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# Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

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**Submitted by:** Fortem Australia

## **Q1. What experience have you had with Commonwealth disaster funding support?**

Fortem Australia welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding.

Fortem Australia's submission relates to enhancing community resilience, preparedness, and capability in times of disaster. This is achieved through supporting the career retention and mental health of the disaster response and recovery workforce - Australia's brave first responders and their families.

Since 2019, Fortem Australia has supported first responders – primary '000' emergency services and national security personnel – and their families, living and working within disaster-affected communities.

During this time, we have seen significant improvement and attention to the issues impacting the mental health and wellbeing of first responders and their families. However, there is more work to do and the need to support first responder families never stops- regardless of business as usual, epidemics, or disasters - so we never stop.

During 1 July 2020 – 31 December 2021, the Australian Government provided Fortem Australia with \$4 million in grant funding to:

- \* Improve mental health outcomes for first responders by reducing stigma attached to mental health issues.
- \* Provide opportunities to connect, talk about and seek help for mental health distress.
- \* Provide PTSD and other mental illness support services to those emergency service workers impacted by bushfires across Australia in 2019 – 2020.

For first responders and their families who reside in, or aid communities impacted by extraordinary disaster events, such as the Black Summer bushfires, significant stress is added to what is already inherently high-stress work and home lives.

In acknowledgment of the above, Fortem Australia, assisted by federal grant funding, established services in eight locations along the burn scar of the Black Summer bushfires to provide the families of first responders, with a program of proactive mental health interventions which target the key modifiable factors that promote mental health and wellbeing, and protect against suicide. After this grant period ended, Fortem undertook an independent evaluation of funded services:





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"Fortem Australia" is a rapidly expanding organisation filling an important gap for the wellbeing and mental health of first responders. Data collection systems and processes for each of the respective Fortem Australia programs appears to be at an advanced stage... The coverage of outcome assessment appears to be extensive - Associate Professor David Berle.

At the close of 2022, Fortem Australia was announced to receive \$10 million in funding until March 2024. This funding allowed Fortem to build the capability and resilience of disaster-affected communities nationwide, through providing services to first responders and their families who are urgently seeking support.

In mid-2023, Fortem Australia is working directly with a growing waitlist of first responders and their families who are urgently seeking resilience-building services to address work problems and their ripple effect on relationships, parenting, and capacity to work, alongside disasters that continue to affect many parts of the country.

There is an ongoing and pressing need to invest further in this area to ensure that first responders are at their best and can act rapidly to support disaster-impacted communities.

## **Q2. How could Commonwealth funding support communities to reduce their disaster risk?**

Substantial funding has been made available from the Australian Government for projects that reduce disaster risk and better prepare for future disaster events. Similar levels of significant funding should also be allocated to scale up and sustain community resilience before, during and after times of disaster, with a focus on the mental health and wellbeing of first responders. This funding should be substantial enough to support the mental health of first responders during business-as-usual activities and the additional stressors of responding to disaster.

When disaster strikes, Australian communities rely heavily on first responders to protect lives and property. Simultaneously, there is also a significant dependence on members of the ADF to deploy to disaster-affected regions. However, this reliance is not sustainable and impedes the Defence Force's capacity to fulfil its core national defence responsibilities.

"It's unsustainable to constantly rely on the defence force in the way we have been over recent years. We need to think differently about how we respond to natural disasters in the future because climate change is, unfortunately, going to make them even more frequent."

Senator the Hon Murray Watt, 2023.

The recent Defence Strategic Review proposes a significant recommendation - the involvement of the ADF in domestic disasters hampers force preparedness, readiness, and combat effectiveness (Australian Government Department of Defence 2023).

To address this challenge, it is crucial to prioritise and invest Commonwealth funds in the resilience of first responders. Resilient first responders, with adequate mental health and wellbeing support, possess the capacity to endure the physical, emotional, and psychological demands of disasters. Investing in the resilience of first responders will bolster the number, retention, morale and capability of those on the frontline in disaster-affected communities.





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Although jurisdictionally the first responder workforce is primarily a state responsibility, enhancing the resilience, preparedness and capability of communities in disaster-affected regions across the country is a national priority. As such, there is an opportunity for the Commonwealth to demonstrate strong leadership in this area, safeguarding that first responders and their families on the frontline are supported to achieve their best possible work capacity, ensuring they can respond to community needs in times of catastrophic disaster.

Substantial and sustained funding is critical to address persistent first responder need for specialised mental health support, which may arise months or even years following a disaster. Nationally consistent, coordinated and well-funded mental health support will reduce dependence on the ADF, enhance broader community disaster resilience and will ensure that first responders can remain at their best when they are putting their lives on the line for others.

Fortem Australia is a national not-for-profit organisation that enhances the resilience and capacity of communities, through providing career retention and mental health support to first responders. Fortem has built a scale that is unmatched by any other provider in Australia and has a singular focus on building national community resilience in times of disaster, through supporting the needs of the first responder community.

### **Q3. Please describe your understanding of Commonwealth disaster funding processes.**

Fortem Australia acknowledges that the Australian Government extends financial assistance to state and local governments through the administration of Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA). These arrangements allocate funds for a range of disaster response, relief, and recovery efforts across the country. In late 2022, the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) assumed responsibility for administering the DRFA funds on behalf of the Australian Government.

Furthermore, Fortem Australia understands that the DRFA funding is categorised into four distinct themes:

- \* Category A: Assistance provided to individuals to alleviate personal hardship or distress resulting directly from a disaster. This includes emergency food and essential housing repairs.
- \* Category B: Restoration of essential public assets and certain counter-disaster operations.
- \* Category C: Payments made to severely affected communities, regions, or sectors. This encompasses clean-up and recovery grants for small businesses and primary producers, as well as the establishment of a Community Recovery Fund.
- \* Category D: Assistance for exceptional circumstances that go beyond the scope of categories A to C.

Between June 1 2018, and June 30 2022, the Australian Government allocated \$3.1 billion in DRFA payments to state and territory governments. It is estimated that from 2022-23 to 2025-26, a total of \$6.5 billion will be disbursed to state and territory governments through the DRFA.

Additionally, the Australian Government, through NEMA, provides \$200 million to state and territory governments, in collaboration with councils, for projects aimed at reducing risks and enhancing





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community preparedness for future floods, cyclones, bushfires, storm surges, and other natural disasters.

This financial support is facilitated by the recently established Disaster Ready Fund (DRF), which has a total allocation of \$1 billion over a five-year period. Fortem Australia recognises that the DRF serves as a complementary resource to the recovery funding available under the DRFA, avoiding duplication of efforts.

While the Australian Government has allocated significant funding for disaster mitigation, there remains a substantial gap in supporting the resilience and capability building of communities nationwide. Adequate and sustained funding is crucial to address the ongoing need for specialised services in building community resilience, with a particular focus on providing career retention and mental health support for first responders.

Establishing nationally consistent, coordinated, and well-funded community resilience initiatives will enhance community capabilities, reduce reliance on the Australian Defence Force, and ensure that first responders can continue to perform at their best when risking their lives for others.

#### **Q4. Are the funding roles of the Commonwealth, states and territories, and local government, during disaster events clear?**

While the DRFA and DRF funding schemes provide crucial resources for infrastructure development and disaster mitigation plans, there exists a lack of clarity regarding the distribution of funding responsibilities among various levels of government.

This presents an opportunity to establish consistent financial support for not-for-profit organisations engaged in community resilience services, as well as individuals, small businesses, and primary producers under the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements.

Furthermore, the current scope and criteria of Category D under the DRFA scheme remain ambiguous. It would be beneficial to broaden the eligibility criteria to encompass projects and organisations dedicated to enhancing the resilience and capability of disaster-affected regions, even in circumstances that may not be deemed 'exceptional'. This inclusive approach should be a fundamental aspect of building disaster-resilient communities nationwide.

To address these concerns, Australian, state, and territory governments have a unique opportunity to provide clarity regarding the specific situations in which funds can be allocated under the DRFA.

Additionally, all levels of government should collaborate in simplifying the application processes for not-for-profit organisations involved in supporting community resilience on the ground in regions where this support is most needed. Streamlining these processes would ensure that resources are effectively and efficiently allocated to foster community resilience efforts.

By enhancing consistency in financial support and clarifying funding allocations within the DRFA, all levels of Government can maximise the impact of these initiatives and create a more cohesive approach to disaster resilience across the country. This collaborative effort between governments and not-for-profit organisations will result in stronger and more resilient communities, better equipped to face and recover from natural disasters.





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#### **Q5. Is there any further information you would like to provide?**

As highlighted in the National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework, first responders are a cohort that require additional supports due to exposure to historical, repeat and successive traumatic disaster events.

First responders - the brave individuals on the frontline – continually answer the call to respond to disaster-affected communities. Simultaneously, there is also an increasing dependence on members of the ADF to deploy to disaster-affected regions, often at the expense of enduring and organic solutions centred on existing organisations.

Preserving and enhancing the existing workforce of first responders is a more efficient resource allocation in that it is expected to reduce overreliance on the ADF for domestic disaster response. This ensures that the ADF can concentrate efforts on strategic defence operations, safeguarding the nation's long-term security and maintaining readiness to respond to international threats. To address this challenge, it is crucial to prioritise the resilience of first responders.

Substantial funding has been made available from the Australian Government for projects that reduce disaster risk. Similar levels of funding should also be invested in the resilience of first responders. In return, communities across Australia will retain their vital first responders, ensuring they remain on the frontline in disaster affected communities, performing safely and at their highest potential in the face of cascading, compounding and concurrent disaster events. Investing in the resilience of first responders will ultimately strengthen the nationwide capacity to respond to and recover from disaster events.

Since 2019, and through funding provided by both the former Morrison Government and the current Albanese Government, Fortem Australia has delivered evidence-informed wellbeing and mental health care that is independent yet adjunctive to workplace programs. The focus is on prevention, early intervention and building resilience. Operating outside the workers' compensation system, Fortem Australia offers a truly holistic approach to psychological wellbeing.

Our evidence-informed programs have been developed in line with extensive research and in conjunction with senior leaders from state-based first responder agencies, national law enforcement agencies and representative agencies from Australia's National Intelligence Community. This reduces duplication and ensures that Fortem complements existing internal service offerings.

Fortem Australia's services align closely with the 'Key Components of Care', 'Guiding Principles', and types of interventions outlined in the Australian Government National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework.

As we approach four years of operation, Fortem Australia has supported over 13,000 unique individuals, received 32,000 wellbeing activity registrations, received over 2,000 career management referrals, and provided 5,000 psychology sessions to first responders and their families across the country. Fortem has built a scale that is unmatched by any other provider in Australia and has a singular focus on the needs of the first responder community and most importantly, their families.

Fortem Australia acknowledges the long-term nature of recovery and the need for sustained efforts to build resilience in first responder families affected by cascading disasters. Therefore, we resolutely





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advocate the significance of substantial and sustained funding to address the persistent challenges, which may arise months or even years following a disaster.



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