



INQUIRY – RECENT TRENDS IN AND PREPAREDNESS FOR EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

Submission to the Senate Standing Committees on Environment
and Communications

By Department of Human Services
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The Department of Human Services (DHS) submission addresses the role played by the department in providing emergency assistance to Australian citizens affected by extreme weather events and the measures it has taken to ensure it is prepared for future events of this nature.

Role of DHS in emergency events

The department's core responsibility in response to emergencies caused by extreme weather events is to ensure the continuity of our payments and services. This includes:

- assisting individuals to test their eligibility for an income support payment or service
- assessing and paying Medicare benefits
- providing support to Medicare providers
- ensuring Child Support payments can be made and assisting employers to continue to meet Child Support obligations
- delivering Centrelink crisis payments.

During an emergency, immediate support is given to pharmacists to help them maintain supplies of medicines and dispense PBS medicines to people whose prescriptions are lost or destroyed. Support is also provided to health practitioners working in emergency-affected areas.

To support the Australian Government's emergency response, the department also participates in local and state/territory recovery committees. Our services may be delivered from established recovery centres with agreement from the state or territory government.

When an event is severe, the Australian Government may request Emergency Management Australia within the Attorney-General's Department to deliver additional Australian Government assistance. On behalf of the Attorney-General's Department, the Department then deliver emergency payments such as the Australian Government Disaster Recovery Payment and ex-gratia payments.

Following an emergency, the department can deploy:

- field staff to recovery centres
- call centre staff to take emergency calls and claims for emergency payments
- staff to process claims in processing centres

- social workers to overseas locations or to airports in Australia to assist people affected by offshore disasters and to emergency-affected areas to support other staff
- mobile computing support
- two Mobile Offices to provide services in affected areas.

National Emergency Call Centre Surge Capability

The National Emergency Call Centre Surge Capability (NECCSC) was established in 2009 in response to a decision of the Council of Australian Governments. The NECCSC allows states and territories and Australian Government agencies to divert excess call loads received on their emergency (non-000) lines to the department and the Australian Taxation Office. The department is the lead agency for the NECCSC.

2012-13 disaster season preparations

In 2011 DHS implemented its Emergency Management Framework to outline the command, control and coordination arrangements for emergency responses. Since then a number of improvements to emergency management processes and procedures have been implemented or are underway for the 2012-13 disaster season. These improvements are articulated below.

- A joint emergency management and business continuity exercise was held prior to the commencement of the 2012-13 disaster season.
- The department conducts an annual Emergency Management Conference aimed at strengthening working relationships, reflecting on the previous disaster season and sharing information to improve preparations for the next disaster season.
- The department is developing an International Event Service Offer to be implemented in the event of an offshore emergency that impacts Australian citizens.
- CSIRO is developing, as part of its research alliance with the department, an emergency response intelligence capability tool to integrate demographic and emergency geospatial information from a range of sources, including Commonwealth Government and State and Territory emergency services, and demographic information to assist in developing situational awareness during emergencies.