

Fairfield LGA: an example of a community-led emergency response to Delta

This case study examines the place-based response to the COVID-19 emergency in the Fairfield Local Government Area (LGA) in South West Sydney in 2021. Fairfield LGA has a culturally rich and diverse community with more than 70% of its population speaking a language other than English at home.

Fairfield LGA is characterised by a strong place-based network of local services which have collaborated over 25 years to address local issues and support their communities. The Chief Executive Officers of four local services (Fairfield CEOs Group) - The Parks Community Network, Community First Step, Woodville Alliance, CORE Community Services - and Fairfield City Council have been fundamental to building and sustaining a culture of cooperation and trust among local social and community services in the area. The case study demonstrates how a network of trusted place-based services can be the bedrock of an effective, locally appropriate and timely emergency response.

COVID-19 Context

The Fairfield LGA was locked down on 12 July 2021 by the NSW Government due to the number of COVID cases locally. Restrictions imposed prohibited residents leaving the LGA unless they were an authorised worker and tested for COVID-19 every 72 hours. Stay at home orders also meant people didn't have the usual family or community support networks they may have relied on. The economic impact of the strict stay at home orders in Fairfield LGA was also significant. The Fairfield LGA community already had high levels of poverty before the pandemic. Loss of work and ineligibility for welfare payments (e.g. refugees, international students) contributed to increasing levels of hardship.

There were delays in contact made by NSW Health's contact tracers, leaving people without access to food, medication, cleaning products and psychosocial support. When food was provided, it was often inadequate for large, sometimes multi-family or multi-generational households, and particularly did not meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse populations. Larger services and food providers were also less able to assist due to loss of local volunteers, service closures and work from home requirements.

Food relief response

The strict public health orders and public messaging about the risk of catching COVID-19 through casual contact meant many people, particularly frail or vulnerable households were unable or unwilling to get to the supermarket including for click and collect pick-ups. The high demand for home delivery services and the high number of retail workers who were required to isolate led to delays of up to three weeks in receiving deliveries of groceries and other essential items. The Fairfield CEOs Group raised the issue of the growing need for food relief with Fairfield City

Council, who worked with the Local Emergency Management Committee to coordinate the local response. Through the advocacy of the local place-based services and Council, state government agencies began to recognise the significant need for emergency food assistance in the community, and issues with inadequate food assistance for households required to isolate due to COVID infection or exposure. As a result of this concerted advocacy, a Food Hub was established by Fairfield City Council at Council's Prairiewood Leisure Centre.

When Prairiewood Leisure Centre Food Hub became the central point for donated food relief, food packages were delivered by Council staff and through place-based organisations such as The Parks Community Network, Community First Step, Woodville Alliance, and CORE. Deliveries were also supported by Police and the Australian Defence Force personnel, with COVID compliance checks and food deliveries being de-coupled where possible.

All of these local services continued to supplement the supplies from the Fairfield Food Hub with their own donations and purchases, enabling them to tailor deliveries to the needs and cultural preferences of community members. The deliveries included essentials like masks, nappies, cleaning products and other household supplies, and clothes. Food support/food relief/safety equipment was supplied through OzHarvest, Foodbank, Good360° and local business donations to the Food Hub. Council also cooked over 35,000 healthy, culturally diverse frozen meals, which were distributed by place-based organisations and Council to those in need.

The Fairfield Food Hub built on already-established food relief being provided by local services. Additionally, many residents not previously linked with a service received food through the Mayor's Wellbeing Register, established by Council to meet the growing needs. Residents who required more support than food only, were referred to local services for case management and support. Services continued to receive requests and deliver to households. Local services in Fairfield LGA employ staff who speak a range of community languages who were able to provide support over the phone in an inclusive, respectful and culturally safe way to non-English speakers, and to those with poor literacy in their first language.

The Parks Community Network took over the coordinating of the Fairfield Food Hub from Fairfield City Council on 11 October 2021 when the premises relocated to Wetherill Park Community Centre. The Food Hub continued to operate until mid-December 2021.

Conclusion

The Fairfield CEO Group intervention highlights the essential role of a strong, pre-existing network of place-based services, who can work cooperatively to underpin timely responses to an emergency and to push for improved responses and coordination through local and state government agencies. These place-based services are the backbone of any community response to an emergency. For government agencies, the successes of the Fairfield community in responding to the impacts of COVID-19 underline the need to align with on-the-ground partners in emergency planning and responses.