

Supporting the community through floods

This region has is a mix of urban and rural properties in a flood-prone area. The area has experienced fires in 2019, COVID from 2020, and multiple floods. The region has a number of established smaller, local community service organisations.

Impacts of recent floods

One local community service noted most staff live out of the area and could not access facilities during floods. Most support was provided remotely until staff could gain access to facilities. Residents' finances were depleted after COVID lockdowns; some were stuck at home without food and some residents refused to evacuate without their pets. There was a strong community response where homes were lost. A local Facebook group was set up to respond to needs.

The service decided they could scale up to focus on meeting people's basic needs. The community centre was established as a distribution point for food and material goods. GIVIT and Good360 distributed hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of goods to people who needed them. This was done quickly with no bureaucracy.

There was a significant amount of pressure on the operation of the service during and after the floods. Staff had to manage HR and tender writing as well as delivering services so were only able to take advantage of funding opportunities in a limited way. The complexity and number of cases the service deals with often increases after a disaster but there is no extra funding for staffing. The service has the benefit of local trust. However, unlike services with a large organisation behind them, it does have the resources to grow.

The response to 2021 and 2022 floods differed. In 2021 the response fell to local services. They were the organisations that made things happen. In the March 2022 floods, the coordination between local services and external organisations and government had improved. Local community services should be included in disaster response as they contribute valuable social capital.

The local Council has been very supportive even though they are only small. The Council's Community Services Director has a good link with the Local Emergency Management Committee. They have been invaluable during floods as they have a good local knowledge of residents and their needs. The Federal Member is also very community minded and has been proactive with disaster support.

For another local service during the floods, the service was closed and residents were encouraged not to visit. There was a drop-in service before COVID but this had been replaced with phone support. COVID was a "blessing in disguise" as staff already had work-from-home arrangements

that could again be used during the floods. Staff were able to maintain contact with clients without having to access the office.

People were not mentally prepared for the close repetition of flooding. For example, there are a lot of hobby farms in the area and evacuation of animals can cause a lot of issues. There was no housing availability in the region. People were moved out of the area for emergency accommodation and lost social connections.

Since the floods, the service is “constantly hammered”. The cumulative stress of these disaster events is leading to a continual, steady increase in demand for the service. The cases are also increasing in complexity, requiring longer term support. Extra COVID funding was used for an extra case management worker but, longer-term, funding is not changing to meet the change in demand.

Service assessments ask for information and feedback but there are no improvements from the last assessment. Funders are not interested in engaging with services. Donations and philanthropy top up service funding. Before the floods, inadequate funding was “a hidden issues”, hopefully it will be addressed now.

Advice from local community service organisations to other local NGOs

- Disaster recovery is a space for local services.
- Don't duplicate what's already being done.
- Define/know what you service does in the disaster space. Discuss the organisation's role in disasters with your management committee.
- Check whether your insurer has a cap on new volunteers.
- Sound financial management is required to meet the demands of a disaster e.g. funding for vouchers, accessing philanthropic grants.
- Use social capital, leverage local connections.
- Local religious communities have been ready to help, especially in the suburbs.
- Responding to disasters requires thinking differently. Give scenarios - if nothing is done, there is a high cost.
- Don't take it all on yourself. There are capable people willing to help you. Locate the person with the skills you need. People want to help and know what they can do to support.
- There is a lot of positive energy to sustain you but take time out.