



20 September 2023

Department of Home Affairs

**RE: Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper**

*Background*

The Society comprises over 45,000 volunteers and members and 6,000 employees. While not first responders, the Society's primary activities during a disaster include providing emergency relief, accommodation options and support services. As the disaster progresses through its stages, the assistance varies from emergency response through to community-led recovery and rebuilding projects.

Our members and volunteers often live in, or have a connection with, the community they serve and provide help where it is needed. The Society's feedback is based on these experiences.

The Society has been funded to provide Commonwealth Emergency Relief in response to the 2019-20 bushfires and COVID-19, and the Drought Community Support Initiative program.

We refer to the Society's publicly available submissions relevant to this review namely:

- Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience (No.37)
- Emergency Response Fund Amendment (Disaster Ready Fund) Bill 2022 (No. 18)
- National Emergency Declaration Act (No. 6)
- Lessons to be learned in relation to the Australian Bushfire Season 2019-20 (No. 47, 47.1), and
- Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements (NND.001.01084).

The Society has previously called for improvements to:

- coordination of services at all levels and across all agencies
- case management
- central information on all available services by location and number of people assisted (particularly with respect to Disaster Recovery Payments)
- access to real-time planning information
- funding of capacity building and resilience activities for affected communities
- preferential funding of local service provision, where possible
- funding of NFP organisations to provide training and support for their workers and volunteers, and
- information sharing.

The Society participates on the NEMA Tell Us Once (TUO) project, the Charitable NFP and Philanthropic Strategic Group and the National Coordination Group.

- **Acknowledging the primary role of state and territories in emergency response, what longer-term capacities and capabilities does the Commonwealth need to develop to meet the challenges of the evolving strategic environment?**

*Royal Commission recommendations*

Considerable time, effort and resources went into the Royal Commission into National Natural Disasters and its 80 recommendations.

We support the Royal Commission's recommendations regarding the need to improve information, coordination and collaboration both in times of crises and beyond. Collecting, sharing and using comparable data are essential to planning, prioritising and responding to natural disasters and climate risk. It is essential that this occurs across governments, business and the community sectors.

We suggest that a review of the previous Commonwealth Government's responses to recommendations, particularly those supported in principle or noted. Of particular interest to the Society are recommendations to:

- improve evacuation planning (including essential services and supplies, evaluation centres, improved coordination across borders, real-time data on road closures)
- assess the capacity and capability of fire and emergency services, develop a national register of fire and emergency services personnel and equipment and implement interoperable communications for fire and emergency services across jurisdictions
- conduct disaster education for individuals and communities
- develop, implement and provide community education on the Australian Fire Danger Rating system and Australian Warning system
- develop nationally consistent terminology and provide community education on sheltering facilities, evacuation centres, Neighbourhood safer places, places of last resort etc
- develop nationally consistent bushfire warning and all-hazard warning mobile apps
- include primary healthcare providers and prioritise mental health in disaster management
- provide nationally consistent health advice, air quality information and interventions
- improve local government disaster management capability and capacity, resource sharing and vegetation management
- improve risk assessment (relating to climate, critical infrastructure)
- improve information sharing, including natural hazard risk information to individuals
- improve datasets on mental health, environmental data, fuel load data and management, and Indigenous land and fire management
- develop and research aerial fire-fighting capability
- provide information on government policy concerning clean up arrangements
- establish efficient and effective arrangements for donated goods, and
- develop a national scheme for the regulation of charitable fundraising.

#### *Improved information on climate and disaster risk*

The Society notes the establishment of the Australian Climate Service and the importance of leveraging the Commonwealth's data, information and capabilities to manage climate and disaster risk. We understand that the Australian Climate Service is working with the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, universities, and other Australian Government funded initiatives (such as the National Environmental Science Program Climate Systems Hub) to develop an updated set of national downscaled climate projections. However, localised projection maps are only available for Qld, NSW, SA, Tas and Vic. The work of the National Partnership for Climate Projections must be expedited.

#### *Recommendations concerning charities only*

The Society, along with many other large charitable organisations, regularly reminded people during national disasters to donate funds rather than material aid due to the difficulty with transporting materials to places in need.

The Society has advocated for national regulation of the fundraising laws for several years and as outlined in our 2020 submission supported the 'cross-border recognition model for charitable fundraisers'. We also welcomed the agreement between all governments to establish a set of nationally consistent fundraising principles ([February 2023 media release](#)). However, we are not aware of any further progress on this matter.

Throughout the 2020 Black Summer bushfires, public commentary was critical of donations raised, how they were allocated, and the length of time involved. There appeared to be a lack of awareness of the fact

that charities registered with the ACNC must comply with their reporting and accountability requirements, along with Australian consumer law and fundraising laws. This lack of knowledge was especially notable in comments made by a number of federal and state politicians during the Black Summer Bushfires. As we have indicated in various other submissions, community education campaigns addressing these matters would greatly assist the operation of charitable organisations during disasters and help minimise the redirection of our funds from much-needed service responses to public information exercises.

### *2023-24 Budget*

The Society also notes the Australian Government's commitment in the 2023-24 Budget to developing a National Messaging System, the National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework, the National Emergency Management Stockpile and to further work on national Public Safety Mobile Broadband (PSMB) capability. However, these projects should be expedited, with regular updates posted on the NEMA website.

### *Impediments created by the Commonwealth/state divide*

Several Royal Commission recommendations remain outstanding, with the previous Government noting or providing 'support in principle' responses, with the reason given that responsibility rests with states and territories. While this is true with respect to implementation, it does not diminish responsibility for taking a national, co-ordinated approach to these matters. The Commonwealth/state divide is wearing thin with the Australian public, communities, private and not-for-profit sectors. Further, it means nothing to those impacted by disasters, who often don't know who to turn to or where to go for help and are unable to focus on who is actually providing the assistance.

Particular issues that have made our service responses difficult include: issues with accessibility (road closures), lack of communication (regular modes down), limited access to basic infrastructure (accommodation, clean water, power), limited access to real time emergency response data (to inform our planning) and limited information on health and social support services by area.

The Commonwealth/state tends to impede rather than foster a spirit of collaboration and information sharing, both of which are essential to building community preparedness, resilience and responsiveness. It is this approach that results in communities having to take things into their own hands, as demonstrated by the 'tinnie army' in Northern Rivers NSW. Whilst these actions were brave and commendable, they highlighted the failures of our emergency response systems.

- **At a national level, what are likely to be the key pressure points or challenges for the Commonwealth responding to competing and concurrent crises?**

In summary, pressure points for the Commonwealth include limited access to real-time information, inefficient communication with and across jurisdictions and limited resources and capacity to mobilise quickly, particularly if multiple disasters occur concurrently in different locations.

This is further exacerbated when other bodies, such as local governments, private sector and not for profit organisations are in the mix of service responses. The Royal Commission recommendations outlined above identify the Commonwealth's challenges.

- **What changes in the current system are necessary to help Australia have the right capabilities and capacity to handle concurrent crises?**
- **How could we harness the critical role of volunteers and civilian groups under this model?**

Based on the Society's experiences, ongoing funding of the community sector is required to build its capacity in the areas of disaster preparedness and response. The Commonwealth could then call on this network, and perhaps connect better with other networks such as those offered by Disaster Relief Australia, as needed.

The following information is provided by St Vincent de Paul Society, NSW.

### *Place-based, longer term and preventive funding*

Large non-government organisation service providers such as the Society provide an holistic response during disasters that can lessen the pressure on governments, even though it is not their core business to do so. Organisations at the local, state and national level all step-up during a disaster and the Society often

works in bringing these organisations together. Community organisations are well placed to provide an immediate and ongoing, 'on the ground' response.

Funding should be place-based, include a preventive component and targeted to areas at high risk of future disasters. Ongoing disaster recovery and trauma does not have a set period or conclude at a particular point in time. Usually, government funding is limited to set periods (2 years). For example, in the Lismore region, it is anticipated that people displaced from the floods may not move out of housing pod villages for at least 5 years.

The Society self-funds most of its disaster response work. This means that, out of necessity, funding is diverted away from core 'business as usual' operations. This is not sustainable long-term or on an ongoing basis, particularly as the occurrence of natural disasters is predicted to increase into the future.

This diversion of funds and resources from core business was exacerbated and prolonged during the period when the Society in NSW was providing its bushfire recovery response and then needed to pivot to a disaster flood response in 2022.

For organisations like the Society whose core business is not disaster management, it takes time for the organisation to establish and scale up disaster response and recovery systems. Processes and procedures for responding to disasters are not necessarily built into standard operational systems. A disaster response is a disruption to normal ways of operating. However, with specific, ongoing funding, these processes and systems could be embedded and maintained. This funding is also needed to develop and maintain skilled staff and volunteers, and to participate in necessary and local planning and coordination networks.

#### *Fostering collaboration across the community sector*

Collaboration needs to be worked at – it doesn't just happen, and it is difficult to implement overnight.

New South Wales Council of Social Services (NCOSS), in partnership with the Local Community Services Association and AbSec have been funded to deliver the Community Sector Disaster Capability project to promote and facilitate the role of local community services organisations in supporting communities to reduce disaster risk. Focussed on the Hawkesbury, Northern Rivers and South Coast, it aims to build a collaborative, networked approach to local disaster management, providing an opportunity for local community organisations, and the communities they support to bring their expert knowledge and connections into play. It will develop capacity to identify, assess and mitigate risks as well as strengthen ongoing interactions and exchange with formal disaster management systems. Funding expires in June 2024. The results of this project should inform future funding and integrated responses to disasters with the community sector.

NSW Department of Social Services' Emergency Relief Funding program also has a coordination process that is working to bring organisations together.

#### *Limitations of the Disaster Ready Fund*

The Society's National Council welcomed the establishment of the Disaster Ready Fund, through which recovery programs have been funded. However, while community-led, the listed projects that have been funded focus on mitigating the impact of disasters on communities (largely infrastructure) and economies and risk reduction, rather than building social capital and resilience. Further, the funds are accessible only through state/territory governments and must be matched. These are significant impediments to many community sector organisations, especially small local community services and businesses but also national organisations.

Funding must be flexible to support community-led preparedness and resilience activities. This investment in social capital is often not funded by governments. It can support communities to plan and identify disaster risks, develop safety plans, undertake contingency planning and increase disaster awareness and education. It improves responsiveness when disasters strike and mitigates the long-term social impact that disasters have on individual and community health, wellbeing and cohesion.

#### *Investment in human capital*

The Society strongly supports the funding of Recovery Support Officers and for them to be mobilised throughout the disaster period, not just during the emergency phase, and not limited to a presence at

recovery centres.

The Society also notes the important work of Disaster Relief Australia, in mobilising the skills and experiences of Australian Defence Force veterans, emergency responders and civilians to rapidly deploy disaster relief teams domestically and internationally. We note they currently maintain a roster of thousands of volunteers, able to rapidly deploy throughout Australia and look to integrate into existing emergency management arrangements, where possible.

Volunteering Australia is currently working on refreshing the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement to ensure they reflect the contemporary environment.

The Society uses its own resources to conduct statutory checks (working with children and vulnerable people) and provide appropriate training to ensure the assistance provided our members and volunteers is timely, professional, focussed on individual safety and well-being, and quality-assured.

Funding to ensure volunteering standards are met would help organisations attract, retain and train volunteers, and manage risk and safety requirements.

Processes to mobilise the multiple registers of volunteers could be considered. This would improve coordination of services provided by different groups, minimise duplication of effort and ensure gaps are addressed.

Alternative approaches could also be considered, such as state/territory governments overseeing the sign up of volunteers and organising the conduct of checks and training.

#### *Standing panels*

The Society has previously recommended that the Commonwealth establish standing panels of providers for a range of services, prioritising regions identified as high risk in the first instance. Consortia and sub-contracting arrangements managed by local councils should be supported, with local services and businesses identified as preferred providers. The Commonwealth Grant Rules and Guidelines, Commonwealth Procurement Rules and the Public Governance and Accountability Act 2013 should also be reviewed to improve flexibility and timeliness when trying to distribute Commonwealth funds to disaster areas.

#### *Reporting requirements*

For national natural disasters, reporting and accountability requirements remain onerous. Additional reporting was required even though the Society held existing grant agreements and, as a registered charity, complies with ACNC reporting requirements.

Better use of existing reporting mechanisms to reduce duplication of data reporting efforts by funded organisations is needed. Facilitating the sharing of personal information to streamline the assistance process is also essential, as identified by the Royal Commission and through the TOU project.

We conclude this submission with a case study submitted by the Society in NSW.

#### *Case study*

The Society's NSW Bushfire Recovery and Community Development Program has been an important State-wide initiative for communities in six regions across NSW for their recovery from the devastating bushfires of 2019-2020 during which 26 lives were lost, 2448 homes destroyed and 5.5 billion hectares of land burnt.

This program is an example of an investment in social capital. By supporting communities to plan and identify disaster risks, develop safety plans and undertake contingency planning, responsiveness when disasters strike can be improved. The long-term social impact that disasters have on individuals and community health, wellbeing and cohesion can also be mitigated.

The program supported communities across NSW identified as the most affected by the bushfires and vulnerable to ongoing disadvantage. Its aims were to:

- improve community and individual resilience and disaster preparedness capacity

- help strengthen community cohesion and increase individual sense of wellbeing and positive outlook, and
- support local government rehabilitation, relegation and productivity.

The focus was to build social capital and resilience, not just mitigate the impact of disasters on communities (e.g. by focusing on infrastructure). The program

- commenced as a pilot program and was then expanded
- was a community led development model that promoted participative democracy and was directed by people within communities
- was funded at \$2.3m mostly from public money raised for bushfire recovery and a large amount of in-kind support
- was delivered from Dec 2020-June 2023
- designed for whole of community, but particularly for vulnerable groups including people living with disability or mental health challenges, First Nations peoples and people who are socially isolated.
- delivered a range of activities including training, community conversations, and peer support.

Outcomes included:

- 1632 households and 12,677 people prepared for future natural disasters
- 686 community leaders trained with skills in hazard reduction and disaster management
- 23 types of preparedness activities delivered in 26 communities
- 544 people skilled in trauma management
- 2556 instances of casework, support and referral, and
- 42 organisations strengthened organisational capacity

An independent review of the two- year disaster recovery and risk preparedness program found that it:

- delivered good practice community development disaster responses, tailored to the needs of individual communities.
- strengthened community cohesion and contributed to community wellbeing.

Recommendations were made for future similar responses, a number of which focussed on capacity building within the Society to enable it to more readily pivot to a disaster response without detracting from its core services, namely:

- increase funding for more support staff
- procure funding for future programs
- tailor data collection tools to better suit a multi-dimensional and complex program of this nature
- update internal accounting systems so that program expenditure can be better attributed to specific activities, in real time
- extend the program duration and stagger funding to better support vulnerable and affected communities for longer
- embed evaluation into program delivery so that frameworks and baseline data can be established

In summary,

- The Society in NSW played an important role in bringing small local groups together and supporting them to do recovery and resilience work within communities
- Community development needs a long-term approach and requires an investment in social capital programs
- Recovery is a long-term process that looks different for every community and funding needs to be ongoing to reflect this



- Recovery needs to be flexible and cannot be limited to set timeframes. The time each community needs to recover from disaster varies. In many cases it will be a long-term process that exceeds two years.

Yours sincerely



Mr Toby oConnor  
**Chief Executive Officer**