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National Emergency
Management Agency

Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

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Submitted by: Anonymous

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

As a Community Recovery Officer (CRO) I have worked with numerous communities and recovery services to gather the following feedback.

Global Care worker: oversaw a recovery hub assisting those impacted by fires and floods, advocating for people affected by disaster, supporting rural property owners through disaster events, to members whose property had been destroyed in bushfire and flood and I have had positive experiences seeing firsthand the immediate financial assistance (\$1000) given to families who had lost everything.

Frustration and confusion over applying for further grants, lost paperwork, miscommunication etc. People affected by disaster needed an advocate to liaise between different agencies as the processes were not explained well and were frustrating.

Manning Point resident: I had a stressful time gaining Commonwealth disaster funding support, I received conflicting information every time I spoke to a different person. I was told I was ineligible for any of the recovery grants because I had insurance, though my insurance did not cover flood. In the meantime, people who don't live permanently down the street from me, they got it and were then able to buy a brand-new car while I went car less for 9 months as I used my car insurance money to get my home to a semi-liveable state, so me and my kids could move back in. Even the \$1000 payment, involved answering multiple questions and I was on the phone for nearly an hour. Whereas a neighbour was only asked 3-4 questions and was processed straight away.

Rural Recovery Officer: My role was supporting rural property owners through the drought, bushfire, and flood events. I kept getting the response, if (NSW) farmers can't complete forms and applications for funding, they should not be farming. The effect of trauma on the ability to function, let alone try to apply for funding, is not accommodated. We need farmers on the panel, developing the criteria. There were also numerous mistakes in reimbursement of invoices by the Rural Assistance Authority. One farmer was cut short by \$30,000 as the invoices were not added up correctly. Three years after the bushfires, there were still no decisions made to rebuild some houses that had been promised earlier by NSW Office of Emergency Management's Disaster Relief Grants. These people cannot recover with this still not resolved.

Killabakh resident: The main conduit for information regarding funding support was coordinated by the MidCoast Council Community Recovery Officer.





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This position is integral to the roll out of information during disasters, allowing a real local approach to information and support. They are a crucial link to accessing funding for residents who are stressed and frozen. Without this connection many residents would not be aware of the range of support that is on offer.

Possum Brush resident: Nothing the governments are doing makes any sense to me.

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

Improve the reliability of telecommunications or make alternative communications available in vulnerable communities. This was a major weakness during disaster events.

Funding for a permanent Community Recovery Officer (CRO) in NSW disaster affected local councils. Strong relationships between Council and community leaders are vital during disasters and are needed to ensure continuity. Connecting communities to governments at all levels is such an important issue. Funding should be ongoing as communities don't recover overnight. A CRO is a spokesperson who can collect our ideas and speak for us about sensible solutions, not bureaucratic BS determined by someone sitting at a desk in a major city. There has been a focus on supporting recovery and resilience, while risk reduction and disaster preparedness is also needed. The program should be broadened to include preparedness as a key deliverable and the position could be rebadged as a Community Resilience Officer.

In our experience, preparedness should be led by Local Government who have a real connection to the community and can coordinate multi-disaster preparedness approaches between emergency services. Dedicated Community Resilience Officers from Council can be embedded in communities, consult and initiate preparedness programs tailored to individual community needs. This builds community trust in government by ensuring queries about disaster preparedness are responded to by the right agency with accurate information from reputable sources. The issues from disasters do not fit into neat boxes and disappear as soon as the next disaster appears. Fires and Floods do not have separate doorways people can walk in and out of as they please.

Funding needs to be made available to assist property owners with physical preparedness to manage bushfire and flood risk more effectively.

Funding for more trained case workers to work with those who have experienced extreme disasters. There needs to be more people with trauma informed training communicating with those confronted with extreme loss and trauma. For those who lose all possessions and identification who also are not technical or confident to reach out for help, the trauma was unnecessarily heightened unless they had advocates to step in and give assistance, and/or direct them to the correct avenues of assistance.

Educational programs in schools to teach kids how to prepare for emergencies, such as the Australian Red Cross Pillowcase and Zombie Apocalypse programs.

Funding for community consultation is needed to collect and record lived experiences and information from the people that were physically present in the disaster/event. River gauges can't record how much water is on the ground from rain falling inland. Having a weather station 20km away is dangerous as it can misrepresent how much rain has fallen locally. The installation of weather stations and river gauges at low-lying high flood risk communities is needed to allow more accurate monitoring.





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More evacuation centres need to be built in vulnerable areas, with some road access by local communities during floods.

Small rural "one road in" communities need a "safer space" but RFS regulations mean many do not comply. An alternative is badly needed.

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

Our community members do not have a good understanding of disaster funding processes, while our reference group members who work professionally in this space have a reasonable to good understanding of funding processes.

There is a general lack of community knowledge about the processes. Some of this stems from the Commonwealth providing the funding and the State and Local governments deliver the services. This disconnect isolates communities prior to, during and after disasters. The glue that makes this assistance and support available to individuals and communities is the approach and connection by local government to their local community.

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

The funding roles of the Commonwealth, states and territories, and local government, during disaster events are not clear to the public or in some cases even to agency representatives working professionally in disasters.

Recent increases in disasters demonstrate the various agencies are available immediately after a disaster but are restricted to providing assistance on previously agreed conditions, with the added pressures applied by political interference by various competing levels of Government.

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

Possum Brush resident: some of us are over wasting precious life energy on trying to share deeply valuable insights from personally facing both fires and floods, but then being told by Government people sitting behind desks they know better than us. LISTEN TO US ON THE GROUND. WE HAVE ANSWERS.

Manning Point resident: Our local Community Recovery Officer saw the divide in our community after the March 2021 flood and she helped bring organisations into the area to build relationships within the community. She took our concerns to the Council. Now our community's drainage has been investigated and plans are in progress to upgrade town drainage and flood gates. Numerous community members complained to local Members of Parliament and Council about this previously and nothing had ever been done. Because our local Community Recovery Officer spoke on our behalf within the Council, she got us answers. This alone reduced some of our communities' stress levels and rebuilt some community trust in the government systems.

Local knowledge community-based action is key when planning for preparedness, response, recovery, and resilience. Having a dedicated person, and preferably a team placed in local government working with community members, groups, emergency agencies, supporting organisations, government agencies to gain and spread accurate information and strengthen each community will result in reduced disaster impact on a community. More effective community preparedness will result in less recovery costs.





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Ongoing community recovery support will mean people's recovery needs are met more promptly in future disasters and lessen mental stress and trauma impacts.

Government needs to place Community Resilience Officers in all council areas where significant natural disasters have occurred. We will have more natural disasters and unfortunately, they will probably get worse. While we are not in response or recovery mode then these officers can help communities become prepared, then during response and recovery phases, additional staff could be employed to support these officers. Community Resilience Officers have a lot of work to do, on the ground, following up behind the scenes as well as replying with answers to questions. In addition, our MidCoast LGA is a large LGA and would have benefitted from more than one Community Resilience Officer on the ground immediately after our disasters, instead of them appearing nine months later when they were contracted to do this work.

