



NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry

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Statement of Recognition

The Salvation Army acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters throughout Australia. We pay our respect to Elders, past, present and emerging, acknowledging their continuing relationship to this land and the ongoing living cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia.

Introduction

The Salvation Army thanks the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry for the opportunity to provide input into the Inquiry. We would also like to acknowledge the extensive support we receive from all levels of government.

The Salvation Army seeks to meet people at their time of need, meaning that our precise role during natural disasters differs according to the needs of the community, state disaster plans, and collaborative arrangements with other community organisations.

It has been the overwhelming observation of Salvation Army personnel on the ground that government and community responded admirably to the 2019-20 bushfire season given its unprecedented nature. The following submission offers our learnings from this summer and reflections on the following three questions in line with the Review's Terms of Reference:

1. How can NSW be better prepared for next time?

- The NSW Government can work with the insurance sector and community organisations to raise community awareness on how to prepare for and respond to new bushfire conditions, including the level of insurance needed to rebuild after a disaster.
- Local bushfire response plans can balance clarity with flexibility to allow for community generosity and support while ensuring service coverage and encouraging collaboration.
- The NSW Government can ensure essential staff and adequate backup resources are prepared for and available to respond to bushfire threats, even during peak holiday and tourist season.

2. How can the emergency response be improved?

- Governments can locate evacuation and recovery centres in spaces that provide for wraparound services for people seeking support. Governments can also structure funding and response plans in a way that encourages service collaboration.
- All levels of government can cooperate to ensure that all available resources, such as Defence Assistance to the Civil Community, are utilised to the greatest extent.

3. How can we all support communities to recover?

- We can work together to prevent and respond to family violence, particularly violence against women and children.
- Governments can share information about land available for community and industry to provide short to medium term accommodation as communities rebuild.
- Disaster recovery efforts can prioritise providing employment opportunities for local people looking for work before engaging outside contractors.
- Governments can ensure that trauma-informed support, including appropriate mental health support, is available and accessible for in the medium to long term, as the effects of trauma take time to manifest.

The Salvation Army Emergency and Disaster Response

The scale of the bushfires this summer meant that at times The Salvation Army was working simultaneously across all three phases of its disaster response in different parts of the country.

As the crisis unfolds, **phase one** involves Salvation Army Emergency Services (**SAES**) personnel feeding and providing support to first responders and evacuees, and assisting with the management and service of evacuation centres. The SAES is a national 24/7 state of readiness service with 18 full-time staff and supported by volunteers. Between September 2019 and February 2020, SAES teams provided more than 250,000 meals and 240,000 light refreshments for first responders and evacuees in over 165 locations across Australia.

In the immediate aftermath of a disaster, The Salvation Army's support transitions to **phase two** – an initial assessment and provision of emergency financial support.

Once the crisis is over, SAES moves to **phase three** – financial support following a more detailed assessment of need. Our rural chaplains also stand at the ready to visit and provide support to affected rural and regional areas as required.

As at 6 April 2020, we have provided \$18.8 million in direct financial payments to 10,500 Australians. Thanks to the generosity of corporate partners, we have also been able to provide individuals with gift cards worth over half a million dollars, product donations, flights and emergency accommodation.

The Salvation Army has been working with federal, state and local governments to develop recovery plans to map the way forward for the recovery of areas affected by the fires. A dedicated Bushfire Recovery Team is helping coordinate The Salvation Army's contribution to the recovery process, which we anticipate from previous experience will take three to four years.

1. How can NSW be better prepared for next time?

The Salvation Army has the privilege of being included in the NSW State Emergency Plan. We are also active members of our communities, as well as a major provider of social services. This places us in a unique position to speak to the Inquiry's interest in preparation and planning.

Community Education and Engagement

The Salvation Army's experience was that many people were underprepared for the bushfires due to delays in undertaking planning or in enacting their plan, but also due to the sheer scale and ferocity of the fires that burnt across the state. As fires jumped significant distances and travelled at unprecedented speeds, as well as doubling back and burning some areas repeatedly, many people were caught short regardless of planning. As a nation, we simply were not prepared for the new reality we faced.

We found that some people with significant emotional or financial connection to land or property were reluctant to leave properties that were under threat. Some families chose to split, trying to both defend property and take children and pets to safety. Many of these families were unprepared for the impact of limited communications, uncertainty, fear and emotional trauma of the separation. Although The Salvation Army appreciates the connection to land and the emotional desire to protect property, additional education of the risks and associated stresses could assist people to make better decisions and mental preparations before an emergency. The NSW bush fire survival plan¹ offers excellent guidance for households to make physical preparations for a bushfire and a separate webpage offers suggestions for inclusions in an emergency survival kit.² There is scope for this to be expanded to contain prompts for households to prepare emotionally for a bushfire. Additionally, it may be helpful for NSW residents to be able to access the available guidance materials in a single document.

Recommendation

That the NSW Government emergency preparation materials be strengthened to include a prompt for households to consider the risks and stresses associated with staying behind to defend.

¹ NSW Rural Fire Service. 2019. *Bush fire survival plan*. October 25. Accessed March 20, 2020. <http://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/plan-and-prepare/bush-fire-survival-plan>.

² NSW Rural Fire Service. 2015. *Emergency survival kit*. December 14. Accessed March 20, 2020. <http://www.rfs.nsw.gov.au/plan-and-prepare/prepare-your-family/emergency-survival-kit>.



Home and Contents Insurance

Rates of uninsurance and underinsurance have proven to be a significant concern for property owners affected by the fires.

Those who had no insurance often make this decision due to the high cost of premiums, meaning they are often those who are least able to afford to rebuild after the loss of their property. This problem is only expected to increase as we experience the effects of a changing climate, which will in turn affect 'insurability'. Modelling undertaken by the Climate Risk Engine suggests that by 2100, the number of existing properties considered 'high risk' could more than double (from 383,300 to 735,654)³ and that insurance premiums could double or even triple before this.⁴ An expansion of insurance 'red zones' of addresses that are essentially uninsurable will in turn impact housing affordability. Some have also expressed concern that in trying to recover costs incurred this bushfire season, insurance companies will significantly increase premiums to the extent that they are unaffordable to most people.

Though a rise in insurance premiums may be inevitable in response to a changing climate, the shock to household budgets could be alleviated by abolishing insurance stamp duty. Governments and the insurance industry could also work together to incentivise hazard mitigation in building design and town planning, as has been done with the construction of levees in towns prone to flooding.

The problem of underinsurance stems from several factors. In many instances people have insured their houses according to what their home and contents are worth, only to find that the cost of reconstruction in keeping with current building standards is many times greater than expected. Additionally, many areas that burned, for example, the Coffs Harbour region, were not considered to be bushfire prone. As such the levels of insurance on properties in these areas are often below what is needed for a full restoration of losses.

Staff at The Salvation Army's Moneycare financial counselling service have also reported assisting many people who discovered that their policies did not cover associated outbuildings on properties, or damage to property that was not burned. Beyond the associated smoke damage, residents found that water storage, plumbing and other plastic structures had melted due to radiant heat. This left residents with little to no ability to rebuild, repair or replace damaged buildings and other essential fixtures.

³ Mallon, Karl, Maxwell McKinlay, Ned Haughton, Rohan Hamden, Ruth Tedder, and Jacquelyn Lamb. 2019. *Climate Change Risk to Australia's Built Environment: A Second Pass National Assessment*. XDI Pty Ltd. Accessed March 31, 2020. <https://xdi.systems/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Climate-Change-Risk-to-Australia%E2%80%99s-Built-Environment-V4-final-reduced-2.pdf>.

⁴ Ting, Inga, Nathanael Scott, Alex Palmer, and Michael Slezak. 2019. "The rise of red zones of risk." *ABC News*, 23 October. Accessed March 25, 2020. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-10-23/the-suburbs-facing-rising-insurance-costs-from-climate-risk/11624108>.



Though we acknowledge that this is outside the Inquiry's terms of reference, our experience is that the process of cleaning up and rebuilding is central to the emotional and economic recovery of individuals and communities. Slow insurance assessments and payouts have delayed both physical and psychological recovery. Though delays are understandable, as distances between affected areas and the volume of claims lodged across the country have stretched the resources of insurance inspectors, this simply highlights the need to improve how claims are assessed.

Issues stemming from uninsurance and underinsurance have been experienced in previous bushfire seasons.⁵ The experiences of many people during this bushfire season offers an opportunity to raise awareness of the importance of ensuring home and contents insurance covers the cost of rebuilding. Further to the recommendation above to encourage households to be mentally and emotionally prepared, the NSW Government could consider expanding their bushfire preparation guidance to include a prompt for households to review their insurance.

Our previous experience has shown that communities who have lived through bushfires are more likely to make a bushfire emergency plan in the future. The experiences across the state this bushfire season provide an opportunity for the NSW Government to encourage all residents to have a bushfire plan.

Recommendations

- That the NSW Government evaluate the intended purpose of insurance stamp duty and its impact on insurance affordability and rates of uninsurance and underinsurance.
- That the NSW Government work with the insurance sector to incentivise hazard mitigating building design and town planning.
- That greater emphasis be given to the issue of uninsurance and underinsurance with respect to the cost of rebuilding in the NSW Government emergency preparation materials.
- That all NSW residents be encouraged to have a bushfire plan, regardless of the 'normal' level of risk.

⁵ Lucas, Chloe, Christine Eriksen, and David Bowman. 2020. "A crisis of underinsurance threatens to scar rural Australia permanently." *ABC News*, 7 January. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-07/crisis-of-underinsurance-threatens-to-scar-rural-australia/11844992>.



State and Local Emergency Plans

We would like to draw attention to three specific considerations relating to the development of emergency plans:

- The need for a clear pathway for community and charity efforts to be coordinated;
- Recognition that the bushfire season will get longer; and
- That emergencies may overlap with peak holiday and tourist seasons.

Community and charity involvement

The Salvation Army recognises the dedication and hard work of volunteers, including first responders, without whom the bushfire response and recovery effort could not have been possible. The Salvation Army is grateful for the support of more than 3,000 volunteers across Australia through the 2019-20 bushfire season. We have also been overwhelmed by the generosity of individuals and community groups.

Our experiences across Australia revealed an opportunity to better coordinate and channel community generosity and volunteer efforts, particularly in the immediate response. The generosity of individuals and community organisations during a crisis meant that some areas experienced friction and duplication of supports. For example, though The Salvation Army has responsibility for providing emergency catering at evacuation centres, there were occasions where teams from other organisations arrived with food, expecting to be able to serve it to first responders and evacuees. While we appreciated their spirit of generosity, we have a duty of care to ensure food safety and the impromptu nature of the support meant that it was more disruptive than helpful. At another evacuation centre, an immense amount of donations including perishable food and other consumables was donated. Unfortunately, we did not have appropriate storage capacity and despite best efforts some went to waste.

At other times, the absence of a clear coordination point caused confusion about where help was needed. Improved coordination and communication of the practical and emotional support available, which organisations were responsible for them, and who to contact to offer help, would mean more efficient use of volunteer skills and resources while improving volunteers' and the community's experience of evacuation centres. A clear demarcation of responsibilities, outlined in local bushfire plans, would ensure service coverage, enable better collaboration and reduce confusion. The Salvation Army notes that the Office of Emergency Management's Community Recovery Toolkit includes a section on 'planning for spontaneous volunteers' and suggests that this guidance could be expanded to include organisations and widely circulated in preparation for the next bushfire season.



"If you want to be there for the people, it comes at a bit of a cost. When do you step aside? There's no one else we know who is going to these places".

(A Salvation Army member in regional NSW)

Adapting to changed bushfire seasons

As mentioned earlier, our experience was that many people were not prepared for the reality of the bushfire season that we faced. Its unprecedented nature – in terms of scale, ferocity and timing – meant that resources used to dealing with a few discrete emergencies at a time were stretched to cover disasters in almost every state and territory of Australia. According to the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (**CSIRO**), at 18 February the land burned in southern Australia during the 2019-20 bushfire season (more than 10 million hectares) was already greater than the 2009 Black Saturday and 1983 Ash Wednesday bushfires combined.⁶

Fire has been a constant feature of Australian life and this is expected to continue. Research by the CSIRO and the Bureau of Meteorology (**BOM**) shows a long term increase in extreme fire weather and fire season length across Australia.⁷ Evidence also shows that climate change has led to an increase in drought, which combined with higher temperatures, increases the average forest fire danger index and number of days with severe fire danger.⁸ The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (**IPCC**) warns that climate-related extreme conditions, including extreme heat, drought and wildfires, have a significant impact not only on ecosystems but also on physical and mental health and wellbeing.⁹ We have seen these effects this summer directly in loss of life (human, flora and fauna), physical injuries and mental health concerns, as well as due to the effects of bushfire smoke inhalation, which research has shown to cause respiratory problems.¹⁰

Our bushfire plans as individuals, communities, jurisdictions and as a nation, need to reflect this new reality. This includes providing appropriate resourcing to ensure that our systems can cope with the strain experienced this year with multiple fire fronts threatening homes and lives across the state.



“Losing a significant amount of our farm to a bushfire has been extremely difficult with the ongoing drought conditions. The recovery process has been very slow and costly. Unfortunately, the risk of bushfires increased for us because of the drought.” (A community member in regional NSW)

⁶ CSIRO. 2020. *The 2019-20 bushfires: a CSIRO explainer*. 18 February. Accessed March 17, 2020. <https://www.csiro.au/en/Research/Environment/Extreme-Events/Bushfire/preparing-for-climate-change/2019-20-bushfires-explainer>.

⁷ Bureau of Meteorology and CSIRO. 2018. *State of the Climate 2018*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

⁸ CSIRO and Bureau of Meteorology. 2015. *Climate Change in Australia Information for Australia's Natural Resource Management Regions*. Technical Report, Australia: CSIRO and Bureau of Meteorology.

⁹ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). 2014. *Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report*. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Geneva, Switzerland: IPCC.

¹⁰ Reid, Colleen E, Michael Brauer, Fay H Johnston, Michael Jerrett, John R Balmes, and Catherine T Elliott. 2016. “Critical Review of Health Impacts of Wildfire Smoke Exposure.” *Environmental Health Perspectives* 124 (9): 1334-1343. Accessed March 5, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1289/ehp.1409277>

Resourcing to meet additional challenges

An issue that was experienced nationally was that the bushfire season overlapped with the end-of-year shut down and peak holiday periods. This meant staff shortages in state and local emergency services and government departments, as well as internally within The Salvation Army. Our experience was that the state government officials that were on hand responded in a timely manner. Tourist numbers also increased near to fire zones. This had significant impacts on the coordination and orderliness of the response.

With an expected increase in the duration and intensity of future bushfire seasons, this represents an opportunity to ensure that all organisations involved in emergency response and recovery consider this added challenge in planning for the holiday season. This includes ensuring adequate staff with appropriate trauma-informed training can be deployed at a moment's notice to attend an emergency. The Salvation Army will not shut down in the week between the Christmas and New Year's Day holidays from 2020-21.

An additional challenge experienced in some bushfire-impacted communities was the loss of telecommunications and electricity, which coupled with lack of fuel, left community members unable to leave their towns, unable to communicate or receive safety information and for those people who did not have cash on hand, unable to purchase food and other essential items. It is important that state and local bushfire plans make provisions to mitigate the impact if this were to happen in the future.

Recommendations

- That state and local bushfire plans should:
 - Clearly communicate response and relief roles and responsibilities.
 - Provide for spontaneous community and charity involvement at evacuation and recovery centres to be clearly coordinated to ensure a comprehensive and cohesive support structure, minimising gaps and duplication.
 - Ensure adequate resources to cover the threat of longer, more extreme and more widespread fire danger.
 - Ensure preparations are made and adequate staffing arrangements made to cater for the additional challenges of peak holiday and tourist seasons.
 - Ensure preparations are made to overcome telecommunications and power outages.
- That the Office for Emergency Management's guidance 'Planning for Spontaneous Volunteers' be expanded to include community groups and organisations and be widely socialised in preparation for the next bushfire season.

2. How can the emergency response and relief effort be improved?

Evacuation and Recovery Centres

Local needs met by local people

The Salvation Army's vision that we 'live, love and fight' alongside others experiencing hardship and injustice naturally places us in evacuation and recovery centres. Our experience was that centres were managed with varying levels of efficiency and that there was scope for better communication between centres to ensure a more equitable service offer. While gathering input for this submission, we heard frustration expressed that some state government officials, though well-meaning, appeared to take over local operations. This caused confusion as they were not across the local plan and did not know the area or the people on the ground.

This is not meant to negate the need for external help or best practice sharing, but rather to emphasise that external resources should not seek to take over the operation from local leaders. This includes community leaders where a community has been evacuated to a nearby town. There is a risk that key local personnel may also be personally affected and therefore a clear chain of command and agreed backup resources, needs to be identified well in advance.

Additionally, the external impression of communities affected by the bushfires is of collectively dealing with the disaster at hand. While this is true of some communities, we have also been present in communities where long-standing rifts have been deepened following the fires. Ensuring that a whole-of-community approach to disaster response and recovery is critical to maximise the long-term recovery of disaster affected regions.



"...it is more important that we have local people, the local community on the ground coordinating the effort." (A Salvation Army member in regional NSW)

Mobile recovery centres and outreach

There is also scope for mobile recovery centres to be increased, particularly in regional and rural areas. It was suggested that there seemed to be an expectation that people affected by the bushfires would travel to their nearest recovery centre. Our experience was that the trauma associated with the experience often prevented people living in smaller satellite communities from venturing out of their community for help. For people living in regional and rural areas, particularly for those who had lost livestock, presenting at a recovery centre is often lower on their list of priorities. Electricity and telecommunications outages also meant that Salvation Army personnel were making first contact with people many weeks and even months after the bushfires had passed. With no easy access to mobile phone reception and the internet, it is not easy for people to find out about support let alone apply. Lengthy phone waiting periods present an additional barrier for people whose only access to a telephone is at their local pub.

Service co-location and collaboration

Our experience is that co-location and collaboration between support services in evacuation, relief and recovery centres eases some of the burden on people impacted by the bushfires. This means those impacted do not need to know which organisations to seek out for help and can access the support they need at a centralised location. Co-located services would also assist in alleviating communication barriers between agencies.

Lack of space, necessary resources or forward planning meant that this was not always possible. Our experiences this summer showed the need for emotional support (such as those provided by disaster chaplains) and professional mental health support to be available from the start of the emergency response phase.

We also heard many times the importance for Commonwealth and state government community service agencies to have a physical presence at these centres. The ability to speak in person to representatives from Commonwealth and state governments, as well as access to information at a 'one stop shop' website, would have greatly alleviated the confusion we encountered in the community about what government supports were available and which they were eligible for. This benefit would extend to mobile recovery centres, which could include staff from Services Australia and its state counterpart.

We cannot stress enough the importance of relationships in providing community-centred responses. We have found that the NSW bushfire response and relief models, which allow for flexibility between organisations fosters collaboration much better than models that directly or indirectly force community organisations to compete for roles. Flexibility allows us to meet people at their point of need.

Another form of collaboration is in the sharing of resources. Many organisations involved in emergency response, relief and recovery have developed excellent resources to assist the community and practitioners. Sharing such resources would reduce the need for duplication and increase the benefit to the community.

Recommendations

- That where external help is needed, state government officials are led by local emergency plans and expertise.
- That the NSW Government facilitate mobile recovery centres and outreach clinics as necessary to ensure smaller communities can access the support they need.
- That the choice of location for emergency relief and recovery centres cater for service co-location and collaboration.
- That all levels of government and other organisations involved in emergency preparation, response, relief and recovery share good practice to reduce duplication.

Requests for Assistance

Some of the criticism directed at charities regarding the length of time it took to distribute donations and assistance could have been in part mitigated if the NSW Government, the Rural Fire Service (RFS) and other organisations had been able to share the contact details of people they knew to have been affected. This would have enabled us and other community organisations involved in the relief and recovery effort to proactively contact people with offers of assistance, rather than putting the responsibility on people who have already experienced significant trauma to seek out assistance themselves. While The Salvation Army appreciates that privacy legislation imposes restrictions on sharing information without consent, we suggest that this consent can be unobtrusively sought through the information gathering process.

Though many people approaching The Salvation Army for material aid and financial assistance were genuinely fire affected, we also encountered individuals from within and outside of the community who saw the support as an easy opportunity for financial gain. One individual, who did supply their genuine address, on further investigation proved to be very removed from any fire front. Others insisted on their eligibility but quickly backtracked when we offered to accompany them to their local RFS office to help them seek assistance. Better access to government records of impacted areas would enable us to quickly identify such claims and allow genuine claims to be assessed more efficiently.



“We have been abandoned and forgotten about.”
(A community member in northern NSW)

While public attention and media coverage moved along with the fires, some communities who experienced an earlier fire season felt left in the dark with no communication or reassurance that assistance towards the clean-up and recovery effort was on the way. While bushfire operations were focussed on the response phase on the South Coast and appeared to move rapidly to relief and recovery, many northern communities independently and resourcefully coordinated their own recovery through community donation points and working groups. Though the unprecedented nature of the 2019-20 bushfire season meant that resources were stretched, it is nevertheless important that governments ensure that communication lines remain open and that communities that have experienced trauma are supported equitably.

Recommendations

- That the NSW Government enable better information sharing to facilitate more efficient assessment of claims for assistance.
- That the NSW Government ensure that fire-affected communities are kept informed on next steps and that all communities receive support equitably.

Commonwealth Cooperation

The Salvation Army acknowledges that very few decisions made during the management of a crisis are straightforward, particularly not considering the scale of the fires experienced in 2019-20.

Feedback from sites that benefitted from Australian Defence Force (**ADF**) assistance noted the immense difference this assistance made. Not only were the forces a significant addition of human resources, the facilities which the ADF were able to deploy provided great relief, whether in assisting the emergency catering effort or in providing the barracks for use as an alternative evacuation site. The mental health support they provided was also beneficial in helping community members return to a normal routine.

It was remarked in some locations that had this assistance arrived as much as ten days earlier, it would have made the biggest impact and represented a more efficient use of resources in the emergency response and relief efforts. We encourage the employment of ADF assistance earlier during future crises that develop with the same speed and breadth of impact. This would provide much needed support during the response and recovery stages.



"[The ADF] have equipment we just don't have - stuff we couldn't dream of; field kitchens, and cool rooms the size of shipping containers."
(A Salvation Army member in regional NSW)

Recommendation

- That the NSW Government deploy resources, such as the ADF, in a timely manner to ensure maximum effectiveness and ease the strain on first responders.

3. How can we all support communities to recover?



“The Salvos will be the ones who are left to pick up the pieces - because we never leave.” (A Salvation Army member in regional NSW)

Although community recovery is not explicitly within the Inquiry’s terms of reference, The Salvation Army feels that it is important to highlight key issues we have witnessed in providing recovery support in the past and during the current bushfire season.

Additionally, in working alongside local councils in the aftermath of the bushfires, we have noticed that each council organises recovery operations slightly differently. It is our hope that the newly revised Recovery Action Plans and Community Recovery Toolkit being developed by the Office for Emergency Management will ensure greater consistency across NSW.

Employment

We note that recent statistics from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (**ABS**) show a steady rate of unemployment throughout much of the bushfire season, particularly during January. These statistics are couched by the ABS in the understanding that sampling issues did occur during this window due to limited responses from areas of NSW as a result of the bushfires, and it remains too early for figures to reflect the longer-term implications of the bushfires on employment. The experience of The Salvation Army Employment Plus service has been that jobseekers who were not directly impacted by the bushfires may have put off actively looking for work due to a combination of the general atmosphere of disquiet during the fires and uncertainty about what support was still available to help with finding work.

We have estimated based on previous experience that communities impacted by the bushfires will take three to four years to recover. While some aspects of recovery will no doubt require certain skills and expertise, the sheer amount of work involved can mean added employment opportunities for jobseekers in the local community. Local and state governments could actively seek to provide employment opportunities for jobseekers. They could also investigate facilitating a platform for community members to seek services from within their own community in the first instance before reaching out to external contractors and service providers.

Recommendations

- That local and state governments actively seek to provide employment opportunities for jobseekers in the bushfire recovery efforts.
- That governments continue to encourage and facilitate, where possible, communities to employ local services during recovery and rebuilding.

Family and Domestic Violence

Our expertise in delivering emergency management, specialist family violence services and broader social services compels us to raise family violence as a critical area for action during the recovery phase. Natural disasters do not cause violence, however trauma combined with loss of land, loved ones, and employment contribute to conditions that promote violence. Additionally, increases in the abuse of alcohol and other drugs to cope with loss of community can also contribute to escalating family and domestic violence. Previous experience shows that trauma will continue to manifest in various ways long after the disaster.

Research found that community acceptance of family and domestic violence in the aftermath of the Black Saturday bushfires increased the risk of violence to women and children. The violence was seen as 'out of character', excused by trauma with the hope that they would eventually return to their 'normal selves'. These attitudes, combined with a strong focus on resilience, recovery, grief and loss, and sympathy towards men experiencing trauma and suicidal ideation, meant that family violence was ignored. It is important that we combat gender roles and stereotypes which perpetuate dangerous forms of masculinity. Research has shown that men impacted by the Black Saturday fires who presented as 'not coping' were ostracised for seeking help.¹¹ Access to appropriate and timely counselling can address unhealthy and risk-taking behaviour that promotes violence against women and children.

It is imperative that communities are equipped to recognise and respond to family and domestic violence.¹² One example is the research based training offered by the Gender & Disaster Pod which can equip the emergency management and broader recovery sector to support people experiencing family violence.

Recommendations

- That government and communities take steps to address, not excuse, men's violence and promote the right of women and children to feel safe and free from harm in the aftermath of a disaster.
- That the NSW Government increase specialist domestic and family violence services, particularly in the short to long term recovery period after a disaster.
- That the NSW Government work with other governments to develop national disaster guidelines and strategies that prioritise the prevention of, and promote an appropriate response to, family and domestic violence following a natural disaster.

¹¹ Parkinson, Debra. 2013. "The hidden disaster: Domestic violence in the aftermath of natural disaster." *Australian Journal of Emergency Management* 28 (2): 28-35.

¹² Watt, Jacqui. 2019. "Responding to community trauma and family violence after natural disasters." *No to Violence: Working together to end men's family violence*. Accessed March 13, 2020. <https://www.ntv.org.au/responding-to-community-trauma-and-family-violence-after-natural-disasters/>



Crisis Accommodation and Short to Medium Term Housing

The Salvation Army has witnessed the need for emergency and short-term housing options following natural disasters. Due to the scale of land and property lost in the 2019-20 bushfire season, the demand upon an already short supply of affordable housing has been significant. The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (**AHURI**) has raised concerns about the potential effect that the bushfires will have on housing costs, particularly in regional, rural and remote areas.¹³ This will in turn impact the structure of the local community if some families can no longer afford the rebuilding and ongoing insurance costs.

Many residents, even those who are able to afford to fully reconstruct their properties, are in a position of short-term homelessness and require housing during their reconstruction. This is made more difficult because people would ideally stay within their communities to maintain their social, economic and community connections. Given the shortage of housing supply, this is often not an option.

Short to medium-term accommodation options do exist, including modular 'prefab' homes and other temporary housing designs, yet the key element is a shortage of known land where such housing can be placed.

Local and state governments are able to supply land on a temporary basis for emergency accommodation, including transport corridors which are not slated for development for several years. A lack of readily available information about land ownership and planning timeframes makes it difficult for organisations that do have the means to provide temporary housing structures to set up emergency accommodation and allow for people to remain in their communities while they reconstruct.

A searchable register of local and state government land suitable for short to medium-term housing would allow for a swifter and more efficient establishment of temporary housing in communities and ensure that recovery is less disruptive for families and the community.

Recommendation

- That the NSW Government work with other governments to establish a searchable register of local, state and federal government land suitable for short to medium-term housing.

¹³ Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute. 2020. *Bushfires likely to increase the cost of living in regional Australia*. 10 March. Accessed March 19, 2020. <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/policy/ahuri-briefs/Bushfires-likely-to-increase-the-cost-of-living>



Impact of Trauma

The Salvation Army has also witnessed the impacts that bushfires and other natural disasters have on the psychological health of communities. This has been exacerbated this year in many parts of NSW by long years of drought and has put additional strain on already stretched locally embedded psychological supports.

The effect of trauma can take many months to emerge and this can manifest in several ways. Trauma can exacerbate existing issues or be the catalyst for new challenges emerging. It is therefore vital that governments ensure the provision of ongoing adequate mental health and other social supports to bushfire affected communities to meet an expected increase in demand for services. This includes services to assist people experiencing substance use disorders, family violence and mental health concerns among others. These supports must be deployed early in the response and sustained through the recovery phases to minimise decline and maximise recovery. We anticipate that this support will be increasingly needed as the nation experiences compounding trauma from COVID-19 and as communities seek to adapt to the extreme heat, severe drought, floods and bushfires that are becoming the new normal.

The Salvation Army's rural chaplains have provided guidance and have been a valuable resource for rural communities throughout the recent bushfire and drought seasons. As many smaller communities are often tight-knit and news and information can travel quickly, The Salvation Army's rural chaplains are seen as outside of the town microcosm, and are a trusted, confidential support. While rural communities may show resistance to fly in-fly out mental health workers from the 'big city', they have expressed a preference for our rural chaplains, who are seen to 'get them' as a result of a shared lived experience. Our rural chaplains are already stretched, having very large areas of responsibility, which has forced them to decline invitations to conduct activities like men's retreats to assist with community healing. Dedicated, ongoing and accessible mental health support is therefore critical to ensuring the recovery of rural and regional drought and bushfire affected communities.

The benefit of sharing good practice resources has already been mentioned above. There are many other examples of good practice across Australia and sharing them would maximise their benefit and minimise duplication. One such example is the 'Birdie's Tree' suite of resources developed by the Queensland Centre for Perinatal and Infant Mental Health to explain natural disasters to children in an age-appropriate way.

Recommendation

- That the NSW Government ensure that funding and resources are provided to meet an expected increased demand for social support services, especially for accessible and tailored mental health services in the medium to long-term.

Drought



“I am sure if we were not affected by bushfires this money would have gone further than it had. We have lost our livelihood due to the fires and the cattle were having to be fed as we had no paddocks left to put them in. We are still struggling with no income.” (A rural community member)

We have heard that the response to the bushfire crisis, though important and deserved, has been perceived to have overshadowed the ongoing drought across NSW. In regions that had already been devastated by drought, bushfires have compounded the strain on farmers and farming communities. It is important that ongoing practical and emotional assistance continues to these communities and is not diverted to respond to fresh crises.

Recommendation

- That the NSW Government continue to provide assistance to drought affected communities.

Conclusion

The Salvation Army thanks the NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry for the opportunity to provide feedback on our experiences during and after the 2019-20 bushfire season.

Though we have identified opportunities for future improvement, The Salvation Army wishes to emphasise that this is in no way meant to diminish the tireless efforts of the NSW Rural Fire Service during the 2019-20 bushfire season, which successfully minimised the losses of property and life despite unprecedented conditions and challenges. We would also like to pay tribute to the firefighters who lost their lives in the defence of homes and property.

It is our belief that the best way to honour their sacrifices and successes is to build on them by committing to:

- Minimise the impact of future bushfires by strengthening community preparations for emergencies, including ensuring adequate insurance cover, as well as providing training and other support to ensure the wellbeing and safety of our volunteers.
- Ensure bushfire response plans are clearly communicated, build in flexibility to embrace community support and prepare for the added challenges associated with peak holiday and tourist periods.
- Provide for efficient use of available resources, collaborative service delivery and wraparound support for people seeking help through funding structures, response plans and location of evacuation and recovery centres, in concert with other levels of government.
- Support communities to recover by preventing and responding appropriately to family violence, working together to provide short to medium term accommodation as communities rebuild, providing employment opportunities for local people first, and ensuring that trauma-informed support services, including appropriate mental health support, is available and accessible for the medium to long term.

We thank the Inquiry for their consideration of our experiences as outlined in this submission and wish them success in their deliberations.

About The Salvation Army

The Salvation Army is an international Christian movement with a presence in 128 countries. Operating in Australia since 1880, The Salvation Army is one of the largest providers of social services and programs for people experiencing hardship, injustice and social exclusion.

The Salvation Army Australia has a national operating budget of over \$700 million and provides more than 1,000 social programs and activities through networks of social support services, community centres and churches across the country. Programs include:

- Financial inclusion, including emergency relief
- Homelessness services
- Youth services
- Family and domestic violence services
- Alcohol, drugs and other addictions
- Chaplaincy
- Emergency and disaster response
- Aged care
- Employment services

As a mission driven organisation, The Salvation Army seeks to reduce social disadvantage and create a fair and harmonious society through holistic and person-centred approaches that reflect our mission to share the love of Jesus by:

- Caring for people
- Creating faith pathways
- Building healthy communities
- Working for justice

We commit ourselves in prayer and practice to this land of Australia and its people, seeking reconciliation, unity and equity.

Further Information

The Salvation Army would welcome the opportunity to discuss the content of this submission should any further information be of assistance.

Further information can be sought from Major Paul Hateley, National Head of Government Relations, at [REDACTED] or on [REDACTED].

