

Media Release

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SOCIAL SERVICES PEAK: “THE NSW FLOODS SHOW WE NEED TO OVERHAUL THE EMERGENCY RESPONSE SYSTEM”

The NSW Council of Social Services (NCOSS) has made four recommendations to the NSW Government, to address lessons learned and ongoing supports required in the aftermath of the Northern Rivers floods this year.

Lodged in response to the 2022 NSW Flood Inquiry, the NCOSS submission highlights how local NGOs in Northern NSW stepped in to support their communities, in the absence of prompt emergency service support and in the face of substantial challenges.

NCOSS CEO, Joanna Quilty, said local NGOs supplied shelter, food, emergency relief and other services, despite having no formal training, dedicated emergency resources, or visibility of their local disaster management plan.

“When disaster strikes, it is often disadvantaged communities who are most impacted, and it’s local NGOs who are first on the ground, providing essential support. That was certainly the case in the February floods,” NCOSS CEO, Joanna Quilty, said.

“In the Northern Rivers we had NGOs setting up temporary evacuation centres, doing welfare checks, finding accommodation, supplying food and other essentials, coordinating volunteers and managing donated goods. They went above and beyond to look out for the welfare of their vulnerable clients and others in the community, and they continue to play this role.

“But they do this with no input to their local emergency management plan or involvement in preparatory exercises, no clear allocation of responsibility as part of a coordinated effort, and no additional funding for the considerable additional workload involved.

“This important function appears to be left to goodwill, voluntary effort and a ‘wing and a prayer’. Given the social services sector faces rising demand and chronic under-funding at the best of times, it is an unsustainable situation.

“The frequency and severity of natural disasters is unfortunately increasing. While we don’t seem to have learnt from the experience of the 2017 floods and the 2019 bushfires that impacted Northern NSW, this Inquiry is the opportunity to make sure we are better prepared for the next time.

“Our recommendations aim to embed social service NGOs in the emergency management system - by ensuring that local emergency management plans prioritise the needs of the most vulnerable and appropriately support and resource local NGOs for their front-line role.”

The submission highlights that this latest disaster has worsened the region’s already severe housing crisis; and exacerbated existing workforce shortages in the social services sector.

NCOSS’s four recommendations have been drafted with input from member organisations in the Northern Rivers, including neighbourhood centres, Aboriginal organisations, homeless services, community housing providers and services providing domestic violence, disability, aged care, and family support. In summary, the four recommendations are:

- 1. Embed social service NGOs and community-led responses in the NSW emergency management system, by testing a cluster approach that involves establishing Community-based Resilience Coordinators to:**
 - a. Formally support and link Community Resilience Networks to Local Emergency Management Committees.
 - b. Promote a focus on vulnerable population groups and those most at risk.
- 2. Address the chronic under-funding of social service NGOs in the Northern Rivers and the need to respond to increased demand in the aftermath of the floods through urgent measures, including:**
 - a. Increasing recurrent baseline funding by 20 per cent and provide longer-term contracts of at least five years’ duration to provide certainty.
 - b. Providing capital grants to NGOs whose offices have been damaged by the floods.

- c. Funding sufficient Recovery Support Services to meet the real level of community need that will emerge over the next three years.
- 3. Tackle the growing housing crisis across the Northern Rivers through a rapid 'Social Housing Repair, Rebuild and Construct' program.**
- 4. Develop a Northern Rivers Workforce Strategy to fast-track solutions to the worsening skills shortages impacting social service NGOs**

For more information, and to read a copy of the submission, visit www.ncoss.org.au

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