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What is your submission based on? I am making this submission based on my professional knowledge, qualifications or experience or on behalf of a group or organisation

What is your area of professional expertise?

If you are lodging your submission on behalf of a group or organisation, what is the name of the group or organisation? The Salvation Army

Your Submission

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response worked well?

Please see attached submission

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response didn't work well?

Please see attached submission

In your experience, what needs to change to improve arrangements for preparation, mitigation, response and recovery coordination for national natural disaster arrangements in Australia?

Please see attached submission

Is there anything else you would like to tell the Royal Commission?

Please see attached submission

Do you agree to your submission being published? Yes I agree to my submission being published in my name

Supporting material provided:

The Salvation Army - Royal Commission Bushfire Inquiry Submission.pdf



Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements

April 2020

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Statement of Recognition

The Salvation Army acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters throughout Australia. We pay our respect to Elders, past, present and emerging, acknowledging their continuing relationship to this land and the ongoing living cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia.

Introduction

The Salvation Army thanks the Royal Commission for the opportunity to provide input into the Inquiry. We would also like to acknowledge the extensive support we receive from all levels of government.

The Salvation Army seeks to meet people at their time of need, meaning that our precise role during natural and manmade disasters differs according to the need of the community, state disaster plans, and collaborative arrangements with other community organisations. It has been the overwhelming observation of Salvation Army personnel on the ground that government and community responded admirably to the 2019-20 bushfire season given its unprecedented nature. The following submission offers our learnings from this summer and reflections on opportunities for better collaboration and coordination as they relate to the following four questions:

1. How can Australia mitigate the impacts of natural disasters?

- Governments can raise community awareness on how to prepare for and respond to new bushfire conditions, including the level of insurance needed to rebuild.

2. How can Australia be better prepared for natural disasters?

- Governments can ensure that state and local emergency plans are comprehensive and clearly communicated well in advance of the bushfire season.
- Governments can raise public awareness about the need to prepare and enact a bushfire plan, regardless of the level of expected risk.
- Governments can ensure necessary staff and resources to respond to an extended and more intense bushfire season, even during peak holiday and tourist periods.

3. How can the emergency response and relief effort be improved?

- Governments can increase public capacity to translate fire danger levels and bushfire warning levels into action.
- All levels of government can cooperate to ensure efficient and timely use of resources.
- Governments and community groups can share information and resources to enable holistic and community-focussed responses.

4. How can we all support communities to recover?

- We can work together to prevent and respond to violence against women and children.
- Governments can share information about land available for community and industry to provide short to medium-term accommodation as communities rebuild.
- Disaster recovery efforts can prioritise providing employment opportunities for local people looking for work before engaging outside contractors.
- Governments can ensure that mental health support is available and accessible for during all stages of recovery, as the effects of trauma may take time to manifest.

The Salvation Army Emergency and Disaster Response

The scale of the bushfires this summer meant that at times The Salvation Army was working simultaneously across all three phases of its disaster response in different parts of the country.

As the crisis unfolds, **phase one** involves Salvation Army Emergency Services (SAES) personnel feeding and providing support to first responders and evacuees and assisting with the management and service of evacuation centres according to agreements in place with state and local governments. The SAES is a national 24/7 state of readiness service with 18 full-time staff and supported by volunteers. Between September 2019 and February 2020, SAES teams provided more than 250,000 meals and 240,000 light refreshments for first responders and evacuees in over 165 locations across Australia. At the peak of the season our Bega team fed 4,000 people for dinner.

In the immediate aftermath of a disaster, The Salvation Army's support transitions to **phase two** – an initial assessment and provision of emergency financial support, and then once the crisis is over, to **phase three** – financial support following a more detailed assessment of need. In NSW, our rural chaplains also stand at the ready to visit and provide support to affected rural and regional areas as required.

As at 6 April 2020, we have provided \$18.8 million in direct financial payments to 10,500 Australians. Thanks to the generosity of corporate partners, we have also been able to provide individuals with gift cards worth over half a million dollars, product donations, flights and emergency accommodation.

The Salvation Army has been working with federal, state and local governments to develop recovery plans to map the way forward for the recovery of areas affected by the fires. A dedicated Bushfire Recovery Team is helping coordinate The Salvation Army's contribution to the recovery process, which we anticipate from previous experience will take three to four years.

1. How can Australia mitigate the impacts of natural disasters?

Home and Contents Insurance

Although insurance is perhaps not traditionally understood to be a key component disaster mitigation, it can go a long way to reducing the impact that disasters can have on individuals and communities. Our experience has been that rates of uninsurance and underinsurance have proven to be a significant concern for properties affected by the fires.

Those who had no insurance often make this decision due to the high cost of premiums, meaning they are often those who are least able to afford to rebuild after the loss of their property. This problem is only expected to increase as we experience the effects of a changing climate, which will in turn affect 'insurability'. Modelling undertaken by the Climate Risk Engine suggests that by 2100, the number of existing properties considered 'high risk' could more than double (from 383,300 to 735,654)¹ and that insurance premiums could double or even triple before this². An expansion of insurance 'red zones' of addresses that are essentially uninsurable will in turn impact housing affordability. There is concern that, in trying to recover costs incurred this bushfire season, insurance companies will significantly increase premiums to the extent that they are unaffordable to most people. Though a rise in insurance premiums may be inevitable in response to a changing climate, the shock to household budgets could be alleviated by abolishing insurance stamp duty, where this is still charged. Governments and the insurance industry could also work together to incentivise hazard mitigation in building design and town planning, as has been done with the constructions of levees in towns prone to flooding. As with areas at risk of coastal erosion, a national discussion is needed about the future of communities located in insurance 'red zones'.

The problem of underinsurance stems from several factors. In many instances people have insured their houses according to what their home and contents are worth, only to find that the cost of reconstruction in keeping with current building standards, is many times greater than anticipated. Staff at The Salvation Army's Moneycare financial counselling service have also reported instances where policies did not cover associated outbuildings on properties or damage to property that did not catch fire. Beyond the associated smoke damage, many residents found that water storage, plumbing and other plastic structures had melted due to radiant heat. This left residents with little to no ability to rebuild, repair or replace damaged buildings and other essential fixtures.

¹ Mallon, Karl, Maxwell McKinlay, Ned Haughton, Rohan Hamden, Ruth Tedder, and Jacquelyn Lamb. 2019. *Climate Change Risk to Australia's Built Environment: A Second Pass National Assessment*. XDI Pty Ltd. Accessed March 31, 2020. <https://xdi.systems/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Climate-Change-Risk-to-Australia%E2%80%99s-Built-Environment-V4-final-reduced-2.pdf>.

² Ting, Inga, Nathanael Scott, Alex Palmer, and Michael Slezak. 2019. "The rise of red zones of risk." *ABC News*, 23 October. Accessed March 25, 2020. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-10-23/the-suburbs-facing-rising-insurance-costs-from-climate-risk/11624108>.

Another related issue has been slow insurance assessments and payouts, which have delayed the process of cleaning up and rebuilding and therefore, the physical and psychological recovery of individuals and communities. Though delays are understandable, as distances between affected areas and the volume of claims lodged across the country have stretched the resources of insurance companies, this simply highlights the need to improve how claims are assessed.

The issues outlined above are not new, though the scale of the 2019-20 bushfires has perhaps intensified their effect.³ These experiences offer an opportunity to raise awareness of the importance of ensuring that home and contents insurance actually covers the cost of rebuilding. This could be included in the disaster preparation guidance materials circulated by state and territory governments and a national information campaign. Additionally, the Commonwealth Government could work with the insurance industry to ensure that natural disasters are included in standard policies and that policy holders are aware of what their policy covers. The Commonwealth Government could, through its regulatory bodies, monitor any increases as a result of the 2019-20 bushfire season and floods to ensure that these are fair and justified.

Recommendations

- That state governments consider phasing out stamp duty charged on insurance to alleviate the stress of rising insurance premiums.
- That all levels of government work together with industry to incentivise hazard resilient buildings, especially in high-risk areas.
- That all levels of government work together to increase public awareness of common issues with home and contents insurance coverage, including underinsurance. This could be included in disaster preparedness guides and a national information campaign in the lead up to the bushfire season.
- That the Commonwealth Government works with insurance companies to ensure that bushfire and other natural disasters are included in standard home and contents insurance policies, and that cost recovery from the 2019-20 bushfire season does not result in a disproportionate and unjustifiable increase in insurance premiums.

³ Lucas, Chloe, Christine Eriksen, and David Bowman. 2020. "A crisis of underinsurance threatens to scar rural Australia permanently." *ABC News*, 7 January. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-07/crisis-of-underinsurance-threatens-to-scar-rural-australia/11844992>.

2. How can Australia be better prepared for natural disasters?

Community Education and Engagement

The Salvation Army's experience was that many people were underprepared due to delays in undertaking planning or in enacting their plan, but also due to the sheer scale and ferocity of the fires that burnt across the state. As fires jumped significant distances and travelled at unprecedented speeds, as well as doubling back and burning some areas repeatedly, many people were caught short regardless of planning. As a nation, we simply were not prepared for the new reality we faced.

We found that some people with significant emotional or financial connection to land or property, were reluctant to leave properties that were under threat. Some families chose to split, trying to both defend property and take children and pets to safety. Many of these families were unprepared for the impact of limited communications, uncertainty, fear and emotional trauma of the separation. Although The Salvation Army appreciates the connection to land and the emotional desire to protect a property, additional education of the risks and associated stresses, for example in bushfire survival guides, could assist people to make informed decisions and mental preparations before an emergency.

Previous experience shows that communities who have lived through bushfires are more likely to make a bushfire emergency plan in the future. It has been ten years since the 2009 national 'Prepare. Act. Survive' campaign in response to the Black Saturday fires. The national and global attention given to the unprecedented 2019-20 bushfire season provides a rare opportunity for governments to encourage greater public awareness of the need to make preparations and enact plans well in advance of danger. While this has always been the case, the new bushfire conditions that were experienced over the summer showed that we need to expect the unexpected.

Recommendation

- That all levels of government cooperate on a multimedia public awareness campaign on the importance of having a bushfire plan, regardless of the 'normal' level of risk.

State and Local Emergency Plans

The Salvation Army recognises that emergency plans and indeed, responses to disasters are a state and territory responsibility. There are however aspects of the preparation and response that could benefit from a nationally consistent approach, as recognised in the 2011 National Strategy for Disaster Resilience (**National Strategy**). While aspects of the following are addressed in the National Strategy, our experience this summer shows that there is scope for more consistent implementation, in particular regarding:

- The need for a clear pathway for community and charity efforts to be coordinated;
- Recognition of the impact of a changing climate on bushfire seasons; and
- The probability that emergencies will overlap with peak holiday and tourist season.

Community and charity involvement

The Salvation Army recognises the dedication and hard work of volunteers, including first responders, without whom the bushfire response and recovery effort could not have been possible. The Salvation Army is grateful for the support of more than 3,000 volunteers across Australia through the 2019-20 bushfire season. We have also been overwhelmed by the generosity of individuals and community groups.

Our experiences across Australia revealed an opportunity to better coordinate and channel community generosity and volunteer efforts, particularly in the immediate response, as this led to friction and duplication of supports in some areas. For example, though The Salvation Army has an agreement with the NSW Government to provide emergency catering, there were occasions where teams from other organisations arrived with food, expecting to be able to serve it to first responders and evacuees. While we appreciated their spirit of generosity, we have a duty of care to ensure food safety and the impromptu nature of the support meant that it was more disruptive than helpful. Another evacuation centre received an immense amount of donations, including perishable food and other consumables. Unfortunately, we did not have appropriate storage capacity, and despite best efforts, some went to waste. The 'Planning for Spontaneous Volunteers' handbook developed by the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience addresses some of these challenges.

We observed that good communication, coordination and forward planning were key to the smooth running of evacuation centres. This included the choice of location to ensure a space that is fit for purpose. Where this was absent, this resulted in confusion about what support was available and where additional help was needed. Improved coordination and communication of the practical and emotional support available, which organisations were responsible for them, and who to contact to offer assistance, would mean more efficient use of volunteer skills and resources while improving volunteers' and the community's experience of evacuation centres. A clear demarcation of responsibilities, potentially outlined in local bushfire plans, would ensure service coverage, enable better collaboration and reduce confusion.

Adapting to changed bushfire seasons

As mentioned above, our experience was that many people were not prepared for the reality of the bushfire season that we faced. Its unprecedented nature – in terms of scale, ferocity and timing – meant that resources used to dealing with a few discrete emergencies at a time were stretched to cover disasters in almost every state and territory of Australia. According to the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (**CSIRO**), at 18 February the land burned in southern Australia during the 2019-20 bushfire season (more than 10 million hectares) was already greater than the 2009 Black Saturday and 1983 Ash Wednesday bushfires combined.⁴

Fire has been a constant feature of Australian life and this is expected to continue. Research by the CSIRO and the Bureau of Meteorology (**BOM**) shows a long-term increase in extreme fire weather and fire season length across Australia.⁵ Evidence also shows that climate change has led to an increase in drought, which combined with higher temperatures, increases the average forest fire danger index and number of days with severe fire danger.⁶ The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (**IPCC**) warns that climate-related extreme conditions, including extreme heat, drought and wildfires, have a significant impact not only on ecosystems but also on physical and mental health and wellbeing.⁷ We have seen these effects this summer directly in loss of life (human, flora and fauna), physical injuries and mental health concerns, as well as due to the effects of bushfire smoke inhalation, which research has shown to cause respiratory problems.⁸

Our bushfire plans as individuals, communities, jurisdictions and as a nation, need to reflect this new reality. This includes providing appropriate resourcing to ensure that our systems can cope with the strain experienced this year with multiple fire fronts threatening homes and lives across the nation.



“Losing a significant amount of our farm to a bushfire has been extremely difficult with the ongoing drought conditions. The recovery process has been very slow and costly. Unfortunately, the risk of bushfires increased for us because of the drought.” (A community member in regional NSW)

⁴ CSIRO. 2020. *The 2019-20 bushfires: a CSIRO explainer*. 18 February. Accessed March 17, 2020. <https://www.csiro.au/en/Research/Environment/Extreme-Events/Bushfire/preparing-for-climate-change/2019-20-bushfires-explainer>.

⁵ Bureau of Meteorology and CSIRO. 2018. *State of the Climate 2018*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

⁶ CSIRO and Bureau of Meteorology. 2015. *Climate Change in Australia Information for Australia's Natural Resource Management Regions*. Technical Report, Australia: CSIRO and Bureau of Meteorology.

⁷ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). 2014. *Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report*. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Geneva, Switzerland: IPCC.

⁸ Reid, Colleen E, Michael Brauer, Fay H Johnston, Michael Jerrett, John R Balmes, and Catherine T Elliott. 2016. “Critical Review of Health Impacts of Wildfire Smoke Exposure.” *Environmental Health Perspectives* 124 (9): 1334-1343. Accessed March 5, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1289/ehp.1409277>

Resourcing to meet additional challenges

An issue that was experienced nationally, was that the bushfire season overlapped with the end-of-year shut down and peak holiday periods. This meant staff shortages in state and local emergency services and government departments, as well as internally within The Salvation Army. Tourist numbers also increased near to fire zones. This had significant impacts on the coordination and orderliness of the response, with some interstate visitors not aware of the danger they were in and the response required.

With an expected increase in the duration and intensity of future bushfire seasons, this represents an opportunity to ensure that all organisations involved in emergency response and relief take into account this added challenge in planning for the holiday season. This includes ensuring adequate staff with appropriate trauma-informed training can be deployed at a moment's notice to attend an emergency. The Salvation Army will not shut down in the week between the Christmas and New Year's Day holidays from 2020-21.

An additional challenge experienced in some bushfire-impacted communities was the loss of telecommunications and electricity, which coupled with lack of fuel, left community members unable to leave their towns, unable to communicate or receive safety information and for those people who did not have cash on hand, unable to purchase food and other essential items. It is important that state and local bushfire plans make provisions to mitigate the impact if this were to happen in the future.

Recommendation

- That governments collaborate and share information to ensure bushfire plans:
 - Clearly communicate the organisations with response and relief roles and responsibilities
 - Provide for more spontaneous community and charity involvement at evacuation and recovery centres, including catering, in-kind support, housing and financial support, to be clearly coordinated to ensure a comprehensive and cohesive support structure, minimising gaps and duplication of volunteer efforts.
 - Ensure adequate resources to cover the threat of longer, more extreme and more widespread fire danger
 - Ensure preparations are made and adequate staffing arrangements with appropriate trauma-informed training are made to cater for the additional challenges of peak holiday and tourist season.
 - Ensure preparations are made to overcome telecommunications and power outages.

3. How can the emergency response and relief effort be improved?

Clear and Consistent Communication

Despite significant progress made by the implementation of a *National Framework for Scaled Advice and Warnings to the Community*, research commissioned by the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre found that “few residents understood the implications of all of the different fire danger levels for their safety except for the level ‘catastrophic’”.⁹ We have also noticed that community members also experience similar difficulties interpreting the bushfire warning levels (advice, watch and act, and emergency warning) into actions that they need to take.

The ‘Prepare. Act. Survive’ strategy emphasises that leaving early is the best way for people to stay safe and to our knowledge, there is no requirement for community members to have been formally evacuated to access services at an evacuation centre. We experienced community members referring to themselves as having been ‘evacuated’ and accessing government grants for displaced persons, despite not having been in significant danger. In some areas, we also noticed a risk of community members becoming dependent on the support provided. Referring to them as ‘emergency relief centres’ for ‘at-risk’ or ‘impacted’ people could more clearly reflect their purpose and temporary nature.

Recommendations

- That governments develop and implement a national public awareness campaign to help the community translate fire danger levels and bushfire warning levels into action.
- That state governments consider a change of terminology to refer to ‘emergency relief centres’ and ‘at-risk or impacted individuals’ rather than ‘evacuation centres’ and ‘evacuees’.

⁹ Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre. 2014. *A Synthesis of Bushfire CRC Community Safety Research (2003-2013) Including Post-Fire Contact Surveys*. East Melbourne: Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre. Accessed April 1, 2020.
https://www.bushfirecrc.com/sites/default/files/managed/resource/final_community_safety_crc_synthesis_2014-29-04_v1_0_.pdf.



National Collaboration

Public criticism about a perceived lack of Commonwealth Government involvement during the bushfire season may demonstrate that the public does not differentiate between the responsibilities and support provided by different levels of government. A nationally collaborative approach and consistent messaging would go some way to alleviating this.

Bushfires and other natural disasters know no borders. Greater national collaboration therefore needs to address some of the cross-border issues that we experienced. This included the current need for evacuation and emergency relief centres to be established in the state where the fire is located, despite it being safer and more sensible for it to be in a closer town just across the border. Funding agreements should also allow for community service organisations operating near a state border to deliver emergency response and relief support according to need, rather than state boundaries. We encountered instances where we were prevented from providing services across the border, despite being the nearest service hub. Similarly, the peak tourist season coinciding with bushfires meant that people were stranded away from home for longer than expected. We have heard stories of interstate visitors being turned away from accessing services at evacuation centres.

Evacuation, emergency relief and recovery centres

At local evacuation centres, a clear line of command, including who is in charge on any given shift, is vital in conveying the sense that the situation is under control. In preparing this submission, we heard clearly the importance of local people filling local needs. Though this does not negate the need for external help or best practice sharing, it does mean that external resources do not seek to take over the operation from local leaders. This includes community leaders where a community has been evacuated to a nearby town. There is a risk that key personnel may also be personally affected and therefore a clear chain of command and agreed backup resources, needs to be identified well in advance of an emergency.



“...it is more important that we have local people, the local community on the ground coordinating the effort.” (A Salvation Army member in regional NSW)

There is also scope for mobile recovery centres to be increased, particularly in regional and rural areas. It was suggested that there seemed to be an expectation that people affected by the bushfires would travel to their nearest recovery centre. Our experience was that the trauma associated with the experience often prevented people living in smaller satellite communities from venturing out of their community for help. For people living in regional and rural areas, particularly for those who had lost livestock, presenting at a recovery centre is often lower on their list of priorities. Electricity and telecommunications outages also meant that Salvation Army personnel were making first contact with people many weeks and even months after the bushfires had passed. With no easy access to mobile phone reception and the internet, it is not easy for people to find out about support let alone apply. If people need to go down to their local pub to make a Centrelink call, they will also not necessarily have the ability to wait in long queues.

Wraparound service support

We cannot stress enough the importance of relationships in providing community-centred responses. We have found that the bushfire response and relief models that allow for flexibility between organisations foster collaboration much better than models that directly or indirectly force community organisations to compete for roles. Flexibility allows us to meet people at their point of need.

Our experience is that colocation and collaboration between support services in evacuation, relief and recovery centres eases some of the burden on people impacted by the bushfires. This means that they do not need to know which organisations to seek out for help and can access the support they need at a centralised location. Collocated services would also assist in alleviating communication barriers between agencies.

Lack of space, necessary resources or forward planning meant that this was not always possible. Services that would have been appreciated included Commonwealth and state government community service agencies, emotional support (such as those provided by disaster chaplains), and professional mental health support. The Salvation Army's emergency relief and financial counselling services also experienced barriers in securing a space at some centres.

The ability to speak in person to representatives from Commonwealth and state governments, as well as access to information at a 'one stop shop' website, would have greatly alleviated the confusion we encountered in the community about what government supports were available and which they were eligible for. This benefit would extend to mobile recovery centres, which could include staff from Services Australia and its state counterpart.

Australian Defence Force assistance

Feedback from sites that benefitted from Australian Defence Force (**ADF**) assistance noted the immense difference this assistance made. Not only were the forces a significant addition of human resources, the facilities which the ADF were able to deploy provided great relief, whether in assisting the emergency catering effort or in providing the barracks for use as an alternative evacuation site. The mental health support they provided was also beneficial in helping community members return to a normal routine.

It was remarked in some locations that had this assistance arrived as much as ten days earlier, it would have made the biggest impact and represented a more efficient use of resources in the emergency response and relief efforts. We encourage the employment of ADF assistance earlier during future crises that develop with the same speed and breadth of impact. This would provide much needed support during the response and recovery stages.



"[The ADF] have equipment we just don't have - stuff we couldn't dream of; field kitchens, and cool rooms the size of shipping containers." (A Salvation Army member in regional NSW)

Recommendations

- That state and territory governments reach agreement on how to ensure that where fires occur near state borders, the location of evacuation centres and emergency response plans provide for flexibility to best meet community needs.
- That bushfire response plans remain locally driven and coordinated.
- That the use of mobile recovery centres and outreach clinics be expanded in regional and rural areas to ensure that individuals from smaller communities can access the support they need. That this outreach include representation from the relevant Commonwealth and state agencies, with the support of community service organisations.
- That bushfire response plans and the choice of location for evacuation, relief and recovery make adequate provisions for wraparound support, with representation from Commonwealth and state community service agencies, emergency relief, emergency catering, emotional support and professional mental health support.
- That governments develop a one-stop shop website of relevant Commonwealth, state and non-government support, including eligibility criteria.
- That governments deploy resources, such as the ADF, in a timely manner to ensure maximum effectiveness and ease the strain on first responders.

Information Sharing

Sharing of data and information

It was remarked multiple times that had authorities been able to share the contact details of people they knew to have been affected, this would have enabled us and other community organisations to proactively contact people to offer assistance, rather than putting the responsibility on people who have already experienced significant trauma to seek out assistance themselves. Better access to government records of impacted areas, and better communication between relief and recovery centres would also enable us to quickly identify individuals using hardship grants an easy opportunity for financial gain and allow genuine claims to be assessed more efficiently. While The Salvation Army appreciates that privacy legislation imposes certain restrictions on information that can be shared without consent, we suggest that this consent can be unobtrusively sought through the information gathering process.

As The Salvation Army was not the only organisation administering Commonwealth special emergency relief grants, we were required to check that people who were genuinely eligible had not already received the same grant. Our experience was that in the aftermath of experiencing trauma, some people found it hard to remember the source of previous funding. Sharing this information would make the claims process more efficient. It would also mean that people would not be required to repeat their story to each agency from which they sought assistance.

Sharing of good practice and resources

Our experiences of evacuation, relief and recovery centres across the country reflected a range of experience in operating these centres. Information and good practice could be shared about how centres could operate. Additionally, it was our experience that recovery planning was undertaken slightly differently in each council. A nationally consistent approach and sharing of what has worked in the past would reduce the burden on local councils in planning and also provide a more standardised service offer across the nation.

State and territory governments have also developed excellent resources to assist the community and practitioners in preparation, emergency response, relief and recovery. Sharing such resources would reduce the need for duplication and increase the benefit to the community. One such example is the Birdie's Tree suite of resources developed by the Queensland Centre for Perinatal and Infant Mental Health to explain natural disasters to children in an age-appropriate way.

Recommendations

- That governments enable better sharing of data and information to enable community service organisations to proactively approach community members who have consented to be contacted, and to facilitate more efficient assessment of claims.
- That all levels of government and other organisations involved in emergency preparation, response, relief and recovery share good practice to reduce duplication.

Financial Assistance

The Salvation Army acknowledges the disaster relief grants and other forms of assistance available for individuals, families and small businesses. In some locations, we saw a three-fold increase in demand for social welfare assistance, including from people who had volunteered in the bushfire response. The Salvation Army commends the Commonwealth Government for responding to this need with dedicated assistance.¹⁰



“Imagine doing all the government forms under stress. We went in (to Centrelink) with someone who had been declined and got it all approved within ten minutes. Lots of people get one ‘no’ and just give up.” (A Salvation Army member in regional NSW)

Though it is not an issue unique to this assistance, The Salvation Army continues to hear that the forms that people impacted by the bushfires were required to fill in were overly complex and not sufficiently trauma-informed. One couple we spoke to weeks after they had lost their house were still experiencing difficulty expressing what happened and answering questions. This has meant that people who are legitimately eligible for assistance were being turned away. We have also heard stories of people having received grants, only to have these funds taken back as eligibility was determined according to Local Government Area rather than whether a person had been impacted.

Recommendation

- That the Commonwealth Government review government assistance application forms to ensure that they are sufficiently trauma-informed that an individual who has recently experienced significant trauma would be able to complete the form accurately with little to no assistance.

¹⁰

Crisis Accommodation and Short to Medium-term Housing

Though emergency and short-term housing is always needed after a natural disaster, the scale of land and property lost in the 2019-20 bushfire season has placed significant demand upon an already short supply of affordable housing. Addressing this need early is key to preventing people from falling into a cycle of homelessness. The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute has also raised concerns about the potential effect that the bushfires will have on housing costs, particularly in regional, rural and remote areas.¹¹ This will in turn impact the structure of the local community if some families cannot afford rebuilding and insurance costs.

Many residents, even those who can afford to fully reconstruct their properties, are in a position of short-term homelessness during reconstruction. This is further complicated by the fact that people would ideally stay within their communities. Given the shortage of housing supply, this is often not an option. Short to medium-term accommodation options do exist, including modular 'prefab' homes and other temporary housing designs, yet there is a shortage of known land where such housing can be placed.

Local and state governments are in a position to supply land on a temporary basis for short to medium-term housing, including transport corridors which are not slated for development for several years. A searchable register of suitable local and state government land would allow for organisations that do have the means to provide temporary housing structures to set up emergency accommodation and allow for people to remain in their communities while they reconstruct. This would enable a swifter and more efficient establishment of temporary housing in communities and ensure that recovery is less disruptive for families and the community.

Recommendation

- That governments establish a searchable register of local, state and federal government land suitable for short to medium-term housing to enable families to remain within their community as they recover.

¹¹ Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute. 2020. *Bushfires likely to increase the cost of living in regional Australia*. 10 March. Accessed March 19, 2020. <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/policy/ahuri-briefs/Bushfires-likely-to-increase-the-cost-of-living>

4. How can we all support communities to recover?



“The Salvos will be the ones who are left to pick up the pieces - because we never leave.” (A Salvation Army member in regional NSW)

The immediate to long-term recovery of individuals and communities impacted by the 2019-20 bushfires remains the focus of The Salvation Army's work. A significant portion of donated funds is used in the recovery and rebuilding stages and The Salvation Army is committed to standing by Australians for this period. The following reflections highlight key issues we have witnessed in providing recovery support in the past and during the current bushfire season.

Employment

As the bushfire crisis was followed not long after by the national response to COVID-19, employment figures may never truly reflect the implications of the bushfires on employment. The experience of The Salvation Army Employment Plus service has been that jobseekers who were not directly impacted by the bushfires may have put off actively looking for work due to a combination of the general atmosphere of disquiet during the fires and uncertainty about what support was still available to help with finding work.

Based on previous experience we know that communities impacted by the bushfires will take many years to recover. While some aspects of recovery will no doubt require certain skills and expertise, the sheer amount of work involved can mean added employment opportunities for jobseekers in the local community. Local and state governments could actively seek to provide employment opportunities for jobseekers. They could also investigate facilitating a platform for community members to seek services from within their own community in the first instance before reaching out to external contractors and service providers.

Communities that have suffered the loss of their primary source of income, for example, the Victorian snowfields, will require additional support. This is particularly true as transport and tourism suffer the additional blow of the COVID-19 protection measures.

Recommendations

- That local and state governments actively seek to provide employment opportunities for jobseekers in the bushfire recovery efforts.
- That governments encourage and facilitate, where possible, communities to employ local services during recovery and rebuilding.

Family and Domestic Violence

Our expertise in delivering emergency management, specialist family violence services and broader social services compels us to raise family violence as a critical area for action during the recovery phase. Natural disasters do not cause violence, however trauma combined with loss of land, loved ones, and employment contribute to conditions that promote violence. Additionally, increases in the abuse of alcohol and other drugs to cope with loss of community can also contribute to escalating family and domestic violence. Previous experience shows that trauma will continue to manifest in various ways long after the disaster.

Research found that community acceptance of family and domestic violence in the aftermath of the Black Saturday bushfires increased the risk of violence to women and children. The violence was seen as 'out of character', excused by trauma with the hope that they would eventually return to their 'normal selves'. These attitudes, combined with a strong focus on resilience, recovery, grief and loss, and sympathy towards men experiencing trauma and suicidal ideation, meant that family violence was ignored. It is important that we combat gender roles and stereotypes which perpetuate dangerous forms of masculinity. Research has shown that men impacted by the Black Saturday fires who presented as 'not coping' were ostracised for seeking help.¹² Access to appropriate and timely counselling can address unhealthy and risk-taking behaviour that promotes violence against women and children.

It is imperative that communities are equipped to recognise and respond to family and domestic violence.¹³ One example is the research based training offered by the Gender & Disaster Pod, which can equip the emergency management and broader recovery sector to support people experiencing family violence.

Recommendations

- That government and communities take steps to address, not excuse, men's violence and promote the right of women and children to feel safe and free from harm in the aftermath of a disaster.
- That governments increase specialist domestic and family violence services, particularly in the short to long-term recovery period after a disaster.
- That all Australian governments develop national disaster guidelines and strategies that prioritise the prevention of, and promote an appropriate response to, family and domestic violence following a natural disaster.

¹² Parkinson, Debra. 2013. "The hidden disaster: Domestic violence in the aftermath of natural disaster." Australian Journal of Emergency Management 28 (2): 28-35.

¹³ Watt, Jacqui. 2019. "Responding to community trauma and family violence after natural disasters." No to Violence: Working together to end men's family violence. Accessed March 13, 2020. <https://www.ntv.org.au/responding-to-community-trauma-and-family-violence-after-natural-disasters/>

Impact of Trauma

The Salvation Army has also witnessed the impacts that bushfires and other natural disasters have on the psychological health of communities. This has been exacerbated this year in many parts of NSW by long years of drought and has put additional strain on already stretched locally embedded psychological supports.

Our previous experience supporting community recovery shows that the effect of trauma can take many months to emerge and that this can manifest in a number of ways. Trauma can exacerbate existing issues or be the catalyst for new challenges emerging. It is therefore vital that governments ensure the provision of ongoing adequate mental health and other social supports to bushfire affected communities to meet an expected increase in demand for services. This includes services to assist people experiencing substance use disorders, family violence and mental health concerns, as well as relationship support and youth services. We anticipate that this support will be increasingly needed as the nation experiences compounding trauma from the threat of COVID-19 and as communities seek to adapt to the extreme heat, severe drought, floods and bushfires that are fast becoming the new normal.



“It’s the small things that make a difference. The grants help people rebuild their lives but it’s the conversations that we have that are memorable and encourage people to carry on.” (A Salvation Army member in regional NSW)

The Salvation Army’s rural chaplains have provided guidance and been a valuable resource for rural communities throughout the recent bushfire and drought seasons. As many smaller communities are often tight-knit and news and information can travel quickly, The Salvation Army’s rural chaplains are seen as outside of the town microcosm and are a trusted, confidential support. While rural communities may show resistance to fly in-fly out mental health workers from the big city, they have expressed a preference for our rural chaplains, who are seen to ‘get them’ as a result of a shared lived experience. Our rural chaplains are already stretched, having very large areas of responsibility, which has forced them to decline invitations to conduct activities like men’s retreats to assist with community healing. Dedicated, ongoing and accessible mental health support is therefore critical to ensuring the recovery of rural and regional drought and bushfire affected communities.

Recommendations

- That all governments ensure that funding and resources are provided to meet an expected increased demand for social support services.
- That all governments ensure that adequate mental health support is available to bushfire affected communities in the short, medium and long term. That this support is tailored and responsive to community needs, particularly in regional and rural areas.

Drought



“I am sure if we were not affected by bushfires this money would have gone further than it had. We have lost our livelihood due to the fires and the cattle were having to be fed as we had no paddocks left to put them in. We are still struggling with no income.” (A community member in regional Queensland)

We have heard that the response to the bushfire crisis, though important and deserved, has been perceived to have overshadowed the ongoing drought across the country. In regions that had already been devastated by drought, bushfires have compounded the strain on farmers and farming communities. It is important that ongoing practical and emotional assistance continues to these communities and is not diverted to respond to fresh crises.

Recommendation

- That governments continue to provide assistance to drought affected communities.

Conclusion

The Salvation Army thanks the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements for the opportunity to share our experiences during and after the 2019-20 bushfire season.

We acknowledge that some of the points made above may already have been covered in previous inquiries (for example, the 2010 Senate Select Committee on Agricultural and Related Industries inquiry into the incidence and severity of bushfires across Australia). The fact that they still apply shows that there is still work to be done in realising these recommendations. As we experience longer and harsher bushfire seasons, it has never been more important for Australia to be prepared.

Though we have identified opportunities for future improvement, The Salvation Army wishes to emphasise that this is in no way meant to diminish the tireless efforts of our first responders during the 2019-20 bushfire season, which successfully minimised the losses of property and life despite unprecedented conditions and challenges. We would also like to pay tribute to the firefighters who lost their lives in the defence of homes and property.

It is our belief that the best way to honour their sacrifices and successes is to build on them by committing to:

- Minimise the impact of future bushfires by strengthening community preparations for emergencies, including ensuring adequate insurance cover, understanding the different fire danger and bushfire warning levels, and being prepared to enact a bushfire plan.
- Ensure state and local bushfire response plans are clearly communicated, build in flexibility to embrace community support and prepare for the added challenges associated with peak holiday and tourist periods.
- Working together across all levels of government and within the community to provide for efficient use of available resources, collaborative service delivery and wraparound support for people seeking help through funding structures, response plans and location of evacuation and recovery centres.
- Support communities to recover by preventing and responding appropriately to family violence, working together to provide short to medium-term accommodation as communities rebuild, providing employment opportunities for local people first, and ensuring that trauma-informed support services, including appropriate mental health support, is available and accessible for the medium to long term.

We thank the Royal Commission for their consideration of our experiences as outlined in this submission and wish them success in their deliberations.



About The Salvation Army

The Salvation Army is an international Christian movement with a presence in 128 countries. Operating in Australia since 1880, The Salvation Army is one of the largest providers of social services and programs for people experiencing hardship, injustice and social exclusion.

The Salvation Army Australia has a national operating budget of over \$700 million and provides more than 1,000 social programs and activities through networks of social support services, community centres and churches across the country. Programs include:

- Financial inclusion, including emergency relief
- Homelessness services
- Youth services
- Family and domestic violence services
- Alcohol, drugs and other addictions
- Chaplaincy
- Emergency and disaster response
- Aged care
- Employment services

As a mission driven organisation, The Salvation Army seeks to reduce social disadvantage and create a fair and harmonious society through holistic and person-centred approaches that reflect our mission to share the love of Jesus by:

- Caring for people
- Creating faith pathways
- Building healthy communities
- Working for justice

We commit ourselves in prayer and practice to this land of Australia and its people, seeking reconciliation, unity and equity.

Further Information

The Salvation Army would welcome the opportunity to discuss the content of this submission should any further information be of assistance.

Further information can be sought from [REDACTED], [REDACTED]
[REDACTED], at [REDACTED] or on [REDACTED]

