

From: [NSW Government](#)
To: [Flood Inquiry](#)
Subject: Floods Inquiry
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Your details

Title Miss

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Submission details

I am making this submission as A resident in a flood-affected area

Submission type I am making a personal submission

Consent to make submission public I give my consent for this submission to be made public

Share your experience or tell your story

Your story I live in Byron Bay (Arakwal Country). I am Festival Operations Manager with years of experience in team leadership, safety, compliance, and working resourcefully, calmly, and nimbly under pressure.

I was part of the original Mud Army in Brisbane in 2011 and coordinated the volunteer effort

during the Central Coast floods in 2020. When I saw this event coming, I decided to put my hand up and lead part of the community response, as in my experience there has never been enough official response or resources in the past, and community is needed heavily.

I started a Facebook group called North NSW 2022 Flood Community Clean Up & Help.

I was stuck in Brisbane for work and the friend who I was staying with had her house flood as well, so I remained in Brisbane for five days helping her and running the Facebook group remotely.

The sole purpose of my group was to connect people who needed help with people who could help. I made it expressly clear that political commentary or any kind of rant was not accepted in the group. It was about practical solutions and helping those in need and quickly and efficiently as we could.

I started a Google form for registrations and exported that into a spreadsheet manually grouping people by experience/skill set, resources, availability, location, and access to transport.

The uptake was swift, reaching 1,000 members and 300 volunteer registrations in the first 24 hours.

Chris Hanley from First National Real Estate Byron Bay was the first to respond to my call out, offering admin, on-ground resources, and money for urgent items; he and his staff assisted in the initial response by helping purchase cleaning items, donating white goods to the elderly, and assisting me with managing the Facebook group. A few days in they were boots on the ground and as the phone reception was still out, they shifted their focus to clean up.

Ben Gray is a local resident with an IT and project management background who volunteered as an admin supervisor, having seen the chaos on the ground in the initial response when he visited a donation hub to make a donation and saw it's distinct need for organisation and leadership. Ben had a Star Link satellite on his roof so we were able to communicate with internet and phone at a time most were struggling to do so.

After five days on my return to the Shire we set up "HQ" at Ben's, with volunteers on rotating admin shifts and on-ground coordinators delegated to door knock and be our eyes on the ground for priorities and specific needs. These coordinators called or texted us needs, addresses, and we used our database of registered volunteers and posts of offers of help on the FB group to link them up and send them to jobs. This was all manually monitored by ticking off jobs once allocated in the excel spreadsheet. We had coordinators in South Golden Beach, Ocean Shores, Ballina, Wardell, Lismore, Pottsville, Kingscliff, and Mullumbimby. We also made swift contact with anyone heading evacuation centres and donation hubs including Lismore, Goonellebah, Alstonville, South Golden, Ocean Shores, Wardell, Corakai, Lennox Head, Ballina, and Mullumbimby, and received many calls from these places requesting assistance. The majority of requests made in the initial two weeks were able to be delivered on almost immediately.

On the first day of response Mullumbimby had such a large turn out of volunteers from it's immediate community we dispersed our volunteers and sent them to smaller suburbs that were getting less media and therefore community attention.

By the end of the first week the group had 4,000+ members and 700 registered volunteers.

As the number of registrations grew we needed a more sophisticated tool. Ben found Crisisheroes.com - an existing app where people could register for both help and offer to help and be linked directly. This helped to an extent but it meant more new messaging and not everyone was able to shift to it in the middle of everything. Most people found it more familiar and easier to use the group, especially if they were older, unfamiliar with technology, or in a rush/stressed, as most were.

The needs and requests we received ranged from a washing machine to rescuing a stranded horse to general clean up to needs for large industrial equipment, trucks, water tanks, generators etc., to actual rescues of stranded residents.

A group of ten young volunteers were on their way to a clean up job in South Golden. Their GPS took them the wrong way and they end up in the back of Main Arm where there had been a landslide, and where they found an elderly man and his dog who had been stranded for six days and no one knew. I coordinated with the SES a helicopter rescue as a volunteer texted coordinates as the phone reception was too bad to call.

A day later the same group went to a clean up job and found a body. We connected them with volunteers in the group who were registered trauma therapists and psychologists, who connected them with official channels for follow up.

Ben was coordinating helicopter drops of food from private citizens who took it on themselves to fly in without any clear direction or destination, and there was no official aviation response found, even after several enquiries with official channels.

We then started to receive calls from evacuation centres in need of security, nurses, and mental health professionals as the situation quickly deteriorated and there were not enough people on the ground to respond to the enormity of it, and rotate shifts. On ground volunteers were working 20 hour days and returning first thing the next day repeatedly. Some evacuation centres became unsafe.

We coordinated a team of registered nurses who volunteered to respond. We were told DoHS were in charge of that evacuation centre but it wasn't under control. There were unofficial reports of violence, drug use, excessive alcohol use, and sexual assault. This is one of the vital areas to be addresses as part of this inquiry is to ensure the safety of evacuees from the outset to ensure they are not further traumatised.

Many of the requests and call outs for help coming through were obviously out of our league as far as official training goes but people were calling us because they couldn't get through to the official services, and in a situation like this you do what you can to help those in need. We did the best we could with what we had and were able to resolve the specific requests almost immediately in most cases. Community led groups like ours filled the gap where the authorities and registered organisations could not fulfil the needs, due to the scale and scope of the distaster.

The Facebook group peaked at 9,200 members and 900 volunteer registrations from all over Australia.

People came from as far as South Australia to volunteer their services as electricians, the Central Coast with cleaning equipment, the Hunter Valley with a generator and gernie, Brisbane with donations and practical help, Coffs Harbour with cranes, Melbourne with building

supplies, and many more examples. The community response initially was amazing. We were also able to service needs at the community level by responding specifically to people in need of beds, fridges, washing machines, linen, food, washing services, temporary accommodation, and more.

As more specific services were developed such as accommodation, we were able to hand those enquiries over to other groups.

We also connected with Resilient Lismore and handed over our volunteer registrations to them to consolidate the focus point into one area. Other communities were less responsive to collaboration and wanted to remain focused on their own suburbs, which was fine, but did cause some confusion and distress for community members when they contacted us and we then had direct them to another group that was larger, but overwhelmed. As a small team were agile and responsive and able to connect with people in almost every neighbourhood, allocating people and resources directly where needed and quickly. Good intentions can sometimes disrupt efficiency and delay response times, and even further disturb victims out of confusion etc. We must all learn to make decisions even in the heat of the moment in the best interest of victims and the community.

However, as we were covering the Northern Rivers region we continued to receive regular requests and registrations particularly from smaller suburbs, and managed what we could.

On 13 March I had to leave the area for six weeks for work and had to cease active management of the group. I turned it into a self-run community group where people speak directly to each other. It is still ticking over, especially for areas that remain in distress such as Bungawalbin, Wardell, and Lismore.

Participation has declined and it's now almost impossible to get someone to put their hand up to volunteer or respond to a request for help.

My main observations are that:

- community is vital and need to rebuild our sense of community everywhere, particularly to encourage new recruits into the SES
- On ground response from official organisations including security and mental health support workers need to be installed immediately
- Communications companies need to respond immediately
- Councils should have a stockpile of two way radios for the community in an event like this
- Government cash payments should be distributed based on postcode, not photos of damage – elderly distressed people can't handle admin and technology when they're traumatised
- Old air raid sirens need to be reinstalled in small towns
- Social media is the best tool we had at the time but is fraught with many potential issues including fraud and other criminal activity
- The need remains great – all original volunteers are exhausted and need relief – I would strongly urge retrospective payments to recompense them for lost income whilst volunteering and just to let them know they're valued. It is important for morale boost and to keep the local economy going. Plus it's just the right, nice thing to do at a time broken spirits need any kind of lift we can offer them

Terms of Reference (optional)

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

Supporting documents or images
