



Australian Government

National Emergency
Management Agency

Submission to the Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding

Response ID: IRCDF_2130_2

Consent option: Publish with name

Submitted by: The Black Dog Institute

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

The Black Dog Institute has been providing mental health support for emergency workers affected by natural disasters since 2020.

Originally named the Bush Fire Support Service, it has been used by over 100,000 employed, volunteer or former first responders. The service has been highly effective in treating severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, with over 80% of people receiving PTSD treatment through the Bush Fire Support Service making a full and lasting recovery. In the midst of growing demand across all emergency service workers, regardless of the type of disaster they attend too, the service is now termed the National Emergency Worker Support Service, or NEWSS.

The service provides :

- A mental health self-assessment tool which allows emergency service workers and volunteers to undertake assessments for depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder.
- Evidence-based resources on managing mental health and stress.
- Self-directed digital mental health treatment programs.
- Access to up to 12 treatment sessions with mental health specialists via telehealth, including access to Australia's leading specialist traumatic stress clinic.
- The Build Back Better app, a prevention smartphone application developed in partnership with emergency service workers across Australia to help enhance the ongoing resilience of first responders.
- Training for local GPs to ensure they are able to identify emergency service workers and volunteers who may benefit from accessing treatment services.

All components of the service are available Australia-wide, at no cost to emergency service workers or volunteers. The combination of prevention, wellbeing and treatment services, and the close integration with both local GP services and the support services offered by first responder agencies has meant that the National Emergency Worker Support Service has rapidly become the key point of integration and expertise for this vital group of workers and volunteers (see Figure 1 below).





Australian Government

National Emergency
Management Agency

Feedback from agency stakeholders has highlighted how much they value a single, independent, and confidential source of information, support, and treatment for the mental health concerns of emergency service workers. Stakeholder consultation revealed that agencies believed that the diagnostic assessment tool has filled a critical gap and contributed to the continuum of mental health support available for both prevention and treatment. Stakeholders saw the service as particularly useful for improving access to support in rural and remote communities.

Further details of the 20,608 emergency service workers and volunteers who undertook a mental health assessment with NEWSS are shown below (see Figure 2 below). Around 40% of the first responders using the service had evidence of likely PTSD. During the flood crisis in NSW and Queensland in March 2022, the number of unique visitors to the NEWSS service increased six-fold.

A detailed evaluation of NEWSS was submitted to the NEMA in September 2022. This showed the service was heavily utilised and very popular with first responders across Australia; it provided a rapid response during the 2022 flood crisis, achieved excellent outcomes and value for money and provided very effective treatment for PTSD (see Figure 3 below).

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

A healthy emergency service workforce is critical to effective disaster risk reduction, preparedness, response and recovery. Emergency service workers are routinely exposed to high-risk events, vicarious trauma, and life-threatening situations as they respond to bush fires, floods and other natural disasters. Both emergency service workers and volunteers are at elevated risk of developing mental illness symptoms and PTSD due to the nature of their work. Although prevalence estimates for post traumatic stress vary widely, Australian data suggest the prevalence of PTSD in emergency service workers is at least two times higher than the general population, with around one in ten currently working first responders estimated to have PTSD. Aside from the personal distress and dysfunction this creates for the individual worker or volunteer, this level of mental ill health also has a dramatic impact on Australia's ability to respond to future disasters because the disaster response team is reduced.

With natural disasters an ongoing threat, now is a crucial time to ensure that there is a permanent, evidence-based, and holistic support service for this priority population. Although short term and reactive 'pop-up' mental health services are useful in response to disasters, these services are not sufficient to meet the needs of emergency service workers and volunteers, who are most likely to experience symptoms of PTSD in 1-2 years following a traumatic exposure. A permanent, centralised service is essential to ensure that the emergency service workers and volunteers who step forward during disasters and not left to endure the long term mental health consequences.

The National Emergency Worker Service Support Service (NEWSS) aligns well with the newly formed National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA). As noted above, during the first two years of operation, NEWSS worked closely with the National Recovery and Resilience Agency. NEWSS is a perfect example of the combination of national leadership connected to and working collaboratively with local communities that NEMA was established to provide. The National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework, which guides NEMA's work, specifically calls out the mental health and wellbeing impacts of those who support response and recovery work during and following a disaster. NEWSS provides a ready-made solution to this major issue.





Australian Government

National Emergency
Management Agency

Mental health will remain critical to the ongoing disaster resilience strategy across Australia. Recommendation 15.84 of the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements also highlights that effective integration of mental health responses is an essential part of disaster planning. Ensuring the already established NEWSS program can continue to respond to all disasters is also cost effective, because it capitalises on the existing infrastructure and relationships garnered through the implementation process. A single centralised service will reduce the need for future expensive investments to rapidly design, develop, and establish future supports services in response to each new disaster. Continuing and expanding this effective service as permanent support for all Australian emergency service workers and volunteers is critical to safeguard the wellbeing of this priority population.

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

Our understanding is that current Commonwealth disaster funding is mostly 'reactive' i.e., the scale and impact of the disaster determines the funding made available at the time. Reactivity is an unavoidable part of managing the short-term impact of disasters; however, long-term impacts of disasters - such as the impact of disasters on mental health - require a more forward-looking approach to be effectively managed.

The mental health impacts of a natural disaster are wide reaching and long lasting, and therefore not well served by a purely reactive funding process. Mental ill health impacts entire communities; from the person experiencing a mental health condition, to their care givers and family members, to colleagues and employers. To mitigate these social and economic risks, disaster funding must proactively fund disaster 'recovery and resilience', in addition to funding disaster 'response'. Disaster recovery and resilience are directly linked to improved health and economic outcomes. Fortunately, there is scope for the Government to update its funding approach to support current services that foster both recovery and resilience while avoiding duplication of funds.

Specifically, the Commonwealth should proactively invest in long-term, effective, and evidence-based mental health programs such as NEWSS. The NEWSS program uses the latest evidence and consumer-centric design, streamlining a stepped care approach and meeting the privacy and quality needs of first responders who are notoriously sceptical of mental health services and can be hard to engage. By combining expert mental health treatments with digital resilience programs, initiatives like NEWSS can deliver disaster risk reduction while also constraining the substantial recovery costs associated with mental illnesses, such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). NEWSS is currently only funded until 2024 with a proposed extension to 30 June 2025, creating uncertainty for both those who use the service now and those who will do so into the future. Longer-term funding, including funding for research on the impacts of natural disasters on mental health, is required so that programs like NEWSS can provide leading, evidence-based support for emergency service workers in the long term.

To achieve this, Commonwealth funding programs must (a) make funding available for recovery and resilience; and (b) clearly delineate which department or level of government has direct jurisdiction over funding and streamline processes to prevent confusion and delay. Whilst it is our understanding that most of the disaster funding will come through NEMA as the agency responsible for emergency management, confusion and delay can occur when programs like NEWSS straddle different departments and levels of government. In our experience with the funding process for NEWSS, there was some





Australian Government

National Emergency
Management Agency

confusion as to who had direct jurisdiction over the program and which department would fund it, with the program eventually sitting with the Department of Health and Aged Care. This led to a delay in the rollout of the program. To avoid delays in delivery, all Commonwealth funding arrangements for disaster related initiatives should be streamlined through a singular agency.

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

The funding roles of different levels of government are clear, but the visibility of available funds and programs is often poor. This can create confusion amongst stakeholders and lead to missed opportunities for collaboration for both the government and potential partners.

What is clear is that Commonwealth provides funds to the States and Territories that are affected by the natural disaster and their emergency agencies to aid with recovery - this is the practical emergency help given by agencies like the SES and the other recovery agencies that are administered by the States. The Commonwealth also provides direct funding for programs like NEWSS that have a national scope, as disasters often span across multiple jurisdictions and have impacts far wider than the immediate vicinity.

Where the Commonwealth could be clearer in the available funding avenues and aligning priorities for resilience and pre disaster efforts. Taking NEWSS as an example, this was a contract partnership original signed due to the ongoing events of the Black Summer bushfires of 2019. We welcomed the funding made available for NEWSS and the success of the program is detailed above, however, with the continued understanding of the importance of mental health protection during natural disasters, centralised grant funding for long term, preventative programs such as NEWSS would be useful. The Commonwealth should also provide continuity in funding priorities. Aligning all future funding priorities with the National Disaster Reduction Framework or another centralised document will streamline the process for stakeholders and make it more efficient to provide required applications.

There should also be a centralised location for funding programs at a State/Territory or Local Government level. The lack of visibility at a stakeholder level can really impede the chance for partnership with the government at all levels and can lead to a missed opportunity for both parties.

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

No response provided.

