ON THE FRONTLINE IN EMERGENCIES: A Practical Guide For Communities And Community Service Organisations

Proudly supported by the Bendigo and Adelaide Bank Black Saturday Bushfire Appeal
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Berry Street seeks to acknowledge all the individuals, families and communities affected by the Black Saturday bushfires. In particular, we recognise the courage and resilience of those people with whom we worked during a most challenging, traumatic time.

We wish to thank David Hall and Alison Dyson for their enormous contribution to this guide. David and Alison were key figures in Berry Street’s response to Black Saturday and, subsequently, they have shared their experience and expert knowledge with other fire affected communities. They have a genuine commitment to building the capacity of communities and have generously imparted their wisdom in this guide.

We are very grateful to Marie McInerney who worked so respectfully with David and Alison as the writer and editor of this guide. We thank her for making the guide so clear, succinct and accessible. Also, we acknowledge the assistance of Anne Leadbeater, Carolyn Atkins and Callum Wright for their review of drafts and helpful feedback.

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During January and February 2009, a succession of bushfires burnt across rural and regional Victoria, culminating in the Black Saturday fires on February 7—one of the worst natural disasters in Australia’s history.

The impact was enormous and complex:
- 173 people lost their lives on the day, with the toll growing in the months and years following the fires
- 2,029 homes were destroyed
- 7,000 people were displaced
- More than 400,000 hectares of residential, farming and national park land were burnt, resulting in significant losses of livestock and native wildlife
- 78 communities were directly affected, including massive loss of infrastructure: schools, kindergartens, service outlets, sports facilities, and businesses.

Berry Street is a not-for-profit organisation that has been supporting Victorian children and families since 1877, working with children, young people and families with the most challenging and complex needs.

Since 2001, Berry Street had been delivering the Connect for Kids initiative in the regional Shire of Murrundindi to promote the health and wellbeing of children and young people. From its office in Alexandra, 130 kilometres north-east of Melbourne, Berry Street also provided or hosted a range of other community services relating to family support, mental health, housing, family violence, foster care, sexual assault, drug and alcohol use and young people, as well as emergency relief, Centrelink services and the volunteer resource centre.

On February 7, the Shire was hit the hardest by the bushfires, with 95 lives lost and more than 1400 private, public and commercial properties destroyed. Along with other agencies and organisations, Berry Street moved immediately to provide support and was later invited by Victoria’s Department of Human Services to play a formal, long-term role in response and recovery.

From having just six mostly part-time staff in the Alexandra office, it went on to become the largest non-government provider of the Victorian Bushfire Case Management Service, employing more than 50 case managers out of its offices in Alexandra, Seymour and Eaglemont to work with fire affected individuals, families and communities in the Shires of Murrundindi, Mitchell and Nillumbik.

Its community development and long-term work with trauma-affected individuals in these regions continues today.

This guide has been developed from that work. Berry Street learned valuable lessons in the aftermath of the Black Saturday bushfires and is now committed to sharing its knowledge as widely as possible.

**INTRODUCTION**

Natural disasters are on the rise. While it is hoped Australia will never see another disaster on the scale of the Black Saturday bushfires, governments, emergency services and community sector organisations expect to have to respond to more heat waves, extreme fire weather, severe storms and drought as the climate changes.

This guide seeks to assist those responses through each phase of emergency management: planning, response, relief and recovery, via the lessons learnt primarily in responding over years to the devastation and trauma of Black Saturday.

It does not intend to provide comprehensive advice for all issues that will face communities around an emergency event, but to act as a prompt and a checklist for issues that are likely to emerge and where best practice responses might be found or developed.

It aims particularly to assist community service organisations, but many of the experiences and lessons will apply also to government agencies, emergency services, and broader communities. It may also inform other relevant stakeholders, such as the media.

Some readers may be scanning it first during an emergency event, although Berry Street hopes it will be put to most effective use as a planning tool.

The guide is informed by the experiences of Berry Street which were captured in an internal evaluation report soon after the 2009 Bushfires and those of David Hall, former Berry Street Senior Manager, Victorian Bushfire Case Management & Community Programs in the Hume region and Alison Dyson, who was Berry Street’s Emergency Relief and Volunteer Coordinator.

David and Alison have since been involved, as consultants and volunteers, in the recovery process in the Dunalley community in Tasmania, following bushfires there in 2013.

The guide also draws from extensive reading of trauma and emergency management literature, and provides a list of resources for further reading.

The quotes, unless sourced differently, are observations and reflections from Berry Street staff and managers.

This guide is free of charge and is available in hard copy form or can be downloaded from www.berrystreet.org.au.
EMERGENCY RESPONSE: the early days

WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT?

• An immediate rush of emergency and community service organisations to the affected area as news filters out about the scale and intensity of the emergency occurring.

• Immediate need for trauma support and defusing, but probably overshadowed by the early need for emergency shelter, food, and clothing, medication and other essentials. Those affected at this stage may be looking more for information (about the welfare of friends and family, property and livestock, housing and health issues) than counselling.

• Depending on the scale of the emergency, there may be major political sensitivity about the level and effectiveness of warnings and other issues that will affect levels of funding and scrutiny of organisations involved in responses.

• Also depending on the scale of the emergency, media may pour into the community, raising concerns about logistics, trauma, privacy, and consent.

• The scale, location and timing of the emergency will determine the level of response from the government and broader community.

• Social media will likely ‘explode’ and may be very valuable with sharing information, but can also spread information that is wrong, misleading or unhelpful.

WHAT CHALLENGES MAY EMERGE?

• The response from government and the broader community may be ‘overwhelmed’ by a bigger disaster elsewhere (as the Queensland floods did to the Victorian floods in 2010) or be different if the emergency comes in tough economic times or amid changing government priorities.

• Lack of coordinated planning involving local councils and community services organisations will likely raise the risk that initial emergency responses are ad hoc and uncoordinated, driven by goodwill but at risk of making mistakes under pressure.

• Leadership, staff and volunteers of community service organisations may be directly affected, including through personal or property loss and trauma. In any case they will be working extremely long hours and under stress. Some in leadership roles may buckle or freeze under pressure.

• Service providers will need additional support, money and personnel to provide urgent services but may have to operate in the early days with their own funds, or just on the ‘promise’ of funding from government and philanthropic groups.

• Police may need to cordon off particular areas as crime scenes; this can raise many concerns about access to homes and properties for people who are desperate to return to inspect damage or injury or to deal with livestock or pets. Road blocks will also cause disruption to normal transport routes for others, including those providing relief services.

• The event may pose continuing physical danger over days, weeks or months, such as fire flare ups, falling trees and contaminated sites or waterways.

• Overwhelming donations of material goods may ultimately cause more problems than they assist, particularly in the resources required to sort, store and distribute.

• The emergency may trigger post-traumatic stress disorder especially among members of the community who have experienced previous disasters, whether bushfires, war service, or other traumatic experiences.

• Stock containment, feed and water, and pasture regeneration are likely to be major issues in rural areas, as well as having qualified people to euthanise animals if required. Pets (cats, dogs, birds, fish and even horses) may be a major issue in the recovery centre – requiring veterinary attention as well as suitable food and accommodation.

• Injured wildlife will require rescue and care.

• Events can attract ‘disaster chasers’, such as untrained counsellors and con artists, who will need to be identified and managed.

WHAT CAN WORK?

• Quick, consistent and predictable federal and state disaster funding that provides early and ongoing equitable support.

• Trained state-wide operational ‘strike teams’ teams sent in by state governments to oversee immediate personal (food, clothing, housing) and physical infrastructure needs (power, water, sewage, communications mobile phone towers and recharging capacity, fencing etc).

• Careful registration of affected people to make sure that follow-up support can be provided if they move out of the area after initial registration.

• Appointing organisations with strong local connections to lead responses and work closely with ‘strike teams’, so they know which agencies work best in particular areas, what resources and networks are available and how best to move information around effectively to services and recipients. Local organisations are better placed to support emergency services with practical, local advice, for example on where roadblocks are best situated and where to establish relief centres.

• Ensuring that frontline community services are staffed by professional workers who are regularly supervised and debriefed to prevent vicarious trauma and are able to provide impartial, informed and non-judgemental support.

• Providing an early focus on trauma support, especially for children, the elderly, people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups.

• Sourcing untied grants that allow services to respond quickly and flexibly to needs while formal funding is being rolled out more slowly. Such grants have helped meet a range of urgent needs, from installing temporary toilets and generators to prepaid mobile phones and/or essential medication.

• Informing affected people and communities about the restrictions that apply to how official fundraisers like Red Cross can distribute donations – such as funds may not be available to some affected residents and/or businesses. Mistrainings around this can cause anger and resentment among both donors and those who are not eligible.

• Imposing limits on donations of material aid to weed out those that may be inappropriate (or poor quality), require huge amounts of resources to sort and allocate, and may affect local businesses.

• Ensuring your organisation’s own staff are safe and accounted for, including identifying any whose lives and property and those of their families may still be under threat. Support may include putting in place ‘backfill arrangements’ for those who are unable to return to work in these circumstances.

• Ensuring local community services are involved with police and emergency services in planning – preferably before a disaster and then throughout response and recovery.
Flooded with care

An overwhelming outpouring of sympathy and support from the public to a disaster or other emergency event can produce huge benefits, such as the offer of hundreds of vacant houses and apartments across Victoria for survivors of the 2009 bushfires.

But it can also produce a deluge of donated goods that requires major resources to unpack, store and allocate.

Much may not be of use and will need to be dumped or sent back, for example, unsafe cots or prams, tired and dirty furniture or clothing or – as was experienced in the Dunalley bushfires in Tasmania – high volumes of donated baby food when there were few babies in the local community.

Even some offers of accommodation may lead to later problems if owners do not understand how long it may take for some communities to recover and ask survivors to move out again before they can find more permanent options.

The influx of donated goods may also disrupt and undermine local business operations over the short and long-term. In 2009, the arrival of tonnes of donated grocery items meant that those goods were not purchased from local businesses for months.

Recognising this, the Rotary Club in Alexandra organised the donations and provided a voucher system that was redeemable in local businesses. For the Dunalley bushfire, Bendigo Community Bank organised for donated material goods to be sent to Hobart and sold at a garage/car boot sale, with the proceeds distributed to the affected community also in the form of vouchers that were redeemable in local businesses.

“I think the worst part was the huge numbers of people who were homeless, all camped out together in shock, saying ‘it’s all gone’, or ‘I thought I was prepared’. It was the sheer number of those in need. Then there were the people who had suffered trauma elsewhere, even as far back as the (1983) Ash Wednesday fires, and it had brought it all back and they started to come to us needing help too.”

“A day or two after the fires, when we were still in emergency response mode, a full loaded semi of donated goods arrived – at 9pm! We went to the pub and got about a dozen men out to help unload all the stuff. There was everything you could imagine: prams and pushers, equipment, clothes, towels, bedding. Unfortunately a lot of it was broken or dirty that was disheartening and meant we had to pack it all up again a couple of days later and get it to the dump.”
THE LONGER HAUL: case management, funding, resources

WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT?

- Financial support from Federal and State governments, but it will vary in level and duration and will probably never be as comprehensive as the Victorian Bushfire Case Management Service (VBCMS) that aimed to provide a ‘one stop shop’ to those affected (see breakout).
- Depending on the size of the emergency, governments may shift major services such as Centrelink to the location and second staff from federal and state agencies.
- Massive and extended need may emerge: around 5,500 people registered for case management support from the 2009 Victorian bushfires in the first month (including nearly 2,500 in the first week).
- Staff may need or want to work long hours without breaks and experience exhaustion and vicarious trauma.

WHAT CHALLENGES MAY EMERGE?

- How best to prioritise the distribution of funds and donated goods.
- The risk of governance issues as disaster arrangements are put urgently into place.
- Unclear lines of support may see multiple agencies and service organisations contacting affected people until systems and structures are sorted at the local and funder level.
- Failure by some in real need to register for support, because they believe others are more deserving, or they associate support with ‘stigma’ or welfare or don’t want to acknowledge vulnerability. This often includes men, whose issues emerge further down the track.
- An early rush to register for help that may not be needed because affected people are concerned that they might miss out if they don’t put their hands up immediately.
- Lack of clear information about the losses experienced by individuals, which means services are “cold calling” when they first get in touch.
- Developing responsive case management that allows affected people to deal with just one support person who is well matched to their needs and available for the long-term where necessary.
- Being clear about why your organisation is involved: Berry Street approached its Victorian bushfires work with the view that it was ‘core business’ given its central role in the local community and long-term experience in trauma and grief.
- Using well developed ‘triage’ approaches that can identify who is in urgent need and who can wait until more staff come on board and clearer processes are in place.
- Making sure that accurate and essential information is recorded about an individual’s loss (family, home, property, livestock etc) and then shared with relevant service providers. This may be difficult in the immediate aftermath, if survivors do not yet know the extent of their loss, but recording systems should be put in place quickly so traumatised people do not have to list or describe their losses on multiple occasions.
- Having a clear system of registration that allows ongoing support and tracking of people affected by the disaster – whether for passing through roadblocks or accessing support. Hospital name tags can work if nothing else is available.
- Locating support hubs in the right place for best possible access, not only by those affected by the disaster but for traditional clients of services like Centrelink which may be involved in the disaster response.
- Engaging the right services for the right work, including the ability to scale up quickly and to be adaptable and responsive.
- Ensuring that traditional service needs, including family, ageing and disability, child protection, and mental health and drug and alcohol supports, are not overlooked or pushed aside.

WHAT CAN WORK?

- Having adequate government funding that allows organisations to be flexible, respond quickly to need and put in place effective staff recruitment and support that recognises the varying skill sets of case managers and other staff.

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Victorian Bushfire Case Management Service

Just days after the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria, the Federal and State Governments announced a case management system would be introduced so that each household affected by the fires would have dedicated support through their recovery and within 24 hours of registering. The Victorian Bushfire Case Management Service (VBCMS) was unprecedented in its scope of care and level of funding delivered. It aimed to provide a ‘one stop shop’ to those affected, so they did not have to manage their way alone through a maze of bureaucracy for assistance.

Research shows that case management is most effective when the pre-existing service system is collaborative, high functioning, and comprehensive; that is, that it reflects the range of needs of the community it serves.

The VBCMS had its challenges and problems, and was relatively expensive, but it is highly recommended as the best way to address comprehensive need and most cost-effective in the long term.

AIMS

- Ease access to the plethora of services, grants and information available to people.
- Strengthen the capacity of traumatised people over time.
- Help reduce the stress affecting people through their recovery.

BENEFITS

- Provided a dedicated point of contact for bushfire survivors, with the specialist case manager able to identify and negotiate a pathway through services.
- Supported careful decision making and averted an ‘us versus them’ mentality.
- Funding covered the full cost of the service – a model rarely seen in community services. This allowed organisations to be flexible, respond quickly to demand, and address the logistics needed for the scale of work (cars, offices, IT support etc), and also to put in place proper professional development, staff structures, and visiting specialists.

CHALLENGES

- The sudden announcement and promise to deliver case management within 24 hours meant organisations had to build services in the absence of guidelines and in crisis mode.
- Rolling out such a system in a crisis required enormous trust between organisations and the government, with very little process outlined in writing, including go-ahead to rent offices, employ staff, purchase equipment. This usually worked well but contained inherent risks and some organisations had to chase their funding from various departments.
- There was an early rush for registration because affected people were concerned that they might miss out if they did not put their hands up immediately.
- Only basic information – a name and phone number – was provided for first contacts, not the extent or intensity of loss. More basic information would have meant staff were not ‘cold calling’ and asking for an inventory of loss from those experiencing trauma.
- The Department of Human Services got more directly involved in the oversight of service provision than ever before and this was sometimes experienced by providers as ‘micromanagement’.
WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT?

- Your organisation may need to expand quickly and dramatically to meet the demand for services. For example, Berry Street launched a major recruitment process over 3-4 months after February 7, building from a team of six mostly part-time staff to a full complement of 50 case managers. This required a major shift in organisational priorities.

WHAT CHALLENGES MAY EMERGE?

- Support required in an emergency event is likely to be very different to the ‘traditional’ work of community services and may therefore require a very different skill set among staff. Early need will be for practical and specialist assistance: food and clothing, legal and financial, fencing and livestock, storage and amenities. Later there is likely to be a need for more traditional social support, particularly around trauma.
- With most natural disasters occurring in rural and regional areas, the supply of experienced and formally qualified people in the local area may be limited and it may be difficult to attract staff from elsewhere, particularly given the loss of infrastructure such as housing.
- Insecure funding timelines may make it harder to recruit and retain the right staff. For example, after the 2009 Victorian bushfires, the Department of Human Services initially wanted most case managers employed on three and six month contracts.

WHAT CAN WORK?

- Holding firm on employment issues when government is seeking to contain costs unrealistically. Berry Street declined to employ any staff on 3 month contracts when the Victorian Bushfires Case Management System began.
- Tapping into the strengths of a strong and large organisation, which can offer strong logistical support (cars, IT, accommodation etc) as well as vital organisational and staff support, including HR advice, training, employee assistance etc.
- Allowing staff recruitment to be undertaken by each affected region, backed up by the organisation’s central human resource function to cover administrative and strategic support while allowing local offices to meet local need.
- Providing accommodation opportunities where possible in regional areas which may struggle otherwise to attract the desired skills and experience.
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STAFFING: recruitment

“When it came to recruiting, the first thing that hit me was we did not have what would commonly be called a ‘welfare client group’ so we shouldn’t look only for social workers with those skills; it was imperative we had a good mix of case managers and other staff, people from all backgrounds and skill levels. Their role would be everything from recovering lost war medals and overseas birth certificates to providing food and clothing, sorting finances, insurance, personal problems, trauma issues, fencing, livestock, right through to mobile toilets – so it was a different set of skills and people we were after.”

“We employed solicitors, farmers, accountants, nurses, marketing and business people. Selecting them was really about trying to assess people who were keen and had a commitment – and certainly lots of people were putting their hands up, wanting to help. Then we looked at their personal skills: will they be able to relate to that broad range of people and will they be able to handle the vicarious trauma?”

“One of the big things, when we first started, the Department of Human Services wanted us to employ people on three month, six month, and 12 month contracts, the majority being three and six months. To try and recruit into the bush people on three month contracts was virtually impossible. Not only that, the thinking from government that case management would be able to ‘sort some of these people out’ in three months was just crazy.”

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WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT?
• Staff will be dealing every day with people who have suffered enormous loss: to their family, property, business, community, and physical environment.
• The intensity and long-term nature of response and recovery will mean staff may be exhausted and often running on adrenalin alone, while their own job security and future are uncertain.
• Staff may also have experienced direct losses and trauma, not least to their own community.

WHAT CHALLENGES MAY EMERGE?
• Government funding agencies are likely to want case numbers to decline faster than is appropriate, despite warnings from disaster and trauma experts of the long-term nature of support required in recovery. Ongoing moves to reduce funding and therefore staff numbers can cause uncertainty and stress – for the organisation, individual staff and affected clients.
• Communication from government about funding and resources is likely to be haphazard (especially in the early days) with information often coming via the media rather than formal channels.
• Staff may also feel overloaded with information, particularly about warnings or advice on longer-term issues when they are still dealing with urgent, short-term needs.
• Staff may not want to admit to needing psychosocial support for vicarious trauma, either because they want focus on clients, are concerned about their own job security or think others need it more.

WHAT CAN WORK?
• Regular and routine communication to make sure staff have the latest information and can test any rumours or concerns that have emerged. You can’t over-communicate!
• Providing a long-term perspective to the challenges that might arise in their work and own lives, to ensure that staff are alert to different stages of post-trauma and need.
• Ensuring all staff are able to establish clear boundaries with clients and know how to ensure self care, such as having a commitment to debriefing as a process.
• Comprehensive staff induction process and regular supervision.
• Small teams with structured supervision and a buddy system to support staff.
• Developing specialist portfolio teams to focus on issues such as legal concerns, mental health, family violence, financial issues, and small business needs.
• Focus by the whole organisation and local management on the practical and psychosocial needs of staff, including good risk management around critical incidents.
• An explicit focus on staff health and wellbeing with group and individual activities.
• Rituals to celebrate achievements, especially as staff numbers decline.

“From day one we put a lot of emphasis on management of stress among the staff. Despite that, I think I’ve aged an extra couple of years in the past three years: it’s a tiredness you can’t describe; you get a good night’s sleep and think you should be on top of it, and you wake up and you’re still tired.”

“A number of case managers reported that they had been affected by the stories of their clients and this had impacted on their personal lives. The types of symptoms reported included low mood, ruminations about certain clients’ stories, crying, poor sleep patterns, bad dreams, poor appetite – and feelings of helplessness. In addition, case managers reported feeling exhausted both emotionally and physically as a result of high intensity workloads.”
Looking after the team

For the first six months after Black Saturday, Berry Street Alexandra held a staff meeting every morning, and then at least 2-3 times a week for the next six months, to make sure everyone had the latest information from government and the local community and could share what information they had also gathered from clients, colleagues, other organisations or elsewhere, including rumours that might need to be checked out.

A ‘buddy system’ was set up to support staff, pairing, for example, a case manager with more generalised skills with one who had a trained ‘welfare’ background. Each person had primary responsibility for 10 clients and a working knowledge of their buddy’s 10 clients. This not only enabled professional support, but meant that clients were not isolated if a case manager was sick or otherwise absent.

Berry Street’s Employee Assistance Program provided four levels of support: whole group debriefing sessions, team debriefing, the opportunity for individual staff appointments on days other sessions were scheduled and then access to confidential assistance sessions where needed.

Teams of six were set up for staff supervision and given regular, practical and tailored training support, via monthly Tuesday Focus sessions, which included a range of topics from trauma, debriefing, mental health, and self-care to more practical advice on human resources, insurance, and legal issues.
FUNDING: for those affected and those assisting

WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT?

- Varying and unpredictable levels of financial support from government and the broader community.

WHAT CHALLENGES MAY EMERGE?

- Government and the broader community may become overloaded by disasters and less willing or able to provide support; public responses to the Dunalley bushfires in Tasmania and 2010-11 Victorian floods were overwhelmed by massive flooding in Queensland.
- Legal restrictions on fundraising such as the Red Cross Appeal means that many people in the community may not be eligible for distribution. For example, funds donated to charitable organisations are restricted by taxation legislation and cannot be provided to small businesses.
- Community members may split over who is ‘deserving’ of support, such as where funds may go more quickly to people suffering entrenched disadvantage versus business people.
- Some of those affected may be unable to make important financial decisions because grants can flow haphazardly from a variety of different sources with different timelines.
- Staff or organisations may start to compete to deliver the most support to their ‘own’ clients.
- Offers of assistance may be made which are not helpful, do not meet the need or are tied with unacceptable requirements.
- Community services may have to fund emergency responses out of their other funding arrangements or even seek flexibility from their bankers until government funds are formalised and begin to flow.

WHAT CAN WORK?

- Appropriate federal and state disaster funding and fair and transparent division of money raised by fundraising appeals.
- Cash donations rather than material support to allow more personal choice and dignity and to enable local people to source their items locally, thus better supporting local businesses.
- Untied grants for urgent and immediate support; for example a $30,000 untied cash donation to Berry Street from the Melbourne Lord Mayor’s Fund provided flexibility in meeting immediate need, without having to put in formal submissions. This requires careful governance.
- Deductible gift recipient (DGR) status for credible local organisations which are focused on community development and connections over the long term can distribute funds fairly and become a conduit for donations.
- Philanthropic funding that can take into account specific local needs (anything from purchasing tractors for wood donations through to funding meals for people living without appropriate cooking facilities: see the ‘Cooks Night Off’ program).
- Building a culture of ‘need, not want’.
- Over time, working with the community to see themselves as survivors not victims.

“We ended up renting the property next door which luckily had come up for rent a week or so after the bushfires. It wasn’t ideal but there were virtually no other viable alternatives. But even landlords need to know that you’re going to sign a lease for two years so we needed DHS to say they were going to keep funding the programs. They said ‘yes, they would commit to two year funding’, but there was never anything in writing (although) so far they have kept to their promise.”

“A disaster like that probably brought out the best and the worst in people. The level of resources really made a difference in what we could offer, and we tried to give to people on the basis of need not want, although the grants were not always fair. For example, people who lost their major home got assistance, but a lot of people who worked in Marysville and lived in rented accommodation missed out and had to leave the area.”
WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT?

• Depending on the scale of the emergency event, media may pour into the community, providing important information for local people and the ‘outside world’, but also possibly exacerbating trauma, infringing privacy and causing logistical issues for police, emergency services etc.
• In a disaster, media arrive usually right behind the police and emergency crews and will seek to film and interview survivors when they may be at their most vulnerable.
• Social media will explode and may be very valuable with sharing practical information, as it was during the Queensland floods, but may also spread the wrong information.

WHAT CHALLENGES MAY EMERGE?

• Media may be given access to emergency locations before people who live there have the opportunity to return and realise their losses, as when Marysville was opened up to journalists before residents were allowed in to witness their losses.
• Survivors may talk to the media while in a state of distress and feel angry or violated later.
• Sudden or constant replay of distressing footage or photos to mark anniversaries or other major events, or even as a trigger to raise funds, may revisit trauma for some survivors.
• Survivors may be angry about being approached by the media and/or may be resentful of those who are chosen to speak about their experiences or ‘represent’ the disaster. Others may want the opportunity to tell their story.
• Media coverage can generate sympathy and support but can also serve to put towns or regions ‘off the map’, with people thinking they are no longer viable for business.
• Media coverage can sway government responses and government may focus more on communicating through the media than directly to communities and services.
• Social media may spark fundraising or other support networks outside official and/or local channels. For example, emergency food supplies were sourced outside the formal aid provision in Tasmania and not distributed to those most in need first.
• Social media can also fuel negativity, distress and abuse between survivors, between communities or with support agencies, particularly in the longer term.

WHAT CAN WORK?

• Close and careful liaison with police about access to emergency locations by both media and affected residents.
• Excluding media from community briefings and other meetings of survivors and setting up media free zones at relief centres.
• Regular, planned and controlled briefings for the media, including protecting those who don’t want to speak to the media but supporting access for those who can give informed consent.

MEDIA: traditional and social

Many could not remember any details at all of their early dealings with the media, sometimes not even the approximate date of the encounter – whether it was a day or a week after the fires.

Many could not remember anything much about the content of the earliest interviews – questions or answers.

Some did not make the connection between giving an interview and appearing in the newspaper or on television.

Some gave away information that surprised them when they read it or were told by others what they had been reported as saying.

Some were in a state of post-traumatic euphoria, especially in the immediate aftermath.

From Black Saturday: in the media spotlight.

“They would have seen on TV someone talking about the wonderful assistance that was being offered in Whittlesea or the new building requirements or the new grants and they’d be thinking ‘I must have forgotten to tell them about something they were entitled to.’

Some media did not remember any
details at all of their early dealings with the media, sometimes not even the approximate date of the encounter – whether it was a day or a week after the fires.
COMMUNITY RECOVERY: flame and fire affected

WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT?
- The immediate impact of a disaster can continue for weeks or months; for example, many Victorian communities were smoke shrouded for nearly a month in 2009 as fires continued to burn across the whole region; other regions experience fire and flood threats over weeks.
- Most people will recover in time, but some are likely to require ongoing dedicated support.
- While those directly affected by the emergency need urgent assistance, a broader group of people and communities also need support (in bushfire terminology: flame affected versus fire affected) but often qualify for very little assistance.
- Many people suffer vicarious trauma because of their involvement with fire devastated households and communities through business, services, sport, schools and social connections.
- Community connections may be lost for the short or long-term.

WHAT CHALLENGES MAY EMERGE?
- Governments may struggle or refuse to ‘get’ why community development is important from the start in disaster recovery, if at all. It can therefore be much easier to secure resources to replace and rebuild physical infrastructure, such as roads and bridges, than to bring together the community through re-established events and ceremonies.
- Local businesses may lose income and customers – not just those that are directly affected by disasters such as fire, flood or cyclone, but those that supplied those businesses, for example, laundry and food suppliers to hospitality industries etc. Many businesses may close or declare bankruptcy.
- Young people and young families in particular may begin to leave the area because jobs or job opportunities are lost, schools closed or rental accommodation gone. This creates a downwards cycle where businesses facing cash flow issues have to downsize, which then forces more people out of the community or leaves them unable to recover, for example to get new loans for housing. This puts more pressure on businesses and the cycle continues.
- Community and individual recovery may become a very sensitive political issue, as it did in the 2009 Victorian bushfires. This can mean that the louder voices generate stronger responses.
- The influx of emergency and community service workers and aid in the initial recovery phase can bolster the local economy in the short term and mask long term problems.
- Media reporting that focuses on community and commercial losses, such as tourist attractions or conference centres, can put visitors off coming and exacerbate those losses.
- The whole economy of a region may be at risk for example if historic areas are burnt out in a tourist area.
- Particular occupations and professions may be suddenly at risk, even from some of the support provided to residents; for example, having many houses rebuilt and cars replaced can cause loss of work for some service providers, such as mechanics and handymen.
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WHAT CAN WORK?
- Risk management and resilience planning: working with communities to identify potential risks and how to strengthen social capital.
- Approaching all case management from a community development framework and the ethos of ‘healing from within’.
- Recognising and engaging the capacity within the affected community to contribute to its own recovery.
- Tapping into the willingness of community members to provide support, but providing professional and co-ordinated organisation of volunteers to make best use of their time.
- Understanding that economic recovery is very important to social recovery and vice versa: for example, getting child care, créches, and schools operating as quickly as possible is not only important for the recovery of children but means parents can get back to work and businesses are less likely to lose staff.
- Corporate support in differing forms. For example, one international business provided funding for specialist youth services for Black Saturday survivors, while other corporations contributed volunteer labour in the months after the bushfires. The benefits of the latter include that they have their own insurance, work cover and transport, but they are usually limited to day only visits.
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lot of people really missed the contact they got from having a case manager so we set up a volunteer program to try to meet that gap. One group of men went out every week in winter to cut and deliver firewood. A lot of people who were affected in the bushfire have joined up as volunteers, saying they want the chance now to give back to the community. Others have found it’s a really good way to reconnect because the community is different now, many of their friends or connections are gone and they want to make new connections.

“Flame affected areas were obviously those that were burnt out. The fire affected areas take in much broader regions surrounding them. Fires continued to burn across a huge region for another two weeks after the main fire, they were totally smoke shrouded for nearly a month. The people in those areas had contact with people whose lives were lost and suffered vicarious trauma. Then many businesses were affected. Even our local butcher, 40 per cent of his business had been in Marysville with the accommodation businesses. They were last overnight. The ripple effect in a rural community is huge, yet those outer areas rarely attract any funding or service support.

Research...showed how people’s social capital explained the well known differential impact of disasters. People who live alone get left under buildings. People with friends and relatives know that they are missing and where to look. People on their own don’t seek help about symptoms experienced in the aftermath. People with family get rallied into it. People evacuate early when they feel obliged to act in ways that will reduce threat to others. People on their own fall”, Petre Judge, Insight magazine.
Building the community

Berry Street and a range of other agencies, volunteer organisations and local volunteers ran a number of creative community development programs in the Murrundindi Shire area after the 2009 bushfires. They included:

**Women’s Day at the Races:** Case managers and staff played the roles of waiters and waitresses, providing support to make the day a success, with fun events such as Fashion on the Field with prizes donated from local businesses (an added incentive for people who had lost so much personal property).

**Pamper Day:** Through a family connection of a staff member, the Berlei bra firm sent a bus and staff to the area to properly fit and provide all women with a bra. It was held at a local resort which offered free massages, a swimming pool, sauna facilities, yoga and a range of outdoor activities and lunch.

**Firewood program:** Many people were living in caravans and sheds and had lost their fuel stores in the bushfires. In the lead-up to winter, teams of volunteers sourced, cut and delivered the wood weekly. One volunteer had been made redundant and spent a year delivering wood under the program. As well as feeling he was contributing, it enabled him to become familiar with people he visited and “keep an eye on how they were travelling”. The program also allowed men to come together and talk, as well as to do something for others, when they were often not yet in the position to make their own recovery decisions.

**Community Visitor Program:** This was initiated two years after the bushfires, when the case management program was closed, to support people who remained socially isolated. Volunteer community visitors were trained to provide social support and a ‘bridge’ back to the broader community and specialist support where appropriate. Visitors were all volunteers from the local community – and included many who had benefited from bushfire case management over the previous years and wanted to give something back to the community.

**Cooks Night Off:** Local people volunteered to make a regular meal for those living in temporary accommodation, often with very inadequate cooking facilities. It again gave people the chance to do something practical to assist others, and also the opportunity to check on the wellbeing of more vulnerable survivors and make referrals to more specialist services if appropriate.

**Blaze Aid:** This volunteer-based organisation works with families and individuals in rural Australia after natural disasters such as fires and floods. Working alongside the rural families, their volunteers create base camps and help rebuild fences that have been damaged or destroyed. Their support in the months after the 2009 Victorian bushfires not only helped individuals and families but local communities.

**Men’s Shed:** Berry Street provided staff and resources to assist the local committee to develop this facility which aimed to bring men together and provide a contact point for emerging issues requiring support. Eastern Access Community Health (EACH) and Berry Street were also able to pool funding and resources to create a new position to provide outreach support for local men.

**Wirreanda Festival:** After the bushfires, the local committee did not have the personal resources or strength to continue this traditional local festival and its records had been destroyed. Berry Street provided staff and resources to ensure its continuity and develop a template for further festivals.

**Specialist youth services:** Berry Street secured philanthropic support to appoint two specialist youth workers from very early on after the 2009 bushfires, to identify need among young people locally and to provide specialist individual support.

**Cartwheels:** Berry Street partnered with the Royal Children’s Hospital’s Festival for Healthy Living program to use arts and drama to support local children and young people, culminating in a big community theatre event in October 2011. The RCH program works across Victoria in communities that are experiencing serious trauma. It provided an opportunity for local artists to be involved in school recovery programs, assisted by child and youth mental health workers.

**Practical parenting:** Community based parenting workshops were held to provide a forum for parents to discuss and understand the impact of trauma on their children and families, and which acted as a catalyst for ongoing mutual support groups.

**Bendigo Bank Youth Foundation:** Funding was made available from various sources to provide long-term support for young people using the Bendigo Bank Youth Foundation as the model and under the auspice of Berry Street.
WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT?

• Vulnerable individuals and groups are more at risk of the immediate, medium and long-term effects of disasters, such as loss, injury, and social and economic hardship.
• They can include: children and young people, pregnant women, the elderly, people with a physical or cognitive disability, people with pre-existing mental illness, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, homeless people, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, and those who are socially and economically disadvantaged or isolated.
• Many people will experience shock and disbelief, fear and apprehension, anger, and shame and guilt in the early days after an event, and over the longer term.
• Trauma and grief will put personal, family and community relationships under pressure.

WHAT CHALLENGES MAY EMERGE?

• The mental health impacts of disasters can lead to an increase in problematic alcohol and drug use, self-harm, violence and abuse – which may well act as early warning signs.
• Some survivors may be reluctant to put their hands up for support. This is particularly so for men in rural and regional areas where mental strength is related to ‘manhood’ or to the role as ‘head of the family’.
• Whether or not they have experienced direct losses, the disaster may trigger post traumatic stress for people who have experienced previous trauma, including war service, previous bushfires or house fires, and family loss.
• Each anniversary and milestone, including media reporting of any inquests or other investigations into the emergency, may trigger new stress.

WHAT CAN WORK?

• Identifying before a disaster those who are the most vulnerable in the community and having a plan to ensure their safety, including the need for early warning and assistance. This will require a coordinated effort from agencies as some will be socially isolated.
• Explicit evacuation plans for facilities which accommodate vulnerable groups, such as hospitals, aged care facilities, schools, kindergartens and child care centres, and prisons.
• Having local expertise about the impact of trauma and the need for proper debriefing and trauma support. Berry Street had trained with disaster expert Rob Gordon and been involved in Active Response to Crisis (ARC), a trauma debrief group previously set up in a neighbouring region in response to a number of youth suicides in the area.
• Strong connections with mainstream services, for example community health services and with specialist providers. Berry Street was involved in an outreach service run by the Austin Hospital Trauma Unit which allowed case managers to do full client referral or secondary consultations.

TRAUMA AND VULNERABILITY: who is at risk?

“Disasters do not impact everyone in the same way, and it is often our vulnerable community members who are hardest hit.” National Disaster Resilience Statement.

“People with pre-existing mental health stresses or problems may experience new or increased symptoms or possible relapses... Mental health impacts are often associated with an increase in problematic alcohol and drug use, violence and abuse and this is sometimes an early warning sign of more serious mental health problems emerging.”

Those sorts of issues, the family breakdowns, the drinking, have grown since the fires. That’s how a lot of men have coped, hard working and hard drinking. But that just puts off the inevitable and that’s what we’re finding now. They’re still not coming forward to seek help, but usually there’s an incident--someone gets caught drink driving, there’s a major health issue, or a mental health crisis… I’d say with more frequency now.”

“Where people live, their income level, as well as health and social contexts will be a factor in determining the effect that extreme weather events have on people... There is a growing recognition that the distribution of weather-related health impacts has been, and will continue to be, uneven, falling more heavily on low-income populations and those with chronic health conditions. Other factors associated with increased vulnerability include age, disability, homelessness, social isolation, poor English language skills, and residing in rural and remote communities.” Australian Senate
ON THE FRONTLINE IN EMERGENCIES: A Practical Guide For Communities And Community Service Organisations

Children: They won’t ‘just get over it’

Only recently have we begun to acknowledge that children can be deeply affected and traumatised in an emergency. Despite that emerging understanding, the needs of children are often still overlooked in disasters until their needs show up in more urgent ways: acting up at school, self-harm, depression, bed wetting, or other manifestations of stress or trauma.

The Australian and State governments advise in their emergency management planning that:
- although all people are affected by an emergency, children and young people are uniquely vulnerable and require targeted and specialised interventions
- children are not ‘little adults’ and should not be managed in the same way as adults.

Unaccompanied children will need particular care and protection.

Some of the issues children and young people face in a disaster include:
- their own trauma, at the loss of loved ones, including pets, and of their community
- the enormity of the tragedy and needs of whole family units may overshadow their individual needs and the availability of programs, funding and support
- parents may be ‘absent’ to their children or overlook their needs while they try to set up a new home or deal with their own trauma
- the loss of their ‘every day’, especially when schools and recreation facilities are closed.

WHAT CAN HELP?
- Keeping them in mind in the early hours and days after a disaster; evacuation centres should make specific provision for their needs (including age-appropriate food, sleeping requirements, teenager privacy issues, and child-friendly spaces for play – to also provide respite for parents).
- Quickly re-establish childcare, crèches, play groups, kinders and schools.
- Re-establishing institutions, ceremonies and traditions as quickly as possible.
- Considering specialist programs to support the mental wellbeing of young people. For example, Berry Street facilitated the Cartwheels program with the Royal Children’s Hospital’s Festival for Healthy Living program that supports children in communities that are experiencing trauma.
- Supporting parents to reconsider the needs of their children, either through practical parenting or awareness programs.
- Providing access to age-appropriate information about emergency management and mitigated/residual risk, particularly in the lead up to the next fire or flood season.
- Supporting schools and youth work programs.
WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT?
• Trauma-related issues that have been hidden, or managed to date, may begin to emerge through family violence, drug and alcohol abuse, or depression.
• Many people may have moved from the areas leaving disrupted communities.
• Anniversaries and disasters in other areas can retrigger trauma.
• ‘Ordinary’ life events not related to the disaster, such as relationship breakdown, bereavement or losing a job, can compound the grief and trauma of the disaster.

WHAT CHALLENGES MAY EMERGE?
• Demand for support can grow as people who do not originally register begin to see the benefits for others, or those who have been receiving support from other agencies, funding bodies etc may be closed off earlier but still be seeking support.
• Tensions may develop between services that understand the long-term nature of trauma recovery and government processes of trying to pull back on support as soon as possible.
• Government focus may be on ‘number crunching’ as a measure of success: how many cases are active, how many closed and when will numbers start to drop off.

WHAT CAN WORK?
• Understanding and advocating to government on the importance of not hurrying people in their recovery.
• Regularly monitoring and analysing client need and providing evidence for ongoing specialist support to meet more complex needs in housing, mental health, unemployment, legal and financial issues, family violence, drug and alcohol abuse etc.
• Providing a range of social gatherings, community events and practical workshops for the community to maintain contacts and support.

There was never any debate about the bushfire work. I think because of the sheer size of it and the devastation, the Board thought yes, we must play our part. This was the first time that we were clearly going to be working with the whole population. It was outside our core business. It wasn’t just our usual client base of disadvantaged children and families but the Board did not hesitate. It recognised that we had the capacity to help and, as the significant local agency, we had to do what we could to help.

People and organisations working at the local level can often best identify the most vulnerable individuals or groups, particularly those who may need extra planning support, and relief and recovery assistance.”

Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS).

AFTER THE RUSH: longer-term recovery

ROLE OF ‘HEAD OFFICE’: for larger organisations

WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT?
• A rush from staff across the organisation who want to ‘do something’.
• Collaboration and competition from other service providers.

WHAT CHALLENGES MAY EMERGE?
• Questioning by funders, management or staff about whether it is ‘core business’ to play a lead role in the emergency response and recovery.
• Assessing honestly whether the organisation has the skills and expertise to take on such a role, and whether it will lose focus on other primary work.
• Being involved in an emergency response may mean the organisation’s other work may be put on hold, at the expense of other vulnerable people or opportunities for the organisation to pursue more traditional work.

WHAT CAN WORK?
• Deciding quickly whether this is core business and, if the answer is yes, committing whole of organisation support to the operation. For Berry Street this was assessed through:
  » existing sense of commitment to the fire affected communities in areas in which it had provided services for some time
  » knowledge of the local communities, service networks and existing collaborative partnerships
  » prior experience in the provision of case management services
  » proven capacity to establish new programs and innovative practice models, with a short lead up time
  » capacity to recruit, support and develop a professional workforce.

• Ensuring the organisation’s leadership team shows its full support.
• Tapping into all the organisation’s resources including human resources (staff recruitment, support and health and wellbeing), infrastructure (offices, vehicles, IT equipment), training (specific skills, trauma) and administrative support systems.
• Focusing on internal communications, keeping all staff informed about what is happening in the emergency areas and how that might impact on them personally and their work.
RESOURCES:

After the Emergency: support info, Australian Red Cross: http://aftertheemergency.redcross.org.au/get-info/support-info

Beyond Bushfires: Community, Resilience and Recovery - a five year study led by the University of Melbourne: http://beyondbushfires.org.au/

Black Saturday and Beyond: an online resource for sharing stories hosted by EACH social and community health - http://www.blacksaturdayandbeyond.com.au/

Black Saturday: In the media spotlight, by the University of Melbourne’s Centre for Advanced Journalism: http://caj.unimelb.edu.au/research/black-saturday


Disasters and disadvantage: social vulnerability in emergency management, Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS), 2014.


From Disaster to Renewal, final report from Regional Australia Institute, available at www.regionalaustralia.org.au


Still Standing: after a natural disaster, an interactive website with advice from experts hosted by The Salvation Army: http://www.stillstanding.org.au/


