

Manning Valley Neighbourhood Services (MVNS)

Tell us a bit about yourself and your service

Manning Valley Neighbourhood Services (MVNS) is a 42 year old community development/welfare organisation in a rural region of the Mid North Coast of NSW. We assist and support many community members with a focus on socially and financially disadvantaged families, groups and individuals especially when they are at a vulnerable time of their life cycle. We are community managed and rely on a mixture of paid workers and volunteer contribution (with around 50 volunteers) to deliver services and projects. We have been funded for, and delivered, many projects over this time with a focus on women and children. We are a central point of contact for, and partner with, multiple organisations to deliver many of these projects. We have governance structures in place to manage multiple projects at any one time. We are community managed which gives us a broader and wider perspective of community needs.

How has your service been impacted by disaster over the last few years?

One of the services we provide is funded through Dept of Social Services (DSS) for Financial Wellbeing (Emergency Relief). As a Neighbourhood Centre we are one of the first services that community members turn to in times of crisis. However, funding changes have left us with fewer resources to manage this. And the last 2.5 years have stretched our services and resources in ways we could never have imagined. The Black Summer fires, two floods and COVID. Prior to this we experienced long-term drought.

We rely on volunteers to provide much of the wraparound in regard to our ER service, however reliable and skilled volunteers are hard to come by and/or retain. Unfortunately, other services expect that Neighbourhood Centres will just step into the disaster space as a matter of course. This is unrealistic from a skills and resources perspective.

What do you see as the role of your service during and after a disaster like [the recent floods/Black Summer Bushfires/COVID]?

Our role is to advocate to Government for the provision of increased emergency relief funds to support people with basic needs after the disaster, and that we then assess and provide support. However, in the last 2 years it has been a very messy process. We received funds to support those affected by the fires, some for COVID support but none for flood support. In their wisdom, DSS gave a large faith-based organisation \$1m for ER versus our \$100,000. This organisation did not have feet on the ground and ended up doing most of that work from Newcastle or once a week/fortnight in Taree. We worked with them as much as possible but given that we have been providing this service for over 25 years it seemed out of context.

While we were involved in the early days of recovery meetings, etc., it soon became obvious that there were many workers attending whose role was specific to the disaster efforts. Even so, it was also apparent that we were going to be asked to do more as a 'core' community service. As I said, this was not tenable and nor were the numerous meetings that needed to be attended. The best we could do from thereon in was to ensure these other workers knew what we could offer so that they could refer those impacted by the disasters.

How did the disaster/s impact your service's ability to deliver activities?

The disasters have stretched us at every possible level. Provision of client support, bureaucracy and red tape meant that just about every worker was pulled from their actual role to meet the disaster needs. This is not tenable for a small organisation and, if not for the passion of our workers, could have meant that our other services were compromised. In the initial stages after the fires, the volumes of information coming through from other services was impossible to keep track of and therefore make use of in a meaningful way. There was so much confusion about who was doing what. There was repetition of information collection.

What were some of main impacts you have seen on your community, early on, but especially over time?

People at breaking point due to the drawn-out processes of the system and deemed lack of support.

Differences in the way people deal with the impacts.

What are the ways your service worked with other organisations and the community (individuals, groups, business) to respond to the disaster impacts?

In the early stages of the bushfire recovery we were very involved with committees/interagencies, etc. We auspiced a group who applied for funding to create small projects for people affected to be drawn to sharing and supporting each other. Unfortunately, the face-to-face nature of this was quickly shut down with COVID.

What advice would you give to other services who are trying to figure out how to engage in a busy recovery space?

- A dedicated worker/s appear to be the best way to achieve the best outcomes.
- Stop the doubling up of similar services.
- Get your message out there early and simply.

Experiencing a disaster is tough. Supporting others who have experienced a disaster, maintaining service delivery AND looking after yourself can be really tough. What advice do you have for your fellow community workers?

In small organisations it is difficult to do this during 'ordinary' times. For us, the lack of resources made it difficult to engage with the interagencies, but also the other offerings that arose to take up collegial support. This makes it sound like we don't look after ourselves, but we debrief with each other. Allowing our other workloads to build up to engage in external debriefs, etc. seemed the worst of the two options.