

Bushfire support services and the need for evaluation: the 2013 Blue Mountains experience

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ABSTRACT

In 2013, the Blue Mountains region of NSW experienced devastating bushfires. In response, the Step By Step Blue Mountains Bushfire Support Service was established by the Ministry of Police and Emergency Services and a local Blue Mountains service, Gateway Family Support. The service was to support bushfire-affected community members through a strengths-based and solution-focused approach. This approach has been used in other support services but limited evidence exists on the effectiveness of its use in disaster recovery. The integration of research in the early stages of disaster recovery service design may prove a valuable way to support the work of governments and service delivery organisations and is an important aspect of disaster preparedness and community wellbeing.

This paper highlights the vulnerability of the Blue Mountains region to bushfire and examines the 2013 response by the Ministry for Police and Emergency Services Disaster Welfare Service (DWS) in association with Gateway Family Services. The DWS and Gateway Family Services collaborated to implement the service. This paper concludes that support services should be flexible in their response to dealing with those recovering from traumatic experiences such as bushfires. It demonstrates that evaluation of existing disaster support programs could better inform future disaster responses and services to assist communities to better cope and rebuild their lives.

Introduction

More than 97 per cent of Australia experienced above average temperatures between the months of September 2012 and June 2013 (Jones *et al.* 2013) and in 2013 Australia experienced its hottest summer on record (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2014). It is predicted that Australian temperatures will increase and Australia will have more hot days and fewer cold days (Australian Government Bureau of Meteorology & CSIRO 2014). An increase in the number of extreme fire-weather days is expected in some parts of Australia, including longer fire seasons and a decrease in rainfall in some areas that may cause an increase in drought frequency and severity. Alexander and colleagues (2006) report that the shift towards drier summers is wide spread. It is forecast that climate change may have dramatic and devastating impacts on the environment and on human health (Capon & Hanna 2009, Haines 2008, Kiem & Austin 2012, Kjellstrom & Weaver 2009, McMichael, Woodruff & Hales 2006, Patz *et al.* 2008, Wiseman & Edwards 2009).

With this recent history and future predictions it is important that governments and communities are prepared for this change in conditions. Effective emergency response plans and the preparedness of local health services and community welfare programs are essential for responding to these adverse events and are vital for increasing resilience of communities. The projections of climate change for Australia includes extended droughts, hotter summers and increased bushfires (Clarke, Smith & Pitman 2011, McMichael, Woodruff & Hales 2006) placing preparedness and support as key components to community resilience.

While Australian regional communities are generally aware of the increased risk to the destructive effects of bushfires, the Spring of 2013 saw bushfires in the Blue Mountains region destroy the homes of over 200 families (Donegan 2014).

Environmental disasters can result in loss of lives and substantial economic, health and social hardship (Clemens *et al.* 2013, Webber & Jones 2013) The need for communities to be prepared at a local level is pertinent in reducing the cost, time to recover and the effect of disaster on communities.

The Blue Mountains as a risk area

The Blue Mountains local government area is 55–95 kilometres west of Sydney. In 2000, the Blue Mountains was added to the World Heritage list and in 2007 it was included on the National Heritage list.

The Blue Mountains covers over one million hectares of a mostly forested landscape that includes 100 species of eucalypt and more than 400 species of animals (Department Of The Environment 2014).

The typical climate in the Blue Mountains is warm with an average summer-autumn rainfall peak in November to June and a drier early Spring. The bushfire season generally runs from September to February and prevailing weather conditions associated with the bushfire season in the Blue Mountains normally westerly or north westerly winds, which, if associated with drought, can lead to severe weather and fire behaviour (Blue Mountains Bush Fire Management Committee 2010).

The urban, industrial and agricultural development within and surrounding the Blue Mountains, highlights the tension between development and conservation imperatives. Like many protected areas, the Blue Mountains faces threats to its immediate and long-term integrity. These include climate change, urban development, human disturbance (including tourism) and pest species (plant and animal) (Blue Mountains World Heritage Institute 2015).

The Blue Mountains City Council services 26 townships spanning 143 000 hectares with the population in 2012 at 78 414 (Blue Mountains City Council 2014).

tourist activity usually concentrated in the upper Blue Mountains. Peak season is in June-July, October, and January-February (Blue Mountains City Council 2014).

Chen (2005) identified that proximity of dwellings to bushland can predict bushfire risk level. The report showed that the Blue Mountains area is in the highest risk of bushfire in New South Wales and shows that 73 per cent of all addresses in the Blue Mountains are categorised as high bushfire risk. Given the population demographics and number of transient groups, the area is at an increased risk of exposure to bushfire.

Models and theories for disaster recovery

A range of theories, models and approaches have been used in disaster recovery responses. Commonly, case management, psycho-social, community capacity building and community-development models are used (Cronstedt 2002). A shift from treatment-type approaches to community-based and strength-based approaches is increasing. Evidence shows that in the early phase following a disaster, safety, support, information and resources are the most crucial requirement and that flexible, well organised and supportive assistance allows for the natural recovery process to occur (Slawinski 2006).

The Step Blue Mountains Bushfire Support Service adopted a strengths-based and solution-focused approach. This approach is used by its parent organisation, Gateway Family Support, in all aspects of its service delivery. The strengths-based and solution-focused approach views individuals, families and communities as capable participants in their recovery and focuses on the client’s strengths, capabilities, visions, and hopes. This approach allows the recovery process and timeframes to be in the control of the client while the role of the professional is to facilitate and help clients tap into their own strengths to move ahead and seek solutions (Ligon 2002).

This strengths-focused approach uses a different language. Word such as ‘empowerment’, ‘resilience’ and ‘membership’ are key concepts. This way of thinking does not place the person as the victim in their situation but does not ignore the trauma that has occurred. It simply places the control back in with the client and allows them control over their individual recovery.

The solution-focused and strengths-based approach is well-established in social work and case management and are being used with different client groups (Saleebey 1996, Cox, Bachkirova & Clutterbuck 2010). This approach has only been used twice in Australia through Step By Step and the Warrumbungle Bushfire Support Coordination Service in 2013 (Coombe *et al.* 2015). The results from the Warrumbungle Bushfire Support Coordination evaluation demonstrated that former service users and stakeholders regarded this approach as useful and an effective model for assisting people through a disaster event. This evaluation

Table 1: Age distribution in the Blue Mountains (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2014)

Age in Years	Population %
0–14	19.0
15–24	11.9
25–34	9.5
35–44	13.5
45–54	14.9
55–64	14.9
65–74	9.6
75–84	4.6
85+	2.1

Table 1 illustrates the population age ranges and shows that those between 35 and 64 years are a large proportion of the population. A significantly higher number of people reside in the lower Blue Mountains, which mainly consists of young families. The upper Blue Mountains has a higher proportion of older residents as well as tourist accommodation. The Blue Mountains is a major tourist attraction with



Image: Dr Allison Rowlands

The Blue Mountains of NSW experienced its worst bushfires in over 30 years in October 2013. Over 118 000 hectares were burnt with the loss of two lives and 248 homes.

suggested that timely and rigorous evaluation of such services be conducted to inform future implementations (Coombe *et al.* 2015).

Step By Step intervention

Many people affected by the October 2013 Blue Mountains bushfire were severely affected, which took communities by surprise. The three fires started in Lithgow, Springwood and Mount Victoria and burned in the region for several days before their severity was realised. By 25 October the fires had burned over 65 000 hectares (NSW Rural Fire Service 2013).

The fires were fought by local fire services and communities for 10 days. Many people evacuated and experienced isolation, separation from people they love, fear and trauma, and dislocation from their communities and services (Curran 2013).

The Disaster Recovery Centre was opened at the Springwood Presbyterian Church and Gateway Family Services was contracted by DWS to establish and manage a personalised bushfire recovery support service for bushfire-affected households in the Blue Mountains for a specific timeframe. The recovery service was jointly funded by the NSW and Commonwealth governments under the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements. The Step By Step service was designed to assist affected individuals, families and the community by providing an outreach service that offered users a single point of contact to help them navigate and access the range of services they may require.

The Step by Step Blue Mountains Bushfire Support Service commenced operating from the Springwood Disaster Recovery Centre on 7 November 2013.

The recruitment process for the Step By Step team commenced in the second week in November. The team was initially based at the Disaster Recovery Centre with a mobile outreach service. Communication and referral services were established with other providers and a psycho-social recovery model was integrated into a *Bushfire Support Services Manual*, produced earlier by the DWS. The team consisted of workers from Gateway Family Services and a seconded worker from a local youth centre (Crestani 2014).

Using a strengths-based and solution-focused approach the Step By Step support workers assisted householders in their bushfire recovery. This included supporting people in making decisions regarding housing, livelihoods, relationships and day-to-day living. Rather than imposing solutions on individuals and families, the workers facilitated an informed, supported decision-making process. There were no other comparable services in the area and the Step By Step service filled a gap during the recovery phase of the fires.

The Step by Step Blue Mountains Bushfire Support Service was operational from November 2013 to August 2014 and while the DWS administered the joint Commonwealth/NSW Government funding for the majority of the service during its time, the last three months of operation were funded by the Uniting Church to extend the service delivery.

The need for evaluation

Disasters can have long-lasting effects on individuals and communities. The ability to recover depends on support from a range of services and can take many years. Emergency response plans and programs are designed to support individuals and communities through this recovery, however limited evidence exists as to how such service or programs help or hinder the recovery process (Dufty 2013). Although past evaluations have indicated that successful interventions employ social connectedness and community development, there is no consensus over which interventions result in positive outcomes (Grealey *et al.* 2010). Further, the role of government assistance in post-disaster intervention is not well understood, which indicates the necessity of governments to be 'evidence-informed' in implementing post-disaster community services (Grealey *et al.* 2010).

There has been a gradual shift from services using treatment-based approaches to respond to a disaster to an increase in community development and capacity-building approaches (Slawinski 2006). Many services adopt the solution-focused approach even though there is limited evidence on its effectiveness in disaster recovery and, generally, reports that have been created are descriptive or kept in-house. In Australia, there have been few evaluations of government-initiated interventions following a natural disaster made publicly available. One Australian post-natural disaster service evaluation was conducted in relation to the Victorian Bushfires Case Management Service (VBCMS) following the 2009 Victorian bushfires. Although the evaluation identified an overwhelmingly positive community response to the VBCMS, it also noted that 'the quality of the evidence available to guide governments and policy makers in responding to disasters is limited' (Grealey *et al.* 2009).

Given the potentially devastating impacts of disasters and the likelihood of future disasters, there is a need to evaluate and increase the evidence for the different models being used in order to improve government services that are implemented following a disaster. Dufty (2013) highlights the inconsistencies in current disaster program evaluation and recommends that a consistent, comprehensive, and timely approach to Australian post-event emergency management will improve learnings for future events and overall disaster resilience. Additionally having research integrated into disaster phases proves useful in collecting data and information on support services from establishment through to closure, thus capturing more complete data about the service and allowing for in-depth evaluation.

Conclusion

The Step By Step Blue Mountains Bushfire Support Service was a collaborative intervention effort between DWS and Gateway Family Services. This collaboration highlights the importance of joint efforts and that when government works with service delivery agencies, they can roll out effective support services for communities.

The next stage in this collaboration is to involve research into the process to evaluate the services, seeking feedback from those who used the service so that future programs will meet the expected needs. The DWS is leading the way in terms of incorporating research into disaster service evaluation, initially with the Warrumbungle Bushfire Support Coordination Service in 2013 (Coombe *et al.* 2015) and with an evaluation of Step by Step Blue Mountains Bushfire Support Service with the University of Newcastle Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health. This integration of research supports the development of appropriate policies guiding the work of governments and service delivery organisations. Research and evaluation are essential to understanding bushfire preparedness and community wellbeing.

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