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## Your details

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## Submission details

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**I am making this submission as**

A member of the general public

**Submission type**

I am making a personal submission

**Consent to make submission public**

I would like this submission to remain anonymous

## Share your experience or tell your story

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**Your story**

I am a volunteer with a community group which provides peer support to women and families who are pregnant, have infants and young children. I am the volunteer co-ordinator for the region which includes the Eurobodalla, Bega Valley, Snowy Monaro and Riverina. We have a small team of volunteers who provide telephone, online and face to face support to their local community.

During the fire emergency, our volunteers were unable to provide their normal support services as they were dealing with the impact of the fire emergency to their own families. Many of them also work in the health service, so their workload also increased with the fire emergency going on. Fortunately none of our volunteers suffered property loss, however some have had income loss as a result of the fires.

Some of our volunteers attended evacuation centres - either as

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evacuees themselves, as a requirement of their employment or simply to offer support. They found that the centres were doing the best they could, however the support for women with infants and young children was poorly managed. Access to a safe, clean space to care for their child was limited. And for women with infants, support for feeding their child (which is our organisation's area of expertise) in this emergency situation was non-existent.

The fires have had an impact on our volunteers' mental health and as a result, they feel that their capacity to provide support and counselling to others is not possible. One of our local leaders said to me "I have no headspace for others, I can barely cope with the needs of my family and work". Our volunteers in Eurobodalla and Bega Valley have been unable to provide any services to their community since the fires and are unsure if or when they may be able to resume their volunteer roles. This obviously has had a short term impact to the local community - fortunately our organisation does provide telephone services nationally, so support is still available. However, in the peak of the emergency telecommunications were unavailable, in some cases for days on end, which left families vulnerable and unable to access support. My main concern is for the longer term as the majority of our volunteer workforce is sourced from families that have been supported by their local volunteers and have engaged with our organisation regularly face to face.

When I speak to our volunteers, they express feelings of guilt and disappointment as they feel that they are letting their community down as they aren't able to commit to delivering our normal services.

I know that our organisation is not alone with these concerns. Our communities will be poorer places if we lose the many volunteer organisations that help fill the gaps between government and private services. Our organisation relies on local engagement and I fear that our services, which are valued by the families we support, will be a casualty of the fires for many years to come.

## Terms of Reference (optional)

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The Inquiry welcomes submissions that address the particular matters identified in its [Terms of Reference](#).

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### 1.2 Preparation and planning

Consideration of the needs of women with infants and young children in emergency situations is necessary. Current planning for infant feeding in emergencies seems to assume access to telecommunications, potable water and electricity however the situation during the summer bush fires put many infants at risk.

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### 1.3 Response to bushfires

Support for local volunteer led community groups whose services have been impacted by the fires has been inconsistent. Many nationally co-ordinated organisations have been funded to come into the affected regions to provide temporary support, however they leave when their allocated tasks or money runs out. Ongoing funding to sustain local volunteer groups and support from local government in promoting the work of volunteer organisations may assist these groups to re-establish local services sooner.

## Supporting documents or images

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