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Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

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Submitted by: MidCoast Disaster Recovery Providers Group

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

As the MidCoast Disaster Recovery Providers Group we provide professional disaster recovery services to the MidCoast area of NSW. As a collective we have been functioning since the 2019/2020 Black summer bushfires and have since provided flood recovery support after the March 2021 floods (the equivalent of a 1% AEP event), and March and July 2022 flood events. We individually represent state and local government, not for profits and local community organisations. As professionals we have wide ranging experiences of how funding has supported recovery in disaster affected communities and what can pre-emptively be initiated to reduce disaster risk exposure.

- Previous disaster recovery activities in some instances been poorly coordinated by state government agencies as there has not been appropriate funding to develop effective plans, processes and checklists for disaster that are well known within individual organisations or the wider community. In some instances, it has been much easier and faster for local representatives to communicate the need for recovery services and staffing arrangements to their cross-agency counterpart as opposed to requests percolating through the official channels. In some cases, it can take over two weeks for staff to receive formal requests to land on the right desk in other government departments.
- Funding for dedicated mental health workers to provide free, easily accessible support post-disaster typically exists for two years after a significant disaster. The compounding effects of successive disasters and the non-linear recovery from disaster result in mental health issues arising well after this two-year time frame. We have witnessed community members who still have not rebuilt their mental resilience from the 2019 bushfires and are still so traumatised and reluctant to receive support that their ability to effectively prepare for, respond and recover from a future disaster situation is questionable.
- NSW Community Recovery Officers (CROs) on a two- or one-year contract have assisted many communities with resolving complex recovery issues. However, a one- or two-year contract is not long enough to address systemic recovery issues. This wait in community recovery creates a barrier as the community perceives that formal support was not there to assist community when it was needed immediately post-disaster.
- Ongoing collaboration between the different recovery services has been needed to ensure that people accessing support/assistance from one service are referred onto other appropriate services. The





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identification of the different recovery services and financial assistance is hard to keep updated and correct when services are not known and coordinated through known and respected organisations.

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

Funding is needed on an ongoing basis for:

- dedicated mental health workers on an ongoing basis to provide mental health support, and to skill up all people working professionally in emergency management and recovery with psychological first aid training.
- supporting communities to develop their own community preparedness and emergency planning. Communities in vulnerable areas like the MidCoast are very aware there may not be enough emergency service volunteers to assist when it is needed. Communities in the MidCoast are now looking to develop their own plans that can reduce the need for emergency services support, for example collating fodder drop need in communities that are frequently isolated in floods. Community Recovery Officers are well placed to assist with this planning.
- Community Resilience Networks set up by CROs are supported by an ongoing funded CRO position, allowing for seamless communication with LEMCs and EOCs when it is needed in. CROs can serve as community advocates in the emergency management sphere.
- CROs employed on an ongoing basis for both recovery and preparedness work in LGAs with a higher risk exposure. This position also needs to be implemented much earlier in recovery, as it ensures communities stay strong and supportive, and creates a soft entry point for disaster affected people to access mental health support that would attend these kinds of events CROs need to establish trust and credibility in the community, genuinely build community capacity and respond to evolving community disaster preparedness and recovery needs. People's commitment to recovery in their community is predicated by their understanding that if another disaster occurred, they won't be as significantly impacted again.
- Local government recovery coordination. In NSW Local Government are seen as the lynch pin in communities' disaster recovery, with the expectation that recovery support will happen at the most granular level. Local government is not funded or mandated to do this work.
- Funding in the initial stages of a disaster for personal financial counsellors to assist with accessing grants, banking help, and managing clients with immediate financial needs. This would reduce immediate worries about financial concerns and giving people a readily accessible pathway for further financial counselling as recovery progresses (or not). As recovery progresses financial counsellors can assist individuals with planning for future disasters, such as ensuring adequate insurance cover is purchased and people are educated about how they can plan for future disasters through researching mortgages and hardship clauses, etc.

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

In the last five years we have become a lot more aware of how Commonwealth funding arrangements are distributed. We have received funding from the Commonwealth through our different agencies and projects.





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Funding for Community Recovery Officers in newly affected disaster declared LGAs takes too long to be released. It took six months after the 2019 bushfires and 12 months after the 2021 floods to be offered to MidCoast Council. Funding needs to be released much more efficiently for new initiations of this role.

Funding for acute psychological and mental health support has taken a long time to be released via NSW Health and this has impacted on the recovery trajectory of our disaster affected individuals in our LGA.

Releasing funding for the development of disaster recovery plans and processes is appreciated by the recovery support workers deployed in active recovery roles.

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

Funding roles of Commonwealth, states and territories and local government are not clear. In some cases, we do not know who our counterparts are in the NSW Reconstruction Authority and what support we can access from them or NEMA.

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

The allocation of Rural Recovery Support workers in the Department of Regional NSW by LGA and doesn't account for the disparity of LGA sizes and the number of primary producers in each LGA, leading to unreasonably large caseloads in some areas.

Immediately post disaster more support is needed to ensure Recovery Centres and Recovery Assistance Points are promoted more thoroughly and with more explanation of what disaster funding assistance and support is available at them. Staff working in these centres are not adequately trained in trauma informed approaches and frequently people attending the centres are bombarded with too much information and are not able to make good decisions. In addition, our experience has been that Service NSW and Services Australia staff doing the initial triaging in person or through phone hotlines are not given enough training to distinguish enough on technical eligibility and there is inconsistency in how effectively people are quizzed on their eligibility. In some cases of NSW Disaster Welfare Recovery grant applications are rejected and people are not given an explanation why their grant application was rejected. To these recipients it feels like they are intentionally kept in the dark and there has been no effort made by people sitting in offices to understand how important these outcomes are to the people applying for the grant. Trauma informed training needs to be compulsory for anyone working in disaster recovery.

