

Renew: a psychosocial response to bushfires

Renew: a psychosocial response to bushfires

The February 2009 bushfires have had a devastating impact on many Victorian individuals, families and communities. The Brumby Government has a psychosocial¹ response to the fires, which will be implemented in partnership with communities, frontline workers and clinical experts in trauma to ensure that those who are affected receive the best possible help to regain their mental health.

Principles guiding recovery

The Government's response will be guided by six core principles for effective recovery, listed here in no particular order or priority:

1. *Integrate services* – Services provided should be well coordinated and integrated with each other to prevent duplication and issues 'slipping through the gaps'.
2. *Use local services* – Help provided to families should be based on services that already exist locally, which should be skilled up to ensure better ongoing support for local families.
3. *Involve the community* – Plans for recovery must include representatives of those who were affected by the event in every stage of the recovery process.
4. *Be flexible* – The recovery process must remain flexible at all times, so that changes can be incorporated as the needs of those affected change.
5. *Share information* – Client information should be shared in accordance with established protocols and legislation and must only be shared if it meets the needs of those affected.
6. *Train workers* – Workers providing services must be appropriately trained, briefed and have access to regular supervision.

¹ The term 'psychosocial' is used here to refer to the emotional and psychological wellbeing of individuals (across the age range) and communities and their overall mental health.

Strategies for recovery

The initiatives we will put in place to aid the recovery process reflect the following four strategies:

1. *Empowerment* – extending the ability of communities and individuals to lead the recovery process by providing the right information, education, and support and by resourcing community recovery initiatives, including for those affected who do not reside in areas directly touched by the bushfires.
2. *Capability* – enhancing the capacity of frontline workers to identify the changing needs of individuals in affected communities and to respond to specific recovery issues, including knowing when to engage specialist services.
3. *Cohesion* – building an even stronger sense of community spirit by enhancing social networks, promoting a strong sense of common purpose and community cohesion, and responding to any emerging conflicts and tensions of the recovery process.
4. *Engagement* – touching the entire Victorian community through activities that enable all Victorians to actively support the communities affected.

Our actions

In addition to the remarkable efforts of the various volunteers and staff who have assisted in the immediate aftermath of the bushfires, many actions to support psychosocial recovery are already underway.

Actions already underway

The Victorian Bushfire Case Management Service (VBCMS) has been established as a one-stop shop, to help people get the supports and services they need during the recovery process. The VBCMS is a central plank in the psychosocial recovery process – identifying people who need supports; helping them gain access to necessary services; gauging the success of supports provided; and providing long-term support.

Community Service Hubs, to be located in fire affected communities, will house a range of relevant and helpful service providers who will be key to the rebuilding process. Importantly, counselling and case management services will be delivered from the hubs. The hubs are another vehicle through which the needs of people can be identified and addressed.

Community development officers are being appointed in the most significantly affected communities, to start to repair and enhance social networks and bring the community back together again. These positions will also play an important role in the process of consulting and engaging with communities about the services they need to further aid recovery – forming an important part of the proposed Community Service Hub structure. They will actively engage all community members in the development and delivery of shared community activities, focusing on those who are hard to reach.

The NURSE-ON-CALL Bushfire Health and Counselling Line, which provides 24-hour support and counselling, was expanded to cater for demand from anyone either directly or indirectly affected by the bushfires.

Next stage

An enhanced training program will be implemented which will equip a range of workers to effectively contribute to the psychosocial recovery process according to their respective roles and/or professions. The training will be targeted at three broad groups:

1. People working with individuals, families and communities affected by the bushfires, but not in the provision of psychosocial supports (for example teachers, child care workers, local government staff, people actively involved in a range of community work and so on);
2. People whose role is to provide general psychosocial supports (for example community health centre counsellors, psychologists, social workers, school student support officers and so on); and
3. Specialist mental health system workers.

Strengthening service availability: The capacity of the specialist service system will be enhanced to respond to the more severe impacts of trauma and grief. This will require an extension to specialist mental health capacity in affected areas and an increase in expert post traumatic stress disorder knowledge and skills across the mental health service system.

Accessibility

If you would like to receive this publication in an accessible format, please phone (03) 9096 7577 using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required.

This document is also available in PDF format on the internet at: www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/