Having a seat at the table: disability and disasters

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People with disability are at increased risk during fire and other emergencies. Knowledge is critical at these times and people who do not understand fire safety and prevention can be hampered in their ability to plan for or react to emergencies. Drawing on the lived experiences of people with disability in such circumstances can change how emergency service organisations prepare and respond.

Background

People with disabilities are over-represented in fire statistics [1, 2, 3, 4, 5] and have accounted for 47% of fire fatalities in Australia between 2003 and 2017.[6] This study also highlighted a significant representation of fire fatalities with no clear declining trend in regional and remote areas. These were in locations where there are imbalances with factors involving income, ability, gender, cultural diversity and age.[7] These fire fatalities have significant social, economic and emotional effects on people, communities, firefighters and other emergency responders involved.

Problem

People with disability face heightened risks, not because of their disability but due to the lack of accessible information, support and services. A key aspect to prevention is effective communication to identify audiences and this is particularly important for people with disability as they can have very different needs for assistance. Disaster-related information can be one-way, passive distribution, frequent and changing and may be inaccessible for some people.[7] People with disability have different needs, expectations and access to information.[8] In the absence of fire messages tailored to different groups with access needs and practices, people with disability frequently rely on their support networks (family members, friends, carers, support workers and neighbours) to assist them with hearing, reading, understanding, believing, personalising, deciding and responding.[8]

In Australia, the traditional emergency management approach to planning and communication has been historically top-down and exclusionary. As such, people with disability have had decisions made for them and not by them. This results in people with disability being unseen, unheard and unaccounted for during planning.

The lack of proper mechanisms for inclusion of people with disability in emergency management planning as well as the lack of training for emergency responders on how to approach and assist people has resulted in a disconnection and mismatch of knowledge and understanding from both sides.[9] Australia has endorsed the *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030* and Preamble 7 (p.10)[10] calls for a people-centred prevention approach to disaster risk. This requires stronger engagement with stakeholders, including people with disability. Meeting the varied needs of people with disability has prompted fire services organisations to reflect on whether their delivery of fire safety and prevention activities is inclusive, accessible and understood.

Solution

To redress this, Fire and Rescue NSW (FRNSW) acknowledged the challenges in meeting the needs of people with disability in emergencies and committed to meeting the Sendai Framework, Section V. Role of stakeholders. This highlights the shared responsibility between governments and stakeholders through working with communities and organisations to co-design participation in emergency and disaster management (p.23).[10] As a first step, FRNSW worked with the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations to develop and fund a staff Disability Awareness training

pilot. This formed part of the FRNSW Station Leadership and Development Program for Captains, Deputy Captains and future Captains throughout New South Wales in 2022. This initiative was led for and by people with disability as the experts with lived experiences. The Disability Awareness training challenged the biases that people may have about people with disability. It also included situations where firefighters need to assist a person with disability and how they might approach them, what appropriate language to use and how to treat them. This training gave insight into what people with disability need emergency services personnel to know about them and, in an emergency context, that they are not vulnerable because of the disability but because of the environmental and structural barriers that increase their exposure to risks. This includes the lack of accessible emergency and fire safety information.

Topics in the training include people with disability sharing their experiences about misconceptions faced, perceptions of firefighters and how they would like to be supported in emergencies. The training teaches leaders, future station leaders and their teams to understand disability through the social and human rights model instead of the medical or charity model.

Future

This collaboration has expanded and strengthened high-level relationships with peak organisations to address the knowledge gaps and identify better practices for working with people with disability and their needs. Lessons from this pilot are being applied to a larger, statewide project initiative: Fire Proofing Vulnerable Communities[11], led by the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations and funded under the Disaster Risk Reduction Fund, which is jointly funded by the Australian and New South Wales governments. This is a partnership project involving FRNSW, NSW Rural Fire Service and The University of Sydney, with the objective of co-developing resources co-designed by people with disability. The aim is to increase the capabilities of firefighters to interact and provide tailored fire safety information and messages suitable for disability groups and their access needs and practices in 14 metropolitan and regional areas across New South Wales. This will help people with disability be better represented in prevention and preparedness for bushfires and structure fires as well as reduce their risks of fire injuries and fatalities.

This project runs until June 2024 with an expected outcome that people with lived experiences of disability will lead, voice and participate in fire safety considerations that will increase their safety. Fire service organisations also benefit by being inclusionary as their planning and response will meet the safety needs of their communities.

A video of the pilot training is at www.vimeo.com/837434933/a2f98e028a.

Endnotes

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