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Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

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Submitted by: Hawkesbury Blue Mountains Community Bushfire Alliance

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

In December 2019 fire the Gaspers Mountain Mega Fire devastated Bilpin District, Mt Wilson, Mt Tomah, Bell, the Grose Valley and Mt Victoria and Blackheath - villages located in the Blue Mountains NSW. Despite the significant amounts of government funding for recovery and resilience building, our community still does not have the basic infrastructure needed to be better able to survive the next catastrophic fire event.

"It is terrifying to be caught in a burn over. A burn over is where you are surrounded by fire and can't escape. To survive you must find shelter where you are. The burning heat on your skin is so painful and you can't see or breathe because the smoke makes you cry and chokes your lungs. You must fight to control the adrenaline rush that causes you to panic and want to run. All you want in these moments is water. Water to drink, water to wet your skin and clothes and water to put out the fire raging around you."

Since this time our community has been applying to have our bushfire disaster management areas upgraded with permanent continuous water supply, storage tanks and fire hydrants so NSW Fire Rescue trucks can refill and help fight bushfires. What we got from Resilience NSW was funding provided through third party community service organisations based between 1- and 2-hours' drive away from bushfire affected communities give us:

\$300,000 of free dance lessons the communities did not ask for because we can dance already and have existing local dance businesses that this funding bankrupted.

\$270,000 for scanning essential documents to USB's that communities did not ask for because we all use our local JP to witness these documents, and our mobile phones to take photos of these documents and email them to ourselves thus creating a permanent fireproof record that can't be lost.

An unknown amount of food and other material aid services we didn't ask for because we use local services between 15 & 30 minutes away.

[REDACTED]. When the community complained we didn't need dance lessons we needed road side water and emergency evacuation areas, we were told to stop complaining and be grateful!





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Our little local community centre which receives NSW Department Communalities and Justice funding, was too busy helping us to get in on the funding gravy train and so we just ended up using our own resources and getting on with things. We formed the Bushfire Community Alliance made the video of our experience <https://www.mtwilsonbackburn.com/film>

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

Identification of need is the most important first step. Local community know best what their needs are. Large charities, NGO's and Government know the least about community needs because they don't live in the disaster impacted area.

The most effective mechanism for identifying and addressing local community needs and funding distribution was the Australian Assistance Scheme <https://wscf.org.au/the-area-assistance-story/> This scheme targeted disadvantage communities and was successful in providing modern infrastructure and support for the most vulnerable people in Western Sydney and regional areas up until 2008. The funding was driven by local community groups identifying needs and making applications that were ranked by local representatives from Council and Department officials working in the locations or nearby. Western Sydney Regional Organisations of Councils and WESTIR will be able to provide you with more information on this very successful scheme.

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

Our understanding of the Commonwealth disaster funding processes is best summed up in this three minute video we made that go 65.000 views

https://www.facebook.com/100025627530352/videos/714255049458506/?__so__=permalink

We did get a Commonwealth Disaster Funding Grant just before the Federal election to upgrade one of our bushfire disaster staging areas. Every grant applicant in the very marginal electorate of Macquarie was successful. The only way to get disaster funding is to live in a marginal seat.

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

Yes - they are to me and other community organisers.

The important thing to remember is the community doesn't care what level of Government is responsible for what - its just the Government. So making clear the roles of each level of government is of administrative importance, it is not important to the general community.

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

Thanks for taking the time to read this submission and if you have time to look at the videos.

Reviewing and revitalising past successful funding schemes for disadvantaged communities worked for disaster impacted communities as post disaster they share the same attributes as disadvantaged communities.

Finally the distress and angry caused to communities by funding outside organisations to come in and tell people what's good for them makes recovery harder. "Surviving a burnover event which took a couple of





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hours was nothing compared to surviving listening to a mob of outsiders tell me we don't need roadside water hydrants and evacuation areas but \$300,000 dance lessons to help express your feelings."



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