

Bushfire Recovery Program

2020 – 2022



St Vincent de Paul Society
CANBERRA/GOULBURN
good works

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CONTENTS

Summary	4
Emergency Relief	6
Community Grants Program	8
Community Development Program	10
Staffing	10
Strategy	10
CDO Activities	10
Governance Workshops	13
Sanitation Projects	14
Training Courses	16
Interagency Co-operation	17
Financial	18
Concluding Comments	20

SUMMARY

The SVDP-CG Bushfire Recovery Program was created to support survivors of the 2019/20 bushfires. There were four parts to the program, the first being the immediate and ongoing response by Conferences in the region. A Bushfire Taskforce was formed from the Territory Council to assist with distribution of emergency relief on site and then this component was supported by SVDP-CG staff. It distributed \$10,688,787.01, of which 75% came from the Vinnies Bushfire Appeal and the rest from the Department of Social Services (DSS). Emergency relief was the largest monetary component of the program, consuming 77% of the funds distributed, with the last payment not being made until June 2022.

The second phase was the Community Grants Program, which provided grants of up to \$30K to existing community groups to conduct projects benefiting their local community. Sixty five projects were funded through this program, supporting a range of applications including infrastructure, youth, indigenous training, communication and mental health support. It covered the five shires in our region that were affected by the bushfires.

Finally, the Community Development Program was launched in 2021 to work with local groups to develop activities, projects and some training. Community Development Officers (CDOs) were appointed from the Bega Valley, Eurobodalla and Snowy Valley Shires to work in their respective shires. They worked with communities to develop projects to promote cohesiveness, resilience and preparedness in bushfire affected communities. Over 100 projects were supported through funding, in-kind contribution or a combination of both. Through this program and the Community Grants Program, we were able to leverage over \$4M through primary grants, co-contribution or grants to continue projects for the groups we assisted.

A further three initiatives emerged from the Community Development Program. Sanitation projects in the Bega Valley and Eurobodalla provided showers/toilets and supporting infrastructure to survivors living

in temporary accommodation who were waiting to rebuild. We funded and attracted attendees to accredited training courses by TAFE NSW and Fusion Walaan Miya that will be useful for people seeking work or who are rebuilding. The skills and experience of one of the CDOs were utilised to design and run a series of workshops on the principles of governance for community organisations.

A feature of the bushfire recovery effort was a good level of co-operation between government and NFP assistance agencies.

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The spring and summer of 2019/20 saw Australia ravaged by huge bushfires from Queensland through to South Australia, with some of the greatest impact occurring in the region covered by St Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn (SVDP-CG). Within the Canberra/Goulburn region, over 1000 homes were destroyed, along with numerous outbuildings (often the basis for income), farm fencing and livestock, and community facilities. Although no statistics are available for the number of people who lost their jobs and/or income as a direct result of the fires or for those who suffered mental trauma, the Society is aware that these were very significant numbers. Many, including those who did not lose property, also suffered mental trauma as the result of uncertainty and evacuation.

The Vinnies Bushfire Appeal opened in late 2019 in response to the bushfires raging in northern NSW and was later expanded to a national appeal to support communities across Queensland, NSW, the ACT, Victoria and South Australia that were impacted by the Black Summer Bushfires. The appeal raised \$25.9 million from donations from the public, businesses and philanthropists. That money was apportioned to each of the Society's state and territory councils.

Co-ordination of the SVDP-CG Bushfire Recovery program was allocated to a member who had recently completed his term on the CG Territory Council and

who had extensive project, budget and personnel management experience from his professional career. He was assisted in this role by a full-time employee and some casual employees at times.

Given that all of the bushfires in the SVDP-CG region were in NSW rather than the ACT, it was deemed desirable to avoid confusion within the affected

communities by making our approach to the recovery program compatible with that of SVDP-NSW, with the details modified according to Canberra/Goulburn's particular needs and capabilities. This approach consisted of three elements: emergency relief, a Community Grants Program and a Community Development Program, to which SVDP-CG added a Sanitation Facilities project and training courses.



Emergency Relief

As did each region of the Society, Canberra/Goulburn became engaged in assisting those impacted even while the fires raged around them. The initial response was generated by those Conferences located in the bushfire affected regions, with the provision of food, clothing, temporary accommodation and empathy. When it became apparent that the volume and nature of the need would soon overwhelm our local members, a Bushfire Taskforce was convened from the Canberra-based members of the Territory Council to assist.

Members of the Bushfire Taskforce travelled to bushfire relief centres at Batemans Bay, Moruya, Eden, Batlow and Tumut where they were able to extend the work of local Conferences by providing cash grants of up to \$4000 to those who had lost property and/or income as a result of the bushfires. The funding was made up of \$1000 from the Financial Wellbeing and Capability Program of the Department of Social Services (DSS) and \$3000 from the Society's Bushfire Appeal funds. After an initial period in the relief centres, the distribution of emergency relief funding was transferred to Canberra where staff and members processed claims submitted online.

Emergency relief payments were made to 3183 households, consisting of 6624 adults and 2987 children. In all \$7,095,910.00 was paid out in 3657 transactions. Most of the payments were made by bank to bank transfer. In one case where the recipient was off-grid and did not have a bank account, the payment was made in goods nominated by the recipient. \$51,780 of the total was distributed as SVDP-CG Bushfire vouchers. Although the bulk of emergency relief payments were made in the first four months, it was not until June 2022 that the final payment was made.

There were some issues around the disbursement of DSS funds. The initial DSS funding of \$1,695,859 made in January 2020 was followed by top-ups in May 2020 (\$551,121), June 2020 (\$400,000). The condition of the DSS funding was that each household could receive a payment of \$1000.

The Australian Government was under pressure was to get their funding flowing quickly and our agreement with DSS required us to expend all their funding by the end of 2020. Despite other organisations being licensed at a later stage of the DSS program to allocate more than \$1000 per household, DSS advised that our agreement (i.e. the \$1000 limit) would not be revised. However, towards the end of 2020, when it became evident that we would not be able to disburse all the funds by the end of the year, DSS allowed us to provide support in the form of goods. In November 2020 we contacted every household that had been allocated \$1000 and offered \$500 Woolworths, Coles or IGA vouchers. Coming as they did in the lead up to Christmas; these vouchers were very well received.

The bulk of emergency relief funding was expended between January and April 2020.

However, emergency relief allocations continued to 14th June 2022 because many people were slow to request support. There were several reasons for this slowness, among them were views that "others need this more than me" and "I was okay at first but only now realise that I need assistance" as well as some who were too traumatised to function effectively for many months, even years, after the fires and others who thought that applying to another agency (e.g. Red Cross) automatically gave them access to support from the Society. It is probable that there will continue to be a need to support some bushfire-affected people more than three years after the initial impact. That need will be met by the local Conferences.

Canberra-based members, volunteers and staff also operated at the Dickson Emergency Relief Centre in Canberra to provide new clothing from the Thread Together stock and toiletries to people seeking safety in Canberra after being displaced by the bushfires. This activity was spread over two weeks in January 2020.

The imperative in the early days of the program was to get assistance to people who really needed it, which required taking people at their word. The inability

of aid agencies to access data from fire response authorities (e.g. what homes had been destroyed or evacuated) and other aid agencies (e.g. what claims had already been made) meant that there was scope for fraudulent claims. Some claims were investigated by police and charges were laid. Our data recording system was established at the outset and that enabled us to identify some double claiming for the same address within the first few months and so

reduced the loss to fraud. While we were arranging the distribution of the \$500 vouchers in November 2020, we did a check on properties in the Batemans Bay region that had been identified as a hot spot for fraud and were able to avoid distributing the cards to those who had made false claims (about 20 claimants).



Community Grants Program

The Community Grants Program aimed to recruit local knowledge to assist in the recovery of communities from the impact of the bushfires. The program was advertised through a variety of media outlets, mainly local radio and posters, and online to attract local groups to propose projects. Applicants were required to identify the need, the section(s) of the community that would benefit and the means by, and the extent to, which the project would meet those needs. The nature of eligible projects was not limited. Funding was provided at three levels (to \$5000, to \$10,000, and to \$20,000) to ensure that small projects would be submitted.

Grants were advertised in July and September 2020. However, when SVDP-NSW decided to run a third round with a higher level of grant, we decided that it would be too confusing to the public unless we did the same. Consequently, a third round was held in June 2021 with the maximum raised to \$30,000. For the first two rounds, applications were directed onto the SVDP-CG website. However, there were a number of applications from our region that were submitted in error to SVDP-NSW and some from the NSW region were submitted to our site. For the third round, all applications were directed to the SVDP-

NSW site and those relevant to our region were passed on to us. Both modes of handling applications worked with little difficulty.

Each application was sent to the relevant local Conference for comment before assessment by a panel of Bushfire Taskforce members. For each round, the panel members individually scored each application assessment against nine criteria before meeting to prioritise the bids and decide approvals. The work of advising applicants of outcomes, sending and receiving grant agreements and reports, transfer of funds, and monitoring progress and final reports was handled by staff. After the first round, the Co-ordinator, Bushfire Recovery contacted the unsuccessful applicants to explain why they had been unsuccessful and to discuss how they might make their applications more competitive.

Over \$990,000 was allocated to 65 projects covering all the bushfire-affected areas in our region (Table 1.). The majority of the applications, both successful and unsuccessful, came from the Bega Valley and Eurobodalla Shires, which were the most heavily impacted by the bushfires. However, we did receive and fund applications from all five bushfire-impacted shires in our region.

Table 1. Geographic Spread of Funded Community Grant Projects

Round No.	No. Projects	Amount allocated	Bega Valley	Eurobodalla	Queanbeyan/ Palerang	Snowy Monaro	Snowy Valleys
1	22 ¹	\$309,532.15	8	6	2	4	3
2	26 ²	\$379,998.06	18	8	1	1	0
3	17	\$301,828.70	7	4	1	4	1
TOTAL	65	\$991,358.91	33	18	4	9	4

¹ One project operated across the Bega valley and Eurobodalla Shires.

² Two projects operated across the Bega valley and Eurobodalla Shires.

The range of applications was very broad (Table 2). It included infrastructure, youth, indigenous training, communication and mental health support projects, costing from as little as \$700 to the maximum of \$30,000. Some of these youth and mental health projects were aimed at indigenous groups. A more detailed summary of the Community Grant projects is presented in Appendix B.

Many of these community projects were delayed in execution because of the COVID-19 pandemic and some by the shortage of materials occasioned by the bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic. We adopted a policy of being flexible about completion dates so long as we received quarterly progress reports. Although

most applicants were very responsible in their reporting, it was necessary in some instances to remind applicants that progress and final reports were required by the Agreement they had signed. The quality of reporting was highly variable but was acceptable in almost all cases.

This program was very well received, with comments ranging from appreciation of the simplicity of the application form, the timeliness of the first two rounds and the freedom to put forward projects of any nature.

Table 2. Nature of Community Grant Projects

Round No.	Infrastructure/ equipment	Youth	Mental Health	Training	Communication
1	14	4	1	2	1
2	19	6	2	2	2
3	13	2	1	1	2
TOTAL	46	12	4	5	4

Note: Some projects were scored under two categories (e.g. Infrastructure/equipment and Youth).



Community Development Program

The third phase of the Bushfire Recovery Program was the Community Development Program. This program aimed to assist community recovery by promoting cohesiveness, resilience and preparedness in bushfire affected communities. This was achieved by the appointment of five Community Development Officers (CDOs; 20hpw) to work with local groups to develop activities, projects and training. We also engaged with other agencies to deliver sanitation facilities and to provide training. The focus of this program was on the hand up rather than the hand out.

Staffing

Given that we wanted the CDOs to work closely with communities, we did not want to spread resources too thinly. We therefore choose to put two CDOs into each of the Bega Valley and Eurobodalla Shires and one into the Snowy Valleys Shire. We split the first two shires geographically to minimise the amount of travelling required of each CDO.

We tested the concept by the appointment of the first CDO to the southern end of the Bega Valley in February 2021. In making the appointment, we emphasized the need for listening skills over social work experience and for the CDO to be living in the bushfire impacted zone at the time of the fires. Having decided that the approach was appropriate, we advertised the other four positions in May 2021. We had a good number of applicants but were only willing to appoint two more. The positions were re-advertised and in the next round we were able to appoint one. We had difficulty in finding a suitable candidate for the Snowy Valley position and were not able to make that appointment until October 2021. However, the delay in making some appointments was more than compensated for by the quality of the people that we were able to recruit.

Strategy

The CDOs were directed to meet a wide range of individuals and groups within their allocated communities and utilise their good listening skills to identify needs and capabilities within each community. They were also asked to identify those communities that might have been left behind or were in greatest need. They collaborated with other agencies (government and non-government) operating in their target communities to avoid overlap and promote synergies.

The initial focus was on working through community gatherings. This enabled the CDOs to become known within these communities and opened the way for meaningful conversations. For example, the lead was taken in organising a community day for all fire-affected areas south of Eden which involved nine other agencies in providing a day of food, music and children's games. This established a solid basis for interagency co-operation and served to publicise our engagement with this region.

CDO Activities

While establishing relationships within communities, the CDOs embarked on a range of activities. Of the 102 projects with which they were involved, some were in-kind, some were simply funded and many involved an in-kind and funding input (Table 3). The number of projects varied between LGAs but overall the spending was equivalent. Approximately 10% of the projects specifically involved working with indigenous groups. A summary of each of the projects is presented in Appendix C.

Application for funding and reports on those projects used the same forms as those for the Community Grants program. The Co-ordinator, Bushfire Recovery Program was responsible for approving applications up to \$20,000 and larger projects were approved by a Bushfire Taskforce committee of three.

Table 3. Community Development Projects

	Eurobodalla	Bega Valley	Snowy Valleys
No. Community Projects^{1, 2}	27	46	32
No. In-kind Projects³	15	26	10
No. Funded Projects³	19	30	26
Funding level	\$267,166.93	\$319,493.30	\$265,484.20

¹ Does not include the Sanitation projects or training courses.

² Some projects ran in more than one shire.

³ Some funded projects also involved an in-kind contribution.

The CDOs in-kind contributions ranged from assisting with grant applications to other agencies to engagement in the organising body for events. In assisting in the preparation of grant applications, the CDOs focused on raising skills in planning, writing applications, managing and reporting on projects that would deliver on one or more of the program goals.

The Community Development projects had a wide range of objectives (Table 4). The greatest number

was those aimed at providing infrastructure or equipment. Among these projects were activities such as providing equipment to enable expansion of cultural burning practices, community gardens and gathering places, a tool library, renovation of community halls, fitting out community buildings to a standard where they will be used as safe havens in future disasters, and more.

Table 4. Nature of Community Development Projects

LGA	Infrastructure/ equipment	Events	Communication/ planning	Grant applications	Other¹
Eurobodalla	10	10	4	6	7
Bega Valley	20	10	4	8	8
Snowy Valleys	17	8	4	2	3
TOTAL^{2, 3}	47	28	12	16	18

¹ "Other" includes mental health, youth activities, etc.

² Some projects covered more than one category.

³ The sanitation and training projects are not included in this table.

The events were usually family days. However, a Ladies' Day Out and a Men's Day Out were specifically aimed at older residents and focused on mental well-being and others had a mental health component. In working to provide community events, the CDOs often did this in collaboration with other assistance agencies, such as Red Cross, Anglicare, Marymead, Police Citizens Youth Clubs, etc., as well as with local government agencies. These events benefited from the multi-agency involvement but it seems that level of contribution by SVDP-CG was not always acknowledged.

Assistance with grant applications took a couple of forms. One was to work directly with community groups to guide them in preparing their grant application and the other involved putting in some seed funding that encouraged other organisations to invest in the project. Some investments were very large (e.g. \$1.9M from a NSW Government agency) and others more modest (hundreds to thousands of dollars). It is worth noting that between the Community Grants and Community Development

projects, we were able to lever nearly \$4M, which was much more than the \$2.17M we invested in these two programs.

The remit for the CDOs was to engage in projects that would promote cohesion, resilience, and/or preparedness (Table 5). The cohesion goal was the easiest and least costly of these to address and that was generally done through engagement in community events. These events were very important in giving the CDOs recognition by and acceptance in the communities they served and enabled them to engage those communities on projects that addressed the resilience and preparedness goals.

The CDOs were also responsible for recruiting for the training programs which they did by distributing posters and through local media and engaging with other aid agencies.

Table 5. Cohesion, Resilience, Preparedness Objectives

LGA	Cohesion	Resilience	Preparedness
Eurobodalla	18	21	11
Bega Valley	33	25	15
Snowy Valleys	19	11	17
TOTAL¹	70	57	43

¹ Many projects addressed more than one objective.



Governance Workshops

The need for governance support for many community organisations was identified by the CDOs as an issue. One of our CDOs (Christine Quick), who is a graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors and had experience in corporate governance, developed and presented a workshop to assist community organisation. Twelve governance workshops were presented in nine locations in the Eurobodalla, Bega Valley and Snowy Valleys Shires. The aim of these workshops was to share information and get attendees to think about how to adapt it to their group. The information provided was general in nature and offered to assist the community group understand the importance of having a good governance

structure in place. An information sheet was also provided to those groups considering incorporation.

The presentations were well supported, and participants left with a clearer understanding of good governance, including risk management, legal responsibilities, planning, funding, auspicing, the Constitution, roles and responsibilities, and reporting requirements. Feedback from the workshops was very positive.

More details on the governance workshops are presented in Appendix D.



Sanitation Projects

1. Bega Valley

SVDP-CG was asked to fund a project to provide pop-up sanitation facilities (cabinets containing shower, washbasin and/or toilet) to people who were living in temporary accommodation (e.g. caravans, sheds, etc.) in the Bega Valley by Catholic Social Services. The concept was that we would identify potential recipients from information garnered through a project to put water tanks on fire damaged properties that was run by Rotary and Social Justice Advocates of the Sapphire Coast. After consultation with the SVDP CG CEO, we agreed to fund that project to \$250K with understanding that the Co-ordinator, Bushfire Recovery would join a management committee chaired by an employee of the Bega Valley Shire Council. However, the funds would not be handed to this committee and payments would only be made to suppliers by invoice.

Despite several attempts by the Co-ordinator Bushfire Recovery to obtain agreement on the scope of the project, the committee chair proceeded to extend the water tank project by purchasing very large sheds for water catchment and living space, as well as housing the sanitation units and extending aid to people that we would not prioritise. These sheds required the installation of larger, stronger and therefore costlier bases than were required for sheds sufficient to house the sanitation units. When it became evident that no consideration of our vision for the project could be accommodated, we withdrew from the committee. However, we did honour our commitment to provide up to \$250K.

Although 24 potential recipients had been identified at the outset, our funding was utilised to only aid eight. Fortunately, an application by the Bega Valley Shire Council was successful in eventually aiding some more households.



2. Eurobodalla

While establishing the Bega Valley project, SVDP-CG and Catholic Social Services also took a proposal to the Eurobodalla Shire Council, Service NSW, National Recovery and Resilience Agency, Eurobodalla Bushfire Recovery Support Service, and DPI Local Land Services. Although supportive, the Shire Council was unwilling to undertake the management of the project and so the Co-ordinator, Bushfire Recovery chaired the committee. A lot of effort went into obtaining agreement from all parties on the scope of this project. It was agreed that this project should be directed towards people who were living in temporary accommodation while waiting to rebuild. Moreover, all agreed on a minimalist approach that involved provision of sheds adequate to house the sanitation facility required by each household and to encourage recipients to contribute to the installation according to their ability. SVDP CG was the sole funder for the project, with other agencies providing in-kind services, such as identifying potential recipients, conducting site assessment and inspections, etc.

Initially, the committee was chaired by the Co-ordinator, Bushfire Appeal. However, with ever increasing logistical difficulties due to COVID and the withdrawal of some agencies personnel as their bushfire programs were terminated or modified, it became obvious that this project could not be adequately managed from Canberra. Consequently, one of the Eurobodalla CDOs was given additional working hours to manage the project. With her considerable business experience, she was able to take over and bring the project to a successful conclusion.

Public and environmental health legislation had to be addressed. To ensure each recipient was aware of their responsibilities, they were required to sign a document setting out their responsibilities as a recipient of temporary sanitation facilities through this project. The acknowledgement also stated there would be no recourse to SVDP CG for costs incurred during usage of these temporary system/s once installed.

The types of facilities that the project delivered included bathrooms, toilets, hot water systems, sheds to house the bathrooms/toilets, septic tanks or other sewage options, site preparation and other items required to provide a functional sanitation unit. The bathrooms/toilets were delivered as flatpacks and where assistance for installation was required, suitably qualified contract tradespersons were engaged to provide their expertise. Several recipients who had building expertise or ready access to same were very willing to do their own installation.

For an input of \$259,385.33, we were able to provide 23 households with sanitation facilities. Five received a compost toilet only and 18 received a bathroom flatpack; nine received assistance from contract tradespersons.

See Appendix E for a detailed report.

Training Courses

SVDP-CG signed an agreement with TAFE NSW to fund courses for bushfire survivors that will provide valuable skills for resilience and preparedness. The courses were chosen to provide skills that will assist in rebuilding (e.g. White Card), securing employment (e.g. chainsaw) and in community work (e.g. accidental counselling).

Though the course quality was very good, working with TAFE NSW proved to be quite challenging because of their systems. Consequently we explored the option of Fusion

Walan Miya, a provider of accredited courses in the Bega Valley. After we had funded two Whitecard and one First Aid course, Fusion Walan Miya was able to secure funding from the NSW Department of Education and Training to conduct another First Aid course and two chainsaw courses. The role of SVDP-CG for these latter courses was community liaison and coordination. We were able to secure accredited training by Fusion Walan Miya for 62 people at a cost to the Bushfire Appeal of \$5,855.

Overall, we organised 22 courses for 290 attendees at a cost of \$88,122.

Table 6. TAFE Courses funded from the Bushfire Appeal

COURSE	VENUE	No. Courses	No. attendees
Whitecard	Batlow	2	15
First Aid	Batlow	4	48
Food Handling	Tumut	1	15
	Batlow	3	15
Accidental Counselling	Moruya	1	20
	Tumut	1	20
Polesaw	Tumut	1	6
Chainsaw - Trim and Cut	Tumut	1	12
	Batemans Bay	1	12
Chainsaw - Fell Trees	Tumut	1	12



Interagency Co-operation

There was an excellent level of co-operation between SVDP-CG and SVDP NSW. We received timely advice on the strategy that NSW adopted, use of their designs for our forms and use of their website for the third round of Community Grant applications. There were frequent videoconferences between the leaders of the two programs during which information and ideas were shared. A videoconference between the two Community Development teams produced useful ideas and information sharing.

The areas covered by the two SVDP regions do not lie within shire boundaries. The leaders of the two programs agreed that SVDP-CG would cover all of the Snowy Valleys Shire in its Community Development Program, while SVDP NSW would cover the Queanbeyan-Palerang shire. This co-operation limited the amount of travelling required to service these areas.

The level of interagency co-operation between SVDP-CG and bushfire recovery teams of non-SVDP agencies was impressive, at least over the first year. The Co-ordinator, Bushfire Recovery Program accepted an invitation to join regular multi-agency videoconferences. In addition to sharing information

about what each agency was doing and planning, some of the other agencies distributed flyers advertising our work, especially the community grants.

The CDOs also engaged in meetings with other agencies. Initially these were the Health and Safety Committees run by the Bega Valley and Eurobodalla Shire Councils. These tended to lack the necessary focus and a Community Recovery and Engagement Working Group (CREW) was established in the Bega Valley. CREW was run by people active in the field with members taking turns to organise and chair meetings. The network operated under a charter and set of principles that formed a common understanding and framework. Critical to this was letting communities lead the way, understanding that, through collaborations, individuals and communities received better outcomes from the services working in recovery. Several multi-agency projects emerged from these meetings and members promoted the events of other agencies as appropriate.

Financial

A total of \$10,688,787.01 was available to the Bushfire Recovery Program, consisting of \$8,041,807.01 from the Vinnies Bushfire Appeal and \$2,646,980.00 from the Department of Social Services (DSS). Expenditure started prior to receipt of these income streams to ensure that we delivered assistance as quickly as possible; that expenditure was ultimately recouped from the Appeal funds. The Appeal funds continued to be received up to June 2022, though 95% of the funds had been received by September 2020 (Fig. 1). The DSS funding was received in three tranches (January, May and June 2020).

By the closure of the program at the end of March 2023, \$10,716,198.97 was expended on the Bushfire Recovery Program (Bushfire Appeal and DSS allocations). The bulk of assistance (\$7.3M) was devoted to emergency relief with the remainder split

between the Community Grants and Community Development Programs (Fig. 2). The proportions in Fig. 2 are indicative rather than accurate because there is an underestimate of the amount spent on Community Development. The CDOs' in-kind was not costed because we did not want to distract from their assistance efforts by timekeeping but should be considered as assistance delivered. At the close of the program at the end of March 2023, \$27,411.96 remained unspent. These funds will be delivered to bushfire survivors through the relevant Conferences.

Nearly 89% of expenditure from the Bushfire Appeal and DSS allocations was devoted to providing assistance directly (Fig. 3). However, as noted above, the in-kind contributions by the CDOs was booked to employee expenses rather than to assistance provided and so the percentage actually devoted to assistance was probably more than 90%.

Fig. 1. Income and Expenditure of Funding for the Bushfire Recovery Program

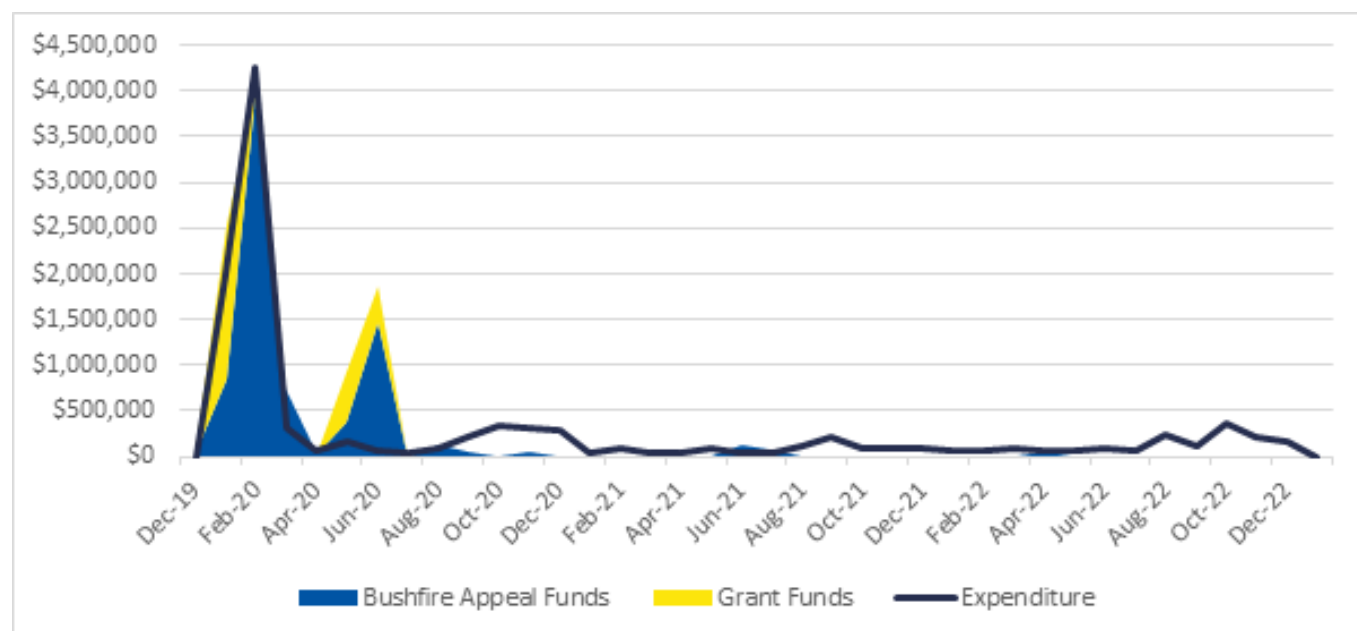


Fig. 2. Assistance Delivered by Category

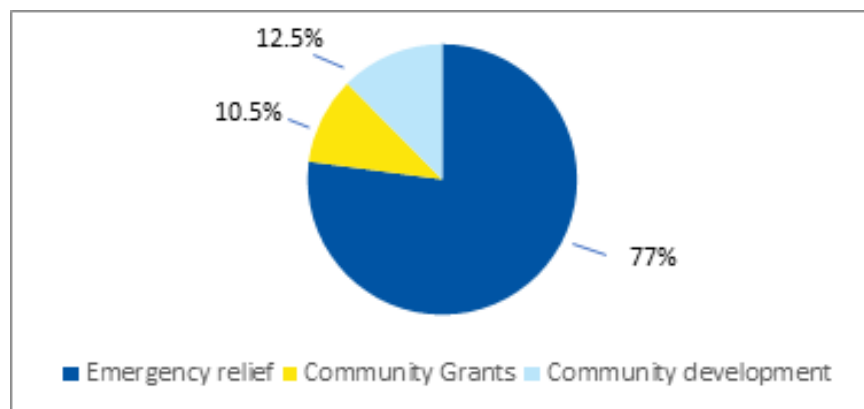
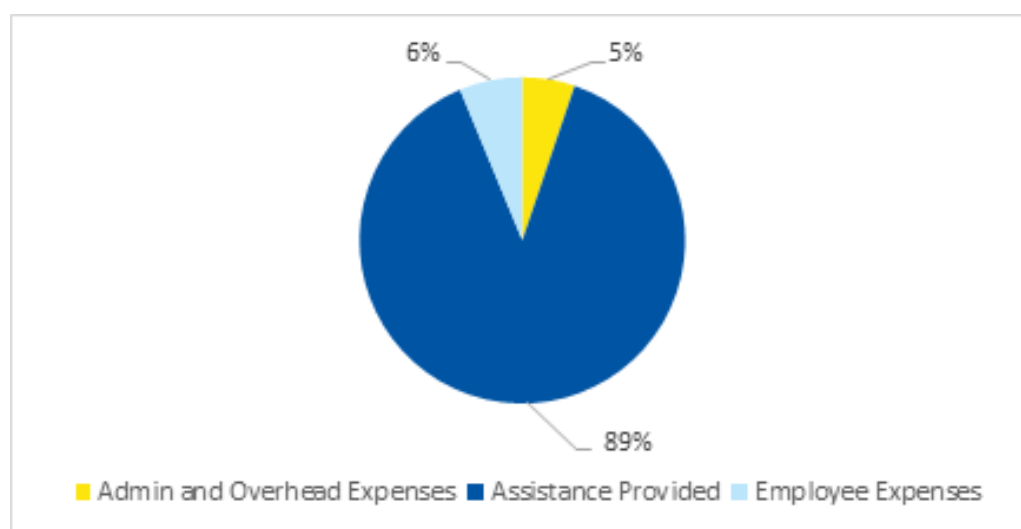


Fig. 3. Relative Expenditure on Assistance Costs and Running Costs



Concluding Comments

The Bushfire Recovery Program was very successful in getting assistance to people and communities that were impacted by the 2019/20 bushfires.

Some of the contributing factors to that success were the rapid response of Conferences in providing assistance, use of simple application and reporting forms, flexibility in approach, the employment of CDOs from the impacted regions, and the timespan. Having our Conferences immediately responding to need meant that the Society was among the first to act. We received many comments about our forms being much easier to negotiate than those of other agencies, both from recipients and employees of other agencies. Our being flexible with issues such as extensions of time, working with applicants to improve the focus of their applications, not being prescriptive about the kinds of projects that we could support, etc. were greatly appreciated. The employment of CDOs from within the impacted regions was important to their being able to engage quickly with survivors and to avoid being labelled as “drop-ins”. Our willingness to engage with communities in developing project scope and applications for grants and to invest in projects that would later attract other funding meant that we were able to leverage nearly twice the amount that we spent through our Community Grant and Community Development programs.

It remains important to recognize that the recovery period from disasters for individuals is highly variable, with a few of those we assisted still finding it difficult to function normally after three years. Running the program over three years was a big contribution. Many agencies either dropped out or significantly reduced their input during this time and our ability to keep supporting individuals and communities was important to recovery. The strategy of recruiting CDOs on the basis of their empathy rather than prior social work experience was successful in bringing five highly effective people into the program. They functioned well as a team and their varied backgrounds meant

that were able to provide expertise to one another when required. Although our provision of funding was greatly appreciated by the impacted communities, having Vinnies people engaging with communities over the three years of the program may have been our greatest contribution to recovery.

It is inevitable in a program responding from scratch to an extreme emergency that some things were not done as well as might have been but these were few. It is unlikely that the problem of fraud in the very early stage of providing support can ever be overcome until there is a better system of data sharing between emergency response agencies and relief agencies. This is essentially a matter for government authorities to address; representations have been made to government by SVDP-CG to address this matter. Our experience with the Sanitation Project in the Bega Valley suggests that we should have a MOU in place whenever we participate in a management committee.

Having a suitably qualified volunteer as co-ordinator of the Bushfire Recovery Program was received very positively by those we sought to assist and also had the benefit of saving money that could then be directed to assistance.

The plusses of this program far outweighed the minuses and many good things were achieved.





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