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Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

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Submitted by: Royal Far West

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

Our Community Recovery Program (CRP) includes the Bushfire Recovery Program (BRP) (winner of a 2021 Resilient Australia Award), which has supported over 3,000 children and their caregivers. The program includes working in primary schools in conjunction with local health professionals and community groups, across 60 communities in NSW. We support the wellbeing, mental health and resilience of children impacted by natural disaster events, to reduce the likelihood of long-term effects. We also support those around the child (carers, parents, teachers) to build their capacity to understand and respond to children's needs.

Our CRP also includes the Floods Recovery Program (FRP) – working in 30 schools and pre-schools in NSW and SE QLD, with a similar trained workforce and similar outcomes and service.

Both initiatives are funded by the Federal Government (with \$2m contribution from the NSW State Government) through four separate grants, to a total of around \$5.6m p/a, reporting through the Department of Industry, Science & Energy Resources, and the Department of Health and Age Care.

Firstly, congratulations on including funding for child-specific initiatives in the area of community recovery following natural disasters.

However, there are issues with the four existing grants.

1. Inconsistent and onerous reporting requirements which are not flexible to support the changing needs of communities through the recovery process. Equally, they mean less time spent on delivering services to children in psychological distress.
2. Timeframes for funding are not reflective of research findings which show a five-year period is required to ensure communities, and in particular children, can fully recover and have the tools and strategies embedded for resilience to withstand future events.

Funding for the Bushfire Program (NSW BLERF) finishes in June 2024 and is tied to specific locations and schools.

Federal funding for the Black Summer bushfires finishes in March 2024. Federal funding for floods support will end December 2023 – but may be extended until June 2024.





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As research shows, the recovery process is far from over and more support is needed to ensure we leave behind stronger and more resilient communities. "Ten years after the fires, the likelihood of having one or more of these conditions (posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and psychological distress) was still more than twice as high for people from high impact communities compared to those from low/no impact communities."*Gibbs et al -10 Years Beyond Bushfires – Uni Mel 2020

An independent evaluation of the BRP by Charles Sturt University (2021) found it was an effective intervention for children following a disaster, demonstrating an overall positive impact on children, parents and their carers and the community around them.

The evaluation found that children understood and were better able to manage changes, talked more openly and used strategies to better cope in activities at home and at school. Overall, they reported improved self-confidence and self-esteem after participating in the Program. Likewise, parents were more confident in supporting their children, understood trauma and could recognise the symptoms of psychological distress and recognised the need to look after their own wellbeing.

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

Recent natural disasters in Australia have led to cumulative stressors, particularly on rural and remote families, which is imposing unprecedented negative factors to children's developmental trajectories. Unfortunately, it is expected that these will continue. The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements in 2022 found that "we can also expect more concurrent and consecutive hazard events. For example, in the last 12 months there was drought, heatwaves and bushfires, followed by severe storms, flooding and a pandemic. Concurrent and consecutive hazard events increase the pressure on exposed and vulnerable communities. Each subsequent hazard event can add to the scale of the damage caused by a previous hazard event."

In 2022, the UNICEF DRR in Action report found that "the increasing frequency and severity of disaster events - exacerbated by an accelerating climate crisis, environmental degradation and lagging risk governance systems - means that children and young people need immediate action to build resilience."

Consolidation of the current bushfire and floods grants and extension of these grants for five years would provide a mobile, flexible and highly trained clinical workforce which can be called upon in times of need and following natural disasters, like bushfires and floods. Sustainable funding will also build resilience and wellbeing, both necessary to support learning, and mental health in remote communities – where disadvantage and need is greatest. It would also help build preparedness and resilience in communities most affected, and which, evidence shows are likely to be hit again with natural disasters.

In January this year, as part of its Treasury Pre-Budget submission, RFW requested ongoing funding to expand the work of our Community Recovery Program (CRP) team and utilise its extensive experience acquired in working with disaster affected communities over the past three years, for a further five years. This money would support an additional 12 rural and remote disaster impacted LGAs in collaboration with 90 schools and preschools. It would also mean the CRP could focus its services on preparedness and building resilience in communities to face further natural disasters.

The CRP services are community led and provide a unique child-centred, paediatric multi-disciplinary service with the capability, expertise and experience to wrap around rural and remote children, parents,





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and school communities, ensuring access to essential health and development services, and providing hope to communities that face multiple levels of disadvantage and trauma.

Ongoing funding for recovery and response programs is a long-term investment in the future of country children and rural Australia, who have and will continue to face unprecedented challenges, and are at higher risk of natural disasters.

An independent evaluation of the Bushfire Recovery Program by Charles Sturt University, found that children's wellbeing, confidence, and resilience significantly improved after participating in the program.

"Effective programs, like the RFW Bushfire Recovery Program, will play an important role in improving the resilience and wellbeing, and decreasing the likelihood of long-term adverse reactions, of children impacted by natural disasters." *Bushfire Recovery – The Children's Voices Report - 2021

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

Disaster response and disaster recovery are different things: response can have an end point, recovery is a continuum that is not necessarily linear.

Consecutive and compounding disasters both amplify need, and delay or set-back response and recovery work, and increase costs.

Many grant program guidelines and reporting frameworks seem to be centred on infrastructure, or shorter term community connection projects, rather than long term human services programs. This means:

* essential components of human services programs being deemed ineligible expenditure, or expenditure within a capped 'administration' percentage, when similar essential components of an infrastructure project are considered eligible. For example, we may have to include all planning-stage clinical governance, oversight and approval within project administration, however an infrastructure project may have an additional expense category such as planning approvals where the preparatory administrative expenses can sit. Another example is program evaluation, which can be very simple for an infrastructure grant: a focus group and count of traffic/users, compared to an on-going and complex set of measures and insights for a mental health program. Evaluation expenses are also considered part of total administration cost on the project.

* difficulties and increased admin costs – to adjust frameworks to people-centred projects. For example, an infrastructure project is implemented in a fixed location, that is extremely unlikely to change once the project starts. People, however, move about a lot, and as a result our project location listings have required regular updates – all these adjustments (ie for each child or family changing school) require a formal request for variation (frequently, obviously based on an infrastructure template), with supporting requirements documentation and updated timelines and budgets;

* increased financial reporting burden for grantee programs utilising skilled, specialist staff employed directly by the grantee. A council, or other recipient of an infrastructure grant, can submit a single sub-contractor invoice as evidence of expenditure related to a particular project stage or activity, accompanied by progress photographs as evidence of work performed at the location. We however (for our Resilience NSW and BLERF2 grants) have to provide evidence of hours worked (CFO-signed, de-identified, wages ledger), specify on-costs applied (CFO-signed report), etc for every staff member





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employed, and provide copies of every invoice or receipt for every other cost associated with the project, summarise it all, and get a CFO signature on the amalgamated report. In some reporting quarters with large volumes of outreach, the travel expense evidence alone has needed to include several hundred receipts, summarised, categorised, documented and collated in a specific format. Our evidence of work performed has needed to include copies of (de-identified) outreach schedules, photographs taken on every outreach in front of a geographic marker, deidentified participant feedback, etc. If all of the paperwork has been signed by the CFO, and we are committed to and providing annual independent financial project audits, the requirement for such detailed evidence of expense seems quite unnecessary.

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

No: Existing funding arrangements are difficult to navigate – it is difficult for service providers to find the available grants and it is not clear who is responsible - either Federal, state or local Governments. This makes navigation difficult and is a slow process. It is also difficult when you have been working in an area and have existing relationships and a proven track record with trained staff – there should be a preferred providers list in areas – which would streamline the process.

Finding available grants and their alignment to LGAs, State boundaries, State/Federal Electoral boundaries is admin-heavy, as it does not take into account the need for clinical care to extend beyond those boundaries if a child or family changes school, home or moves into a shared care situation. A great many changes in family situation or location have required us to lodge variation requests to funders, and these have often been accompanied by requests for 'evidence of need to change' that are not easily accommodated within our space (may breach client confidentiality, etc).

The need to make these adjustments should be included at the contracting stage.

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

Reporting and evidence requirements are not always clear at the time of costing a disaster recovery project. Our community recovery grants have a much higher level of reporting activity than other grants, and as such, we have not built the costs for these late-discovered (or sometimes changing and evolving) reporting needs into our initial costs. This is an increased, unfunded burden that we have been meeting through general donations, fundraising, etc.

Inconsistent and changing communication and relationship management structures across grants. Some of our grants (eg Flood funding – bi-monthly meetings involving many people, bi-monthly AWP & budget updates) have high levels of regular communication and reporting that has been specified at the point of contracting (but has not always been anticipated or taken into account by us at costing stage). Others operate largely via automated reporting (can be good in terms of consistency and evidence trails, but difficult for ad-hoc requests and often limited in terms of responsiveness). Some granting organisations have very high levels of staff turnover, and this has made proactive relationship management and consistent understanding difficult.

A directive about a 6% cap on administrative overheads is quite punitive. Given the arduous reporting requirements to date on disaster funding, this cap is both unreasonable and unrealistic. Most not for





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profits, including RFW, do try and keep their overhead at the lowest possible level but 6% is incredibly low.

Royal Far West and UNICEF Australia have produced two reports: "After the Disaster- Recovery for Australia's Children" 2021 and "Bushfire Recovery – the children's voices" 2022, which outline the impact of disasters on children and include recommendations about the best way forward for community recovery funding. These include the establishment of agencies and expert providers to ensure a skilled and community-led rapid response in local communities, and long term investment in proven programs to help with community preparedness and resilience through transparent funding pathways.

The National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy outlines that it is crucial to fund effective intervention programs, which can be used as preventative programs, to build resilience in families and communities. These programs should be directed at areas in rural and remote Australia, which are identified as having the greatest need – having a higher percentage of children who are vulnerable in two or more developmental domains.

