



27 January 2021

Senate Finance and Public Administration Committees
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Finance and Public Administration References Committee

RE: Lessons to be learned in relation to the Australian bushfire season 2019-20

The St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia Inc. ('the Society') welcomes the opportunity to provide a further submission to this inquiry addressing:

- the level of recovery one year on from the 2019-20 bushfire season (including the progress and status of recovery efforts).

The Society notes that under item 9.25 of the Interim Report, the Committee will examine other areas of interest including the role of charitable organisations in providing financial and other support during natural disasters, and the suitability of existing frameworks for distributing donations.

The Society contracted ANU to evaluate its delivery of the Commonwealth-funded Drought Community Support Initiative and will make these findings available to the committee when the report is publicly released.

Background

The Society is a lay Catholic charitable organisation that comprises just over 50,000 volunteers and members and 6,000 employees who provide on-the-ground assistance in the form of emergency relief and other support and community services across Australia.

The Society has consulted with its state and territory entities in preparing this submission. The information contained reflects the views of members, volunteers and staff who provided direct relief to those affected by the 2019-20 bushfires through Vinnies' centres/shops, helplines, visits and attendance at community events and Recovery Centres.

At 30 November 2020, the Society raised \$25.6 million in donations, distributed or committed \$21.5 million and assisted around 9,400 households. The remaining \$4.1 million will be committed to recovery projects up to December 2021.

Assistance continues to be provided through our network of volunteers, in the form of:

- food, clothing, essential items and grocery vouchers to people who have lost everything
- cash payments of up to \$3,000 from the Vinnies Bushfire Appeal to those who have experienced significant property loss or damage during the emergency response phase and up to \$10,000 in the recovery phase, depending on assessed need
- paying unexpected bills as people go through the recovery process
- referring people to other organisations that provide crisis accommodation and specialised services
- assisting students returning to school with books, uniforms etc
- giving emotional support and practical assistance after homes are lost, and
- assisting with community development and recovery programs.

The Society also received an additional \$12.2 million in Commonwealth Emergency Relief Funding and has distributed \$11.2 million, or just over 90 percent, through cash payments and other emergency relief assistance directly to individuals affected by the Black Summer bushfires.

The [Society's bushfire webpage](#) contains up to date information and a national report which outlines case studies and point-in-time information on the assistance provided by the Society in different geographical locations. The Society's national quarterly publication, [The Record Autumn 2020](#) edition, features several articles on the bushfires and [the Annual Overview](#) contains a summary of the bushfire response provided during 2019-20. These publications are available to the public and are regularly updated through our [bushfire response](#) and [national publication](#) pages on the Society's website.

The Society prides itself on providing emergency assistance with minimal overheads, thanks to its large volunteer base. We rely heavily on conference members to mobilise and assist in disaster-affected areas. As locals, our members have existing relationships with key people and organisations that can be tapped into to organise and coordinate assistance. We have helped with the Black Friday bushfires, 2011 Brisbane floods, 2018 Cyclone Debbie, 2019 Townsville and NW Qld Floods and the recent drought.

Three-tiered emergency response

A three-tiered emergency response, based on disaster recovery stages, is used to inform our service response and the distribution of funds. It comprises the emergency stage (1-2 months), recovery stage (2-3 months) and rebuilding (6+months) stage. Usually, around 60 per cent of donated funds are distributed during the emergency stage, with the remaining 40 per cent distributed during recovery and rebuilding stages.

Although our approach is three-tiered, we recognise that more or less time may be spent in each stage for many reasons including the timing of the disaster, the level of community cohesiveness and resilience and the amount and type of available services. People and communities progress through recovery in different ways and in their own time. They seek or accept assistance when they are ready to do so. Each journey is different, and recovery does not occur quickly or simultaneously. The three-tiered framework is used to inform our approach, but it is applied flexibly, to enable a full and tailored response to people's and communities' needs.

Generally, in the emergency phase, funds are used to cover the costs of immediate and essential items. In recovery, larger amounts are used to help rebuild lives, such as clearing and cleaning up, purchasing larger goods, appliances, tools/ machinery and accessing specialist support services. During recovery, the Society's members follow up with individual households to provide further financial assistance and ongoing support.

Transitioning from emergency to recovery

The Society's members spent time with people helping them transition from emergency to recovery by providing them assistance that was tailored to their needs. Up to six months after the disaster, we were still providing initial emergency assistance to some, while others were being helped with recovery; and others with rebuilding.

When social distancing restrictions were eased, people with complex needs were provided with additional support, either through a specialised service or case worker. This was particularly the case for those people living with disability, experiencing family violence, addiction, facing mental health challenges and trauma and/or who were at risk of homelessness beyond the temporary dislocation caused by the bushfires.

Members and volunteers reported that many of those assisted were either under-insured or not insured at all. Many people who were victims of the bushfires felt like they were in a holding pattern and unable to progress to recovery because they were waiting on the state government to clear bushfire-affected areas. In this rebuilding phase, the Society would ordinarily assist by funding items such as essential household appliances, but this type of assistance was hampered. This has since been resolved and we understand that most of the clean-up work has now been completed.ⁱ

Transitioning from recovery to rebuilding

One year on, the Society has moved largely from the recovery phase to the rebuilding phase. This has meant a shift from assisting individuals to communities, although individuals continue to be helped where the need arises.

Our members have worked with local communities to help them identify their needs. Community grant funding rounds have been conducted by New South Wales, Victoria and Canberra/Goulburn. Through the grants, local community organisations are funded to manage their own recovery projects. Regions are empowered by having local, experienced people at the helm of recovery, who can facilitate community-led responses.

The need has varied from community to community but has included activities such as:

- funding maintenance and restoration projects, such as the construction of a local men's shed, community hall, sporting venue or playground/recreational area
- funding events such as support groups to enable the community to reconnect, especially for people who have been displaced
- funding local services to help get them back on their feet
- creating space and opportunities to hear the stories and strengths of the community
- connecting individuals, families and the wider community with each other and with key leaders
- creating and supporting online platforms to consult with isolated communities
- offering community training such as psychological first aid and managing complex behaviours, and
- facilitating or co-facilitating information sessions on relevant topics such as parenting, financial literacy.

These activities tend not to attract government funding but are an important way of helping communities to rebuild and recover.

In New South Wales, \$1.2 million was committed through one-off grants of up to \$20,000 to support local activities and projects. Examples include:

- funding Noah's Inclusion Services to revitalise an outdoor area as part of the Noah's Playground Project Ulladulla. The aim is to boost capacity and enhance therapy programs for children with disabilities and special needs.
- funding the Thunggutti Local Aboriginal Land Council to create the Thunggutti Cultural Burning Team. This is the first of its kind in the area and community members will be trained to develop culturally appropriate land management. The aim is to reduce future fire hazards and to encourage all members of the community to engage with Aboriginal history and culture.

Canberra/Goulburn has conducted two community grant rounds, allocating almost \$700,000 to around 50 local projects identified by communities. Examples include:

- funding the Batlow Senior Citizens Village Association to purchase and install an air conditioner in the Mountain Made Arts and Craft Shop, located in a building owned by the Village Association. The shop sells locally made items.
- funding the Bombala Preschool Urban and Indigenous agriculture project. The pre-school along with other invited schools have united to create a community based urban and Indigenous agriculture project. The permaculture garden is supported by several organisations and involves people of all ages.
- funding the purchase of a shipping container to store animal feed; and a purpose built, off-the-grid, BBQ and drink trailer.

New South Wales and Canberra-Goulburn are also conducting a Bushfire Community Development Program which places experienced Vinnies community workers in areas identified as most affected by the bushfires and vulnerable to ongoing disadvantage. Vinnies community development workers will consult widely with residents, councils, local businesses and organisations to develop and lead a tailored plan for local recovery. To date, workers have been placed in Kempsey and Lower South Coast NSW.

The Bushfire Community Development Program leads recovery by:

- creating opportunities to hear from the diverse groups within community
- providing opportunities for people to form new and strengthened connections with peers, family, and community networks
- strengthening and developing skills that promote resilience and recovery
- identifying opportunities to make community spaces, places, groups, and systems more inclusive, and
- working in partnership with our members to build the crisis response and help support communities during recovery.

Over the last year, Victoria has worked with local governments to assist those people who the Society has been unable to contact. An example includes working with the local council to reach out to householders in the East Gippsland area.

Of the \$5.7 million received in donations, \$5.4 million has been distributed or committed to help rebuild communities. One-off community grants for recovery projects of up to \$20,000 have also been made available.

Over \$3.0 million has been distributed in the form of emergency, recovery and rebuilding payments to cover land clearing, water tanks, generators and fencing. Material assistance has also been provided in the form of food, fuel, clothing, bedding, laptops, school uniforms, education fees and other ancillary expenses, and other support as identified by the community.

The \$1 million donation made by the Jewish Community of Victoria has been used towards covering education costs for schools and students including:

- the provision of 38 higher education grants to the value of \$304,000
- the 12-month appointment of a trauma counselling social worker at Mallacoota College
- a \$250,000 rebuild of a basketball court and sports facility in Mallacoota, and
- the purchase of two mini-buses – to the value of \$140,000 – for two regional bushfire-affected primary schools.

[Victorian case studies](#) are accessible on our website.

Other comments

The Society's previous submission (Sub No.47) contained recommendations on the importance of working collaboratively, case management, timeliness of data and standardised reporting, planning data and outreach models. It also outlined what could be done to improve the processing of cash payments and streamlining reports to government.

In addition to what was identified in our previous submission, New South Wales and Canberra-Goulburn report that what worked well included:

- the NSW RFS and local councils – these agencies implemented immediate and ongoing recovery officers who have coordinated weekly and fortnightly meetings across the shires to work directly with those affected and the agencies who provide assistance.
- the Recovery Centres – their extended opening hours, intake process, outreach work and engagement with local agencies to share information and facilitate referrals (Ulladulla).
- local government – their active engagement with and coordination of business, tourism, environment and social/community groups to ensure that short and longer-term needs were being met and that services were provided without overlaps (Shoalhaven).
- Office of Emergency Management – their community meetings which brought people together and provided support and information on recovery. A range of organisations were involved including legal aid, Insurance Council, Local Councils, Red Cross, Rural Adversity Mental Health, local Land Services, Rural Services Support Network and the Society.
- liaison between the Society, health and social workers and Aboriginal Land Councils (Jali, Muli Muli and Baryugil) to support the Cabbage Tree Island community who had been evacuated to Ballina.
- the Services NSW program and the Recovery Hub in Kempsey.

Improvements could have been made with respect to:

- giving more notice on when Recovery Centres were being established.
- including Vinnies on the Recovery Centres' state website.
- providing more assistance with fence replacement – this was limited to BlazeAid and they were either stretched or not available in some locations, making it difficult to run properties.
- reducing the paperwork required of small businesses.
- reducing the time taken to complete and finalise insurance claims.
- providing information that would help people decide whether to rebuild or not. Local development assessment guidelines changed, along with increased insurance premiums.
- increasing the amount of and access to emergency accommodation.
- accessing telecommunications systems in isolated communities.
- supporting and funding the delivery of ongoing mental health and trauma support.

- tailoring assistance for the elderly and/or those with health issues – many struggled to gain immediate financial support online and found it difficult to undertake and pay for repairs.

We thank you for the time you have given our submission. If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

Mr Toby oConnor
Chief Executive Officer

ⁱ NSW Government. nda. Public Works Advisory. *NSW Bushfire Clean-up Program*. Accessed at:
<https://www.publicworksadvisory.nsw.gov.au/nsw-bushfire-clean-up-program>.