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National Emergency
Management Agency

Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

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Submitted by: St Vincent de Paul Society National Council

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

The Society comprises over 45,000 volunteers and members and 6,000 employees. While not first responders, the Society's primary activities during a disaster include providing emergency relief, accommodation options and support services. As the disaster progresses through its stages, the assistance varies from emergency response through to community-led recovery and rebuilding projects.

Our members and volunteers often live in, or have a connection with, the community they serve and provide help where it is needed.

The Society has been funded to provide Commonwealth Emergency Relief in response to the 2019 20 bushfires and COVID-19, and the Drought Community Support Initiative program.

We refer to the Society's publicly available submissions relevant to this review namely:

- * Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience (No.37)
- * Emergency Response Fund Amendment (Disaster Ready Fund) Bill 2022 (No. 18)
- * National Emergency Declaration Act (No. 6)
- * Lessons to be learned in relation to the Australian Bushfire Season 2019-20 (No. 47, 47.1), and
- * Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements (NND.001.01084).

The Society has previously called for improvements to:

- * coordination of services at all levels and across all agencies
- * case management by all parties
- * central information on all available services by location
- * real-time planning information
- * funding of capacity building and resilience activities, and
- * information sharing.

The Society participates on the NEMA Tell Us Once (TUO) project, the Charitable NFP and Philanthropic Strategic Group and the National Coordination Group.





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

We welcomed the establishment of the Disaster Ready Fund, through which recovery programs have been funded. However, while community-led, the listed projects that have been funded focus on mitigating the impact of disasters on communities (largely infrastructure) and economies and risk reduction, rather than building social capital and resilience. Further, the funds are accessible only through state/territory governments and must be matched. These are significant impediments to many community sector organisations, especially small local community services and businesses but also national organisations.

Funding must be flexible to support community-led preparedness and resilience activities. This investment in social capital is often not funded by governments. It can support communities to plan and identify disaster risks, develop safety plans, undertake contingency planning and increase disaster awareness and education. It improves responsiveness when disasters strike and mitigates the long-term social impact that disasters have on individual and community health, wellbeing and cohesion.

For example, St Vincent de Paul NSW (SVdP NSW) established a Bushfire Recovery Community Development Program in response to the 2019-20 NSW Black Summer Bushfires. An independent review of the 2-year disaster recovery and risk preparedness program found that it:

- * delivered good practice community development disaster responses, tailored to the needs of individual communities, and
- * strengthened community cohesion and contributed to community wellbeing.

The Program was community-led, participatory and directed by people within local communities. A whole-of-community approach was adopted with a focus on vulnerable groups including people living with disability or mental health challenges, First Nations peoples and people who are socially isolated. Activities included training, community conversations and peer support. Outcomes included:

- * 1632 households prepared for future natural disasters
- * 686 community leaders trained with skills in hazard reduction and disaster management
- * 23 types of preparedness activities delivered in 26 communities
- * 2 hazard identification and planning events
- * 22 unique activities revitalising community connections
- * 544 people skilled in trauma management
- * 2556 instances of casework, support and referral
- * 544 people provided with information and referrals for services
- * 43 double-impacted households supported to respond to rebuild critical personal infrastructure
- * 42 organisations strengthened organisational capacity
- * 1 double-impacted community group supported, and
- * 9 types of land regeneration investment in 22 communities.



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SVdP NSW has partnered with TAFE NSW to offer community preparedness courses, including certification in relevant skills such as first aid, chainsaw operations, and farm fencing.

Funding is needed to support investment in human capital. We currently use our own resources to prepare and skill up our people to ensure the assistance they provide is timely, professional, focussed on individual safety and well-being, and quality assured.

Finally, funding is needed to help services work closely with vulnerable and isolated people. SVdP NSW has partnered with the University of Sydney to develop a Person-Centred Preparedness Tool to guide conversation about a person's readiness for a disaster, including identifying other people and things they can rely on, risks in their lives and strategies on preparing for and managing risks around them.

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

Commonwealth disaster funding processes include:

- * conducting grant rounds for the Disaster Ready Fund
- * administering Disaster Recovery Payment and Allowance
- * varying existing grant agreements (such as increasing Commonwealth Emergency Relief funding)

The Disaster Ready Fund appears to prioritise community-led mitigation and risk reduction projects, at the expense of community resilience/social capital projects.

The duration and amount of Disaster Recovery payments should be increased. During a national natural disaster, Emergency Relief funding for individuals should also be increased from \$1,000 to at least \$3,000. If these additional per capita funds cannot be found within the Emergency Relief Program, then other allocations should be provided to ER providers to deliver extra funds and resources. Further, during the Black Summer Bushfires, the Society's experience was that the administrative processes required to meet eligibility criteria were onerous and significantly slowed the process. Access to information to expedite such checks (such as through the TUO project) would improve the process.

Variations to Commonwealth grant agreements means service provision is limited to organisations with an existing agreement to deliver particular services. While this is much needed by organisations such as ours, it locks out other smaller and locally based organisations not currently funded by the Commonwealth but are perhaps well placed and experienced at working with their communities.

We previously recommended that the Commonwealth establish standing panels of providers for a range of services, prioritising regions identified as high risk in the first instance. Consortia and sub-contracting arrangements managed by local councils should be supported, with local services and businesses identified as preferred providers. The Commonwealth Grant Rules and Guidelines, Commonwealth Procurement Rules and the Public Governance and Accountability Act 2013 should also be reviewed to improve flexibility and timeliness when trying to distribute Commonwealth funds to disaster areas.

For national natural disasters, reporting and accountability requirements remain onerous. Additional reporting was required even though the Society held existing grant agreements and, as a registered charity, complies with ACNC reporting requirements.





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Better use of existing reporting mechanisms to reduce duplication of data reporting efforts by funded organisations is needed. Facilitating the sharing of personal information to streamline the assistance process is also essential, as identified by the Royal Commission and through the TOU project.

A public awareness campaign is needed. This would help explain the roles of various levels of government and the charitable/community sector, including reporting and accountability, and where to go to get help.

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

No. Most people living through a disaster are neither interested in, nor understand, how the different levels of government operate – they just want help and should not be expected to know where to go to get it. Easy access to all information from a central hub is essential but making information solely available online disadvantages some people, particularly the vulnerable.

An inclusive approach is needed to ensure marginalised people benefit from funding in a culturally safe, systemic and meaningful way.

Recovery Support Officers should be mobilised throughout the disaster period, not just during the emergency phase and not limited to a presence at recovery centres. They should provide case management and share information through a national data network (such as through the TOU project).

This is exacerbated by the lack of a comprehensive central information hub across all levels of government and community support services. We note the NEMA website contains service information by government and LGA but little information on other service providers.

SVdP NSW's submission to the NSW 2022 Independent Floods Inquiry recommended that the State and Commonwealth Governments work together to ensure a faster and more coordinated response to the delivery of cash grants following future disasters. Processes and resources are needed to enable not-for-profit organisations to contribute efficiently and effectively to disaster response efforts; recognising the value of the contribution made. Improved coordination and information sharing amongst other community sector organisations and will all government agencies involved in the disaster response is essential.

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

SVdP NSW, along with a number of community sector organisations, commissioned the City Futures Research Centre (UNSW) to examine the impact of housing vulnerability on climate disaster recovery. While the report focuses on the 2022 flooding events in the Northern Rivers, its findings are applicable to other flooding events and climate disasters.

The report, *The impact of housing vulnerability on climate disaster recovery: The 2022 Northern Rivers Floods*, identifies the characteristics needed for any 'new normal' housing system that the recovery process works towards, to minimise the disruptions of future climate disasters. Among its eight recommendations, the report recommends governments work with communities and other stakeholders to:

- * build capacity for a more deliberate role for local civil society in response to crisis





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- * resource community response accordingly instead of rolling one-off funding
- * develop housing system intelligence to inform disaster preparedness and recovery planning
- * develop a more sustainable ongoing social housing sector.

The report notes that parts of the community affected by pre-existing housing vulnerability are more likely to suffer from a shock within climate disaster in the first instance and will struggle to improve their pre-disaster conditions or regain pre-disaster function thereafter. Strengthening social and affordable housing is therefore important to increase community resilience and reduce the impact of any future disaster while allowing communities to recover faster.

With more frequent and extreme weather events likely to result in further loss of housing in the future, short, medium- and long-term housing responses must be better planned and agreed in advance. While the loss of people's homes will always cause devastation, the knowledge that a response will be forthcoming would help avoid the considerable anxiety, stress, and tension that has been the experience of so many people in the Northern Rivers.

The report also highlights how low-income communities and communities with low social capital are more vulnerable to natural disasters and take longer to recover from them. Conversely, communities with strong social networks have greater capacity to respond to and recover from disasters. This reinforces the benefits of funding community development approaches to strengthening community assets and resilience through disaster planning processes. It also reinforces the need for the Commonwealth Government to increase the base rate of income support payments, such as JobSeeker, to reduce the numbers of people living in poverty.

For state-specific information, refer to the Select Committee on the Response To Major Flooding Across New South Wales in 2022. Evidence submitted highlights issues with the NSW Government's financial assistance to flood affected individuals, including delays in receiving payments, cumbersome documentation requirements, confusion about eligibility guidelines and a general lack of awareness as to the financial grants available. Some stakeholders also felt that donation management could have been stronger.

The Committee also found that NSW Government processes surrounding financial grants and support programs following the February-March 2022 floods were confusing and cumbersome for applicants, often preventing assistance from flowing to them in a timely manner.

