

20 April 2020

NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry  
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Carers NSW welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission in response to the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry – Terms of Reference. This brief submission will focus on the experiences of family and friend carers throughout the 2019-20 NSW bushfires and the significant implications for caring relationships as well as carer and care recipient health and safety.

Carers NSW is the peak non-government organisation for carers in New South Wales (NSW). A carer is any individual who provides care and support to a family member or friend who has a disability, mental illness, drug and/or alcohol dependency, chronic condition, terminal illness or who is frail. Our vision is an Australia that values and supports all carers, and our goals are to:

- Be a leading carer organisation in which carers have confidence
- Actively promote carer recognition and support
- Actively support carers to navigate a changing service landscape that will be characterised by ongoing policy reform
- Promote connected community experiences and opportunities for carers that are inclusive of diverse carer groups
- Lead and advocate for carer-specific and carer-inclusive policy making, research and service delivery
- Continue to be a quality-driven, responsive and carer-focused organisation

Thank you for accepting our submission. For further information, please contact [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely,

[REDACTED]  
Elena Katrakis  
CEO  
Carers NSW

## Introduction

Carers NSW thanks the NSW Government for the opportunity to make a submission in response to the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry. This submission will focus on the increasing frequency with which severe bushfires are occurring and the implications for carers and those they care for. As the peak non-government organisation for carers in NSW, this submission will focus on aspects of the Terms of Reference which have the most relevance to carers, as well as the importance of preparation and planning for future bushfire threats and public communication and advice systems and strategies.

## Preparation and planning

Bushfires pose a significant threat to all members of a community, however it is important to recognise that some people are more vulnerable to being adversely impacted by bushfires because they are less equipped to prepare and respond.<sup>1</sup> For people living with disability or chronic health conditions, or for those who are ageing or frail, significant barriers exist that can inhibit their ability to appropriately prepare for and respond to bushfires. Many people in these groups also rely on regular support from family members and friends whose support would be crucial in preparing and responding adequately to a natural disaster.<sup>2</sup> In many, though not all, cases, the carer takes primary responsibility for coordinating and implementing these plans to ensure the safety of their family member or friend, and prevent loss of life, health or property. This responsibility can also place carers at additional risk during natural disasters.

The 2019-20 NSW bushfires highlighted the inadequate level of preparedness the broader community had in supporting people with disability or chronic health conditions, older people and their families and carers to prepare for and respond to natural disasters. Throughout the bushfire period, Carers NSW heard from many carers who reported they had limited supports available to them to meet their needs and the needs of the person they care for. Appropriate accommodation, access to assistive technology or life-saving equipment, as well as access to essential food or medication were identified by carers as being difficult to obtain, creating significant distress for carers and their care recipient.

In addition, carers who had planned and prepared for bushfire hazards were in some cases disadvantaged by community spaces and practices that did not accommodate the needs of the person they care for. Physically inaccessible venues and facilities and inclusive and flexible evacuation plans were identified as a particular issue. It is also noted that change to routine and unfamiliar or unstructured environments can cause significant distress to some people living with dementia, intellectual disability or mental illness. Carers NSW heard from one carer who had to evacuate their family member who exhibited behaviours of concern that meant it was not feasible for them to stay at their community evacuation centre. Both the safety of the care recipient and the carer were jeopardised as the result of having limited accommodation and support options.

While resources and training exist to assist people with disability and older people to prepare for and respond to natural disasters, these often neglect the critical role of family and friend carers in emergency situations, and rarely address the needs of these supporters themselves. Carers are statistically likely to have disabilities and health conditions themselves, and often incur significant financial and emotional costs in assisting their loved ones in an emergency situation. Carers need support and advice on how to look after themselves during a crisis and how to recover physically, financially and emotionally in the aftermath.

Recommendations from the Final Report of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission indicated that the State should establish mechanisms for helping municipal councils to undertake local planning

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<sup>1</sup> Country Fire Authority (CVA) Victoria, Fire Ready Carers Kit

<sup>2</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2019) Survey of Ageing, Disability and Carers 2018, TableBuilder Dataset. Australian Government, Canberra. Available online at: [www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au)

that tailors bushfire safety options to the needs of individual communities.<sup>3</sup> In particular, councils were advised to develop bushfire plans that contain contingency options such as evacuation and shelter for communities at risk of bushfires, including people with disability and older people.<sup>4</sup> Recommendations also suggested that local council compile and maintain a list of residents are considered to be at risk or with additional needs and who need tailored advice of a recommendation to evacuate and provide this list to local police and anyone else with pre-arranged responsibility for helping vulnerable residents evacuate.

Given their disability inclusion planning requirements in NSW, local councils have a valuable opportunity to consult and plan for the needs of residents with disability and their families in crisis situations as well as in day to day circumstances. Locally relevant, co-designed emergency plans involving people with disability, older people and carers would enable local councils to build on the learnings from the 2019-20 bushfire season and ensure more inclusive and effective emergency responses in future crises. Planning should be broad enough to cover the full range of possible natural disasters, drawing on evidence-based and cohort-specific resources such as the University of Sydney's Person-Centred Emergency Planning tool and the SES' Home Emergency Plan.

Carers NSW urges the NSW Government to consider expanding the inclusive planning requirements of local councils to emergency planning for people with disability as well as older people, people with chronic conditions and family and friend carers.

### **Public communication and advice systems and strategies**

Throughout the 2019-20 NSW bushfires, considerable information was made available through a number of platforms and news stations, allowing members of bushfire affected communities to make informed decisions about how they responded. While there remained some confusion and inconsistency, NSW residents were better equipped than ever before to respond in a timely way to risks in their area. In future crises, there is opportunity and need to further streamline this information and ensure it is both inclusive of, and accessible to, people with disability, older people and their carers.

Carers have reported that there was limited guidance or support that was centred on their needs or the needs of their care recipient. While large agencies and service providers like the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) provided intensive support to participants and their families and carers, including in-depth information regarding their plans and funding, many public communication announcements did not adequately include or address carers and the people they care for. NSW Government information provided access to a range of useful resources for members of the community, but rarely highlighted the needs of people with disability, older people and their carers.

Without consistent and targeted information, many carers were unable to keep track of announcements that had a direct impact on their caring role, whether in terms of immediate emergency responses, or longer-term support packages that were announced to reduce the social and economic impact of the bushfires. Peak bodies largely took on the unfunded role of interpreting and disseminating tailored information to these groups, as well as providing cohort-specific advice to government however due to reduced and insecure funding in the disability advocacy sector in particular, this critical role may not be sustainable in future years.

Carers NSW recommends that the NSW Government ensure future communications regarding natural disasters be inclusive and accessible, addressing the needs of particularly at-risk groups as well as the broader community. Carers NSW also recommends that peak bodies representing the full

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<sup>3</sup> Teague, B., McLeod, R. and Pascoe, S., 2010. 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission Final Report. *Parliament of Victoria: Melbourne*.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

range of vulnerable groups continue to be supported to assist in this important role in preparation for present and future crises.

## **Conclusion**

Carers NSW thanks the NSW Government for the opportunity to respond to this inquiry and to highlight key areas where carers and the person they care for require targeted and tailored information and support before, during and after a bushfire. The NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry presents a valuable opportunity to identify where existing policy and practice can be reinforced and strengthened to ensure a more holistic and include approach can be taken to bushfire management.