



Catholic Social
Services **Australia**

Submission to the Finance
and Public Administration
References Committee

Lessons to be learnt in
relation to the Australian
bushfire season 2019 -20

The national network of Catholic social services

About Us



Catholic Social Services Australia (CSSA) is the national body for Catholic welfare services, representing more than 15,000 workers and volunteers in more than 650 locations throughout Australia. We are a national body of over 50 member organisations providing social and community services across our Catholic network, reaching more than one million vulnerable Australians through more than 300 different service offerings each year. CSSA represents the social services mission of the Catholic Church and undertakes advocacy on matters of social justice, inclusion, human rights, inequality and policies that are informed by research and the practical experience of our network. We receive no funding from government.

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Catholic Social Services Australia (CSSA) welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission in response to the terms of reference of this inquiry. Our submission primarily addresses the Committee's interest in the progress and status of recovery efforts one year on.

We make the following recommendations:

1. Access to sanitation and safe and secure accommodation for bushfire impacted communities should be key priorities for all levels of government;
2. Invest heavily in co-ordination – traumatised communities do not differentiate between levels of government.
3. Provide ongoing and long-term financial and social support to bushfire affected communities.
4. Support the concept of safe places and 'places of last resort' in communities and localities that do not have an established evacuation centre.
5. Acknowledge the diversity of rural and regional communities impacted by disaster and enable locally developed responses and community led initiatives
6. Invest in community engagement and development programs supporting the next generation of community leaders to 'step up'
7. Deliver on the promises made – disappointment and delays have been hallmarks of government responses.

INTRODUCTION

Members of CSSA provide a range of services to vulnerable people and communities across Australia. When the 2019-20 bushfire season occurred, CSSA in collaboration with the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) convened a meeting of key Catholic entities – Catholic Health Australia, St Vincent de Paul Society, Catholic Mission, The National Catholic Education Commission, Catholic Social Services Australia and Catholic Religious Australia to coordinate a national response to the unfolding bushfire crisis: *CERA – Catholic Emergency Relief Australia*. Key representatives met weekly to determine how best to respond to the emerging needs in affected communities.

On behalf of the Catholic community of Australia, Archbishop Mark Coleridge, President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference wrote to the Prime Minister offering access to any church facilities and resources as places of refuge.

The Catholic community was mobilised to respond locally to the unfolding disaster and a national church appeal was launched for the period of January 2020 in support of the St Vincent De Paul's work as a provider of on -the-ground support and emergency relief.

International donations from Catholic parishes were received and distributed through CSSA



to local projects and communities. The Catholic Archdioceses also raised funds through local appeals.

Catholic schools and parishes opened their doors to families in need – providing counselling and support, distributing food and clothing, supporting the local disaster relief centres and safe places. Activities were developed to help impacted children and adolescents deal with trauma and grief. Scholarships were created to support students to get back to school. Pastoral care was provided throughout 2020 to affected communities.

As noted in the Committee's interim report the size and scale of the bushfire season which extended from August 2019 to the end of February 2020 was unprecedented. The impacts on vulnerable people and communities have been catastrophic. The submissions from many charitable groups to this inquiry have outlined the extraordinary national and local responses in detail.

CSSA established the **Bushfire Communities Recovery Network** of its members who are providing services in bushfire-affected areas. These included

- CatholicCare Melbourne
- CatholicCare Sandhurst
- Centacare Ballarat
- CatholicCare Canberra -Goulburn
- CatholicCare South West NSW
- CatholicCare Wollongong
- Catholic Care Sydney
- CatholicCare Parramatta
- CentacareSA Adelaide
- Centacare New England
- CatholicCare Hunter-Manning
- Good Grief (Sydney)

This network supports local initiatives and has become a community of practice for our members, allowing knowledge to be shared and providing professional supervision and support as they continue to provide trauma-informed care.. It continues to meet monthly. Our members know from experience that adrenaline can last for a while, but the enormity of the long haul of recovery can get the better of even the strongest of folk.

Our Catholic services are prominent in the space of mental health and wellbeing. Along with other agencies active in this aspect of recovery, this is the most important priority in the medium to long term. Resilience is a common attribute in rural communities and has been very evident in the many stories emerging from the bushfire communities. However, it ought not be taken for granted that people are going to be okay, even when they say they will. The strongest people are those who can admit their vulnerability. Our priority is to be there when those who have been holding it together for the sake of others are ready to let their guard



down and release the tension and emotional toll this event has taken. This is and will continue to be a vital service, because no one is immune in a disaster of this scale.

In February 2020, CSSA received funding from the Global Giving Fund to engage a Community Facilitator to work on the NSW South Coast, deemed to be the area of greatest need and disadvantage. Early media coverage and government responses highlighted this region as having significant social, economic and logistical challenges to overcome in the aftermath of the bushfires.

Our Community Facilitator commenced in early February 2020 and has been working on the ground since then. She has a wide brief – she works as a connector between individuals and community services, she provides training to local groups and helps with grant writing and fund raising. She has walked alongside the tiny communities of the south coast seeking to rebuild their lives and livelihoods, and she sees first-hand what is missing in the recovery effort. She provides linkages between government and community agencies, participates in local recovery working groups, provides referrals and networks across the south coast.

In Victoria, CatholicCare, in partnership with the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne and Catholic Diocese of Sale, reinstated their Bushfire Community Recovery Service, drawing on the lessons of the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires. They launched a Bushfire Recovery Appeal, with the goal of raising \$2.5 million to fund the service for at least three years.

By April 2020 they had people on the ground in Bairnsdale, Lakes Entrance and Orbst to support affected communities, with scope to extend their reach to those in need. Chaplaincy services helped to support the spiritual healing of those coming to terms with the loss and grief they have experienced. Counselling has allowed people to explore the wide range of emotions and trauma they have experienced and help them to strengthen their relationships and build resilience. Community engagement and community building activities continue to support that healing.

It is the experience of the Catholic Bushfire Communities Response Network that the strong focus by state and federal government on a highly medicalised and economic approach to recovery is only part of the long-term solution for traumatised individuals and communities. The challenges are in understanding the long timeframe involved in the recovery process and the time it takes for people to actually recognise they need support and seek it out.

We also urge governments at all levels to acknowledge and understand that recovery is not a linear process. The National Bushfire Recovery Agency, in *Journey to Recovery* describes 'recovery as being made up of response and relief and suggests the phases may overlap, reflecting that individuals and communities need different support at different times. These phases come after the emergency phase. The focus in the response phase is on meeting the basic needs of the people until more permanent and sustainable solutions are found. Response resources may include food, emergency shelter, and medical care. For CSSA, we include spiritual and pastoral care to ensure the building of well-being and future resilience of individuals and the community.



As regional and rurally based services, some of our members have been challenged to respond to community needs because of limited mental health resources available in our regions. Where our members have staff who themselves been directly impacted through bushfires, it certainly is not fair to ask them to counsel others. Our member network has managed to assist some agencies by providing online or phone counselling from unaffected services to those clients. Recruitment and retention of skilled counsellors remains a challenge for nfp organisations – where salaries can't match those offered by state and federal government agencies.

However, we are constantly reminded in our network of the importance of providing socially-oriented community health initiatives that allow communities to develop their own projects and pathways to recovery. These are communal solutions rather than individualised assistance. This focus on community development and engagement has been missing from the government responses to the bushfire recovery effort.

CERA

CERA is a Church-wide collaboration of the key Catholic ministries that serve the Australian community. These ministries include parishes, social service agencies, schools and universities, hospitals and aged care providers, and religious congregations.

As Catholics we want to respond to emergencies with the same fraternal spirit of care as the Good Samaritan, understanding that we have a responsibility for those in need. CERA is the initiative through which the Catholic Church and its ministries assist those effected by disaster and emergency.

The Australian Disaster Preparedness Framework considers 'work across all jurisdictions and seeks to incorporate current thinking and common approaches to emergency management.'¹ This Framework sets the culture for high functioning national collaboration to strengthen and contribute to the nation's emergency preparedness – and the CERA Framework seeks to align cooperatively with this government approach.

The CERA Framework outlines the principles that underpin national preparedness, recovery and response and defines what constitutes preparedness capabilities for emergency disasters along with framework components. Importantly the CERA Framework is underpinned by the key principles of Catholic Social teaching and provides the means for living out of the Gospel - helping those most vulnerable and in need during times of emergency and seeking to ensure people's and communities' pastoral well-being.

The CERA Framework has been developed to assist the whole-of-Church to provide guidance on emergency preparedness in their jurisdiction, with the view to contributing to the

¹ IBID p5



national emergency preparedness, response and recovery effort in relation to an emergency disaster.

Since February 2020 CERA has funded 24 projects developed by local communities to meet their needs.

Access to sanitation and safe and secure accommodation

The 2019 summer bushfires officially destroyed more than 4000 homes. In fact, that number underestimates the number of unregistered shacks, shanties, caravans and sheds that were home to hundreds of 'blockies' living on bush blocks.

The devastation of losing whatever is called home, was exacerbated by the COVID-19 lockdown. For hundreds of people who could not find alternative accommodation, or who, for example, didn't want to leave their farm animals, the winter and spring of 2020 has been very tough. Making do, living in a tent or sleeping in a car without access to running water, or a toilet for months on end has been the lived experience of many of the people we have been working with. Caravan parks and public facilities were locked down – leaving many without the means of washing themselves or their clothes.

Where the bushfires have impacted coastal villages, the influx of holiday makers at the beginning of summer has meant displaced people having to give up their temporary accommodation, and not able to afford to stay in the urban area. Where the bushfires impacted hinterland areas, the winter was harsh, outreach services were few and far between, and for many they felt forgotten. These are the stories we are hearing every day.

A community of 20 houses burnt out is left with nothing – no running water, no public toilet – surely this has to be a priority for government to restore basic facilities to a community? In response CSSA and Vinnies have been working with this community to create a solution that is replicable in other localities.

In the COVID_19 environment, where the South Coast became a hotspot, some of our service users were so completely overwhelmed they locked themselves down, both physically and emotionally- becoming disengaged and isolated from friends and community and it takes a massive effort to bring people back from that.

Invest in Co-ordination:

In NSW there is active 'competition' between Resilience NSW workers and the National Bushfire Recovery Agency workers about ownership of projects and initiatives. There are countless working groups, wellbeing advisory groups, strategy groups, and interminable meetings where well-meaning public servants are talking '*about them*' not '*with them*'. The



fact is that traumatised communities do not differentiate between levels of government, they need seamless communications, not conflicting messages. They need clear advice, pathways and accessible information. Civic leaders are not necessarily the best local community leaders – and in the NSW south coast local government environment, the geographic spread does not allow them to take the lead in a critical recovery phase in local areas.

The Victorian government has drawn on the Black Saturday bushfire experience to focus on community-led recovery and has established community recovery hubs in the heart of bushfire impacted regions. Their advice is this:

“ Recovery can’t be about us telling communities how it’s going to be. It has to be about listening, working together, and ensuring that rebuilding and recovery are both locally driven and delivered. ”

Provide ongoing and long-term financial and social support

The process of recovery is long and slow and is different for every individual impacted. The immediate financial support and emergency relief provides an initial filip, but as we witnessed with COVID-19, the next disaster strikes and governments and services move on. CSSA recognises the importance of staying in impacted communities for the long haul. Government’s need to acknowledge this too and find strategies to invest in social infrastructure and community development that helps the recovery of individuals, not just the economy.

CSSA and St Vincent de Paul Society are collaborating to ensure that we can retain our presence on the NSW South Coast because of the complex community needs that continue to emerge.

CSSA draws the Committee’s attention to the challenges of applying for funding through the Resilience NSW portal. Obviously designed for commercial activity, with no thought of community volunteers or user experience, this portal has reduced people to tears of frustration, and many have given up on applying for funding through it. The current round of BLER, thankfully uses an alternative portal. However, even this funding pits local government against community groups vying for the same funding pool and preferences organisations that can make a co-contribution.

Support the concept of safe places

The experience of coastal villages, with one access road have highlighted the importance of having a network of ‘safe places’, such as community halls or local facilities that can be categorised and equipped as a ‘safe place’ or ‘place of last resort’ in communities and localities that do not have a formal evacuation centre. The government announced funding for 2000 satellite phones and solar panels for RFS and evacuation centres, but a shire of



villages needs local support and infrastructure such as a defibrillator, first aid kit, fridge, telephone, radio wifi, electricity and water tank as a basic community resilience measure.

Not every community will respond to the bushfire threat and impacts in the same way:

The diversity of communities impacted by a disaster means that there is no one size fits all theory about social and economic recovery. The twelve- month anniversary of the bushfires triggered a myriad of responses in communities where we are working. The smell of a burn off near a village in the highlands triggered a community alarm that had people packed and in cars ready to evacuate.

While many people have managed to get on with their lives, there are others who are still deeply grieving for the loss of friends, family, possessions, work, amenity, wildlife. There are still so few birds in the trees around Michelago that the silence is almost deafening. Whole industries that have underpinned local economies have disappeared and we are finding more and more people in financial stress as times goes on. At the same time, a community of retirees on the mid north coast rebuilt their gardens as a communal garden, which has brought them new friends and connections and a new project.

We need to acknowledge the diversity of rural and regional communities impacted by disaster and encourage and fund locally developed responses and community led initiatives.

Invest in community engagement programs supporting the next generation of community leaders to ‘step up’

We are witnessing high levels of volunteer fatigue in our services after twelve months and COVID-19 restrictions has meant that many community activities led by volunteers have lapsed and won't be revived. The Local Government elections in NSW in September 2021 will witness record numbers of retiring Councillors. We believe that a national community engagement initiative that includes facilitation tools, training programs and local projects will encourage emerging/aspiring leaders in communities to step up, and would be an excellent investment in future disaster responses and recovery.

Deliver on the promises made – disappointment and delays have been hallmarks of governments responses.

Australians don't want their civic leaders to play politics in times of crisis – they want leadership and outcomes. If we are to restore public confidence in our institutions, we need to do what we say we are going to do. This means allocating funding according to need and recognising that people who are traumatised by disaster need nurturing support and sincerity.