelessness

Recommendation

- Make trauma-informed follow up services available in the longer term
- Evaluate emergency responses to inform future planning and activity

An individual, their family or the broader community may take time to fully comprehend a disaster's effects. Relief and recovery responses should expect many people may need long-term, consistent and sustained assistance. One organisation recommended people's cumulative needs could be addressed by a genuine 'keep in touch program' of extended support.

Organisations stressed the importance of having awareness of the potential for people to experience longer term problems. One organisation reported that people experiencing homelessness feel "once people cared about me, but now life is back to what it was, no-one cares or can help."

How do we go from caring about someone's immediate wellbeing and safety only to let them down when the crisis is over? The risk is they become even more isolated and marginalised.

- Homelessness organisation, 2015

Another organisation reported that many clients who lost their homes in regional and rural areas during the 2010-11 floods became 'homeless' in the short term, and then experienced a long-term displacement from their community when re-housed in different areas. This had emotional and mental health consequences for many of these people and their families.

Some clients in the Shires of Loddon, Gannawarra and Buloke developed post-traumatic stress some years after the 2010-11 floods. The assumption by many that everyone has or should have fully recovered during this time leads to further negative impacts on these clients.

- Community organisation, 2015

VCOSS recommends that after an emergency response, people experiencing homelessness are linked with experienced service providers for follow-up care after their physical and psychological wellbeing has been safeguarded.

Organisations also suggested performance evaluations of emergency response, relief and recovery be conducted, to enable agencies and organisations to learn from experience. This could include engaging with people directly affected during their contact with services, including people experiencing homelessness.

Importantly, all organisations expressed the need to promote social connectedness and inclusion across communities, before, during and after a disaster or emergency event. Stronger and more cohesive communities are more likely to be cohesive during an emergency, and investment in building strong connected communities should not be underestimated when developing support systems prior to a disaster.

Conclusion

Homelessness is identified as a major factor in increasing vulnerability to hazards, and homeless people or the housing-excluded are more exposed to the risk of disaster. As homelessness is the most extreme manifestation of poverty, a poor, homeless individual or family does not have sufficient income to buy or rent safer housing or improve their dwellings, either before or after a natural disaster. When a major emergency impacts a poor area, there is a high probability that homes will be damaged and that they will be rendered even poorer. Poverty will therefore always be a problem and addressing vulnerability also necessitates addressing poverty, and hence homelessness.³⁵

Homelessness service providers can play a vital role in educating and resourcing people experiencing homelessness to prepare for, survive and recover from disasters. They are the best-placed to integrate delivery of information and supplies into their existing contact with people, and deliver this through existing trusted relationships.³⁶ Drawing on the expertise and capacity of housing and homelessness service organisations by establishing strategic alliances between organisations and the emergency management sector will help ensure people experiencing homelessness are safe and have the opportunities to recover from an emergency event.

Helping people avoid homelessness, before, during and after disasters and emergency events, requires increased focus on prevention, rather than on mainly addressing homelessness once it has already occurred. This can best be achieved through strengthening the community as a whole, and creating a community culture that supports people experiencing disadvantage every day.

³⁵ A Paidakaki, 'Addressing Homelessness through Disaster Discourses: The Role of Social Capital and Innovation in Building Urban Resilience and Addressing Homelessness', *European Journal of Homelessness*, Volume 6, No. 2, December 2012.

³⁶ D Every, *Disaster risk education, community connections and emergency communication with people who are homeless*, CQUniversity, Adelaide, 2015.

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