



# COMMUNITY RECOVERY FOLLOWING THE ASH WEDNESDAY BUSHFIRES

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## About the Authors:

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The fires of Ash Wednesday, 1983 have been a significant turning-point in the history of disaster management concepts and practices in Australia. Disaster recovery management has been identified as an important area of management in its own right, containing complex and prolonged programs and activities and requiring the participation of the affected community and involvement from the wide community.

Recovery from disaster is no longer seen merely in terms of response and relief activities, or as a physical process of reconstruction. It is an enabling and supportive process, which allows individuals, families and communities to attain a proper level of functioning through the provision of information, resources and specialist services.

This complex and dynamic process of change takes account of:

- (a) changing community needs;
- (b) a diversity of services and agencies;
- (c) the integration of psycho-social and physical support structures;
- (d) unpredictable demands arising from the specific disaster setting.

Communities and people generally cope well with disasters or emergencies, but will need support at times. Specialist services should be integrated into pre-existing locally-based networks and structures, both professional and voluntary, to ensure continuity and effectiveness. Community involvement in service provision and decision-making processes is an important step towards healthy functioning, as is the recognition of spontaneously-formed specific issue

groups. These emergent groups often embody the tensions, conflicts, strengths and idiosyncracies of the community, and need to be integrated into recovery structures.

To successfully respond to changing demands, disaster recovery management must have:

- (a) a sound conceptual base which identifies and integrates those principles and values relevant to effective planning and management
  - (i) that communities recover best when they manage their own recovery;
  - (ii) that disaster-affected people will make well-informed organisational and personal recovery decisions, given the appropriate information, resources and support.
- (b) co-ordinate structures which are practice-based and sensitive to community needs and the political environment.

\* This is a summary of a paper presented jointly by the authors to a workshop entitled "Creative Approaches to Hazard Mitigation and Disaster Recovery", in Boulder, Colorado, U.S.A., in July 1987.

Recovery management planning and processes should:

1. encourage communities to be involved in the preparation and maintenance of local welfare plans enabling maximum use of local resources, groups and individuals,
2. promote community awareness and education to minimise risk and increase preparedness,
3. make provisions for programs that enable those affected by disaster to actively participate in their own and their community's recovery,
4. ensure liaison between disaster teams and existing community organisations,
5. ensure that opportunities are provided for people to participate in decisions and processes which affect their community,
6. ensure policies and practices that allow for self-determination and maximum community involvement in planning for physical restoration,
7. provide for public accountability in assessing and reporting the activity of all involved organisations,
8. promote positive working relationships and co-operative mechanisms between the professional and volunteer members of the community.
9. make use of existing structures and resources, and local formal and informal networks of care wherever possible,
10. make use of the community's material and physical resources, local supplies should be used wherever possible,
11. actively provide community groups and volunteers with appropriate resources which will enable them to mobilize, empower and support the affected community.

Following the Ash Wednesday bushfires, the most effective bodies in implementing these processes were

- (a) the Area Co-ordinating Committees, representative of Government agencies, Local Government, community groups and members of the community
- (b) Local Government
- (c) Community Development Officers.

Each group had a commitment to community involvement in decision-making processes, were prepared to act as advocates, were accessible to community members and utilized existing locally-based networks.

#### Information and Communication

The provision of accurate and up-to-date information is critical to successful recovery. Disaster-affected people have a

right to know what services and resources are being provided, so that appropriate decisions can be made for themselves and the community.

Information is needed on –

- (a) the current state and extent of the disaster
- (b) the actual or proposed official response
- (c) desired responses from the community e.g. volunteers, donations
- (d) criteria and guidelines for financial assistance and grants
- (e) practical services provided e.g. legal and insurance advice.

Effective communication is the key to community involvement and can be achieved through the use of the mass-media, community newsletters, notice boards, open public-meetings, street meetings, use of the "bush telegraph".

Information must be accessible to all community members and particularly to those who may be housebound, socially-isolated, or have special needs.

Positive relationships need to be established with the media to ensure accurate and sensitive reporting, and regular and comprehensive briefings should be provided.

#### Personal Services

Those affected by the disaster need information on personal support services e.g. counselling, support groups, information on the effects of disaster on people. These services should be presented in a way which does not stigmatise those seeking assistance, and should be available for an extended period of time. Individual trauma and anxiety is not necessarily in direct proportion to physical losses.

#### Advocacy

Following Ash Wednesday, the Area Co-ordinating Committees worked to ensure that community needs and demands were reflected in the decisions made at State Government level. They would prepare submissions, and lobby senior Government Officials and politicians with the support of the Community Development Officers, who had a sound understanding of community processes.

At the individual and family level, people used the assistance of the Community Development Officer to unravel the complexities of insurance claims and gain access to financial lending institutions and entitlements.

#### Assistance/Dependence

Assistance was directed within an affected community towards the maintenance of family and social cohesion, not to create or perpetuate dependence. Initially, basic requirements for food, shelter, clothing, health and

safety were satisfied, plus emergency financial assistance. Services should be offered sensitivity, with a minimum of disruption, in a way which preserves the independence and integrity of the recipient.

The demand for particular types of assistance will vary over time and it is important that locally-based support structures are resourced and strengthened as the external service providers withdraw.

**Recovery Management** following disaster aims to put structures and processes in place which support individuals, families and communities.

Effective recovery is achieved through the provision of assistance, both physical and psycho-social, through access to information, and by promoting an awareness of recovery as a process and the effects of that process on family life. Without appropriate resources and support, existing social problems may be exacerbated, and groups already vulnerable e.g. the aged, poor, ill, pensioners, single parents and young children, may be more severely disadvantaged.

Recovery can also be a time for creative community development which will enrich the social infrastructure. Support programmes, such as community centres, family aid services and community care groups, are of long-lasting benefit to the total community.

#### Conclusion:

Following the Ash Wednesday experience, five central points have emerged which are crucial to the effectiveness of recovery management.

1. Communities recover best when they manage their own recovery.
2. Individuals and communities will make sound decisions given appropriate support and resources.
3. Information is a key factor in effective recovery.
4. Communication networks are crucial in gaining access to services.
5. Creative and innovative growth can occur during recovery which will enrich the community infrastructure.

To enable creative renewal in the life of the community and its members is the ultimate objective of Disaster Recovery.