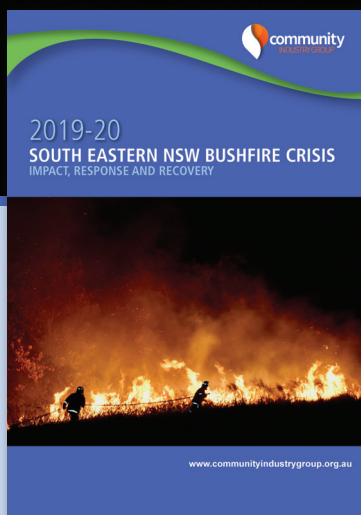


SOUTH EASTERN NSW BUSHFIRE CRISIS

RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY



The 2019-20 South Eastern NSW Bushfire Crisis, Impact, Response and Recovery Report was created as a response to the widespread devastation wreaked across South Eastern New South Wales by the 2019-20 bushfires. NSW RFS crews and other agencies responded to more than 11,400 bush and grass fires that burnt more than 5.5 million hectares, the equivalent of 6.2% of the state.

Community service providers across a range of sectors including aged care, disability, children and family, homelessness and more have experienced first-hand the successes and challenges of the disaster recovery.

As the regional peak body for these services, Community Industry Group met with service providers to gain an insight into what worked well, what didn't work, and what learnings can be implemented to improve outcomes in the event of future disasters. The resulting report describes the overall impact of the bushfire crisis, as well as the recovery and response processes, including factual examples, personal reflections and stories of the people working to support individuals, families and communities impacted by the bushfires.

The long-term consequences of the crisis are analysed with seven important and practical recommendations for immediate and future action. This document is a summary of the report recommendations and we strongly urge you to support the recommendations by advocating for their implementation.

More information is available on our website here: <https://communityindustrygroup.org.au/resources/bushfirerecovery-resources>.



Key Recommendation

\$5 million per year for 5 years (total \$25 million) additional program funding for services targeting vulnerable individuals, families and communities in the bushfire impacted areas in South East NSW.

The key message from community service providers across the region was the overwhelming demand for additional services from programs and organisations which were already at or over capacity. As one provider noted "we are on everyone's recovery plans or referral lists, but there is no additional funding for additional services attached".

Increasing funding by \$5m will support a 50% increase in the provision of vital services to vulnerable individuals, families and communities. It will provide up to 50 much needed jobs and will ensure in excess of 1400 additional hours of direct service delivery per week across the region.

As the impacts of trauma associated with major crises can often emerge or recur many years after the event, this funding needs to be appropriately indexed and secured for a minimum five years.

Children, Families & Young People

- **Immediate increases in long-term program funding is urgently needed for a range of services targeting families, children and young people in South East NSW (key recommendation).**
- **Immediate increase in long-term program funding for domestic violence services (key recommendation).**

The bushfires have had significant financial, psychological and emotional impacts on families, young people and children. Many have been heavily traumatised by the crisis. Even those who did not lose their home due to the bushfires have struggled with being evacuated up to four times.

"Long after the event, we witnessed kids at school being triggered by the sight and sound of an ambulance driving past the school during lunch break."

Service providers are working at full capacity and while waitlists escalate, they are unable to support more families unless capacity is increased. Service providers report that some children who are in need of NDIS plans are missing out because their parents or carers are unable to make necessary appointments due to their own trauma or from being caught up trying to organise permanent housing situations. These families need and deserve expert long-term support.



Aged Care

- **Generators should be made available to all not for profit service providers who support vulnerable people needing life-preserving equipment.**
- **External roof sprinklers should be made available to all providers of residential care, particularly those housing specialist facilities and equipment which is not easily replaced or which is not available in alternate accommodation.**
- **Future planning must include evacuation facilities which are suitable for frail aged people and people with dementia.**

Aged services providers were well prepared with experienced and professional staff, and excellent evacuation plans in place. However, the extent of the fires, with associated road closures, often thwarted well developed plans and lead to decisions having to be made 'on the ground' to enable the best outcomes for clients in a time of chaos.

Evacuation Centres were highly problematic for many older people. Centres were not suitable or equipped to deal with various behavioural and psychological symptoms of people living with dementia, resulting in confused, anxious, and wandering patients. Road closures also left many service providers unable to reach older people in their homes leaving some clients without access to services, including personal care and respite.



Disability

- **Future planning must include alternate evacuation facilities equipped for people with a disability with clear lines of communication.**
- **Generators should be made available to all not for profit service providers who support vulnerable people needing life-preserving equipment.**
- **External roof sprinklers should be made available to all providers of residential care, particularly those housing specialist facilities and equipment which is not easily replaced or which is not available in alternate accommodation.**
- **Regulators must recognise that disability service providers need time to process and deal with the initial impact of the fires and offer flexibility in requirements for Evacuation Plans.**

Inadequate communication channels and the inability to access up to date information created additional challenges for disability service providers to get clients to appropriate and safe facilities. Overall, Evacuation Centres lacked accessibility for people with mobility issues and were unsuitable for people with sensory disability.

Most providers using Evacuations Centres noted an absence of equipment required for basic needs such as wheelchair chargers, proper beds and/or lifters, breathing apparatuses and shower chairs. Some families experienced extended periods with no power, and therefore no access to electronic aids. Some family members also reported life-threatening issues as a result of the emergency.

"A staff member was working in a group home with three participants which was trapped due to road closures. He was unable to communicate with anybody due to loss of all communications, and relief staff could not get through. The staff member worked 44 hours straight to ensure the participants were safe and supported."



Housing and Homelessness

- **Increase program funding for homelessness services and accommodation services, including crisis accommodation and outreach services (key recommendation).**
- **Generators should be made available to all not for profit service providers who support vulnerable people needing life-preserving equipment.**
- **External roof sprinklers should be made available to all providers of residential care, particularly those housing specialist facilities and equipment which is not easily replaced or which is not available in alternate accommodation.**

With homes destroyed and local people directly impacted, housing, which was already in critical shortage, is now even harder to source. Social housing waitlists in the region are long, and individuals and families unable to access the rental market are facing severe hardship. People living on income support payments are increasingly unable to find and secure an affordable and appropriate private rental.

Much of the homelessness is hidden, with people couch surfing, sleeping in tents or caravans, or living in their cars. There is no doubt that homelessness will escalate as a direct and indirect result of the bushfire crisis, with increasing economic insecurity as a result of COVID-19 creating new cohorts of individuals and families experiencing homelessness for the first time.

Without appropriate and rapid action, homelessness and lack of safe, secure and affordable housing will negatively impact health, safety, wellbeing, and access to education and employment.





Mental Health

- **Increase mental health services delivered in place-based settings.**
- **Implement a 'linker' program, which has a long-term casework capability and gives workers the ability to perform home visits for people unable to travel to service providers.**
- **Implement free mental health awareness training for community leaders and community members, held in local community facilities.**

The effects of trauma on mental health is well documented, and mental health impacts are certainly becoming increasingly evident in bushfire-affected areas in South Eastern NSW.

Social isolation is becoming an increasing risk in the face of the COVID-19 crisis and this is exacerbated among many older people in bushfire affected communities.

Community Development & Support



- **Establish a Resilient Communities – Support and Connect fund to support locally developed community initiatives.**
- **Implement a 'linker' program which has a long-term casework capability, and workers who can do home visits for people who do not feel able to travel to service providers.**
- **Long-term flexibility in funding agreements to enable innovation in service delivery in response to crisis and ability to pivot quickly to maintain service delivery in times of rapid change.**
- **No clawing back of unspent funds. The COVID-19 pandemic may have impacted funds spent on service delivery. Providers, however, anticipate a 'tsunami' of demand when individuals, families, and communities can emerge from isolation. Retention of unspent funds will enable providers to ramp up service provision, and to develop community development and capacity building initiatives to support local communities.**

In the wake of the bushfires, various organisations have come into small regional communities from outside of area delivering services with little or no community consultation. Any additional programs must be developed and delivered in conjunction with local service providers who are embedded in and trusted by their own communities.

Local providers have also noted an increase in the impact of structural disadvantage. As demand for services increases, more privileged members of the community who are better able to navigate the system are able to get the services they need. Conversely, more disadvantaged groups, including Aboriginal communities, are missing out on services.



We need your help to get these recommendations implemented! Write to or tweet at your local MP. There's template letters and addresses on our website www.communityindustrygroup.org.au. Help us to assist the people of SE NSW rebuild their lives.