



Submission:

**Inquiry into lessons to be learned in relation
to the Australian bushfire season 2019-20**

May 2020

About ACTCOSS

ACTCOSS acknowledges Canberra has been built on the land of the Ngunnawal people. We pay respects to their Elders and recognise the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. We celebrate Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultures and ongoing contributions to the ACT community.

The ACT Council of Social Service Inc. (ACTCOSS) advocates for social justice in the ACT and represents not-for-profit community organisations.

ACTCOSS is a member of the nationwide COSS Network, made up of each of the state and territory Councils and the national body, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS).

ACTCOSS's vision is for Canberra to be a just, safe and sustainable community in which everyone has the opportunity for self-determination and a fair share of resources and services.

The membership of the Council includes the majority of community-based service providers in the social welfare area, a range of community associations and networks, self-help and consumer groups and interested individuals.

ACTCOSS advises that this document may be publicly distributed, including by placing a copy on our website.

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Introduction

Thank you for inviting the ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS) to make a submission to the inquiry into lessons to be learned in relation to the Australian bushfire season 2019-20.

ACTCOSS represents the community sector and people experiencing disadvantage and marginalisation in the ACT.

Although the ACT did not experience significant damage to property from the 2019-20 bushfires season, the ACT was significantly impacted by heavy smoke, the arrival of individuals and families from bushfire-affected regions and loss of income for some Canberrans relating to the ACT's proximity and close ties to bushfire-affected regions on the NSW South Coast.

Furthermore, ACT community sector services faced significant pressure as they redeployed staff and resources, normally used to provide services to people in the ACT, to support bushfire-affected people in NSW. Despite an increase in demand on services in the ACT, no additional funding for the ACT community services was provided by the Commonwealth. This persisted during the recovery phase, wherein still no funds were allocated to the ACT, for example, to make up for lost funds during the bushfires, or to support the health and mental health service increase required.

ACTCOSS understands that Primary Health Networks (PHNs) in bushfire-affected areas received additional money. However, it is ACTCOSS's understanding that the ACT PHN, Capital Health Network, received no extra funding despite significantly increased demand from Canberra residents whose physical and mental health was impacted by bushfire smoke and the fires, in addition to new demand from people from the South Coast who evacuated to the ACT.

The key lessons learned from the ACT community services sector in relation to the 2019-20 bushfire season are:

- Areas like the ACT, which receive and support bushfire evacuees, should be properly funded. Gaps in funding are particularly apparent where significant numbers of evacuees move across state and territory lines or from regional areas into larger towns and cities following a bushfire event.
- The secondary effects of bushfires can have a dramatic impact on communities. The ACT had an effective emergency response to the threat of fire but was severely unprepared and highly disrupted by extreme levels of bushfire smoke. In the future, services need resources and funding to meet needs and challenges arising from the secondary bushfire impacts. ACT health and community services saw a dramatic increase in demand resulting from smoke and poor air quality in the ACT but received no additional funding.

- Plans for the distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE) to frontline health and community sector workers working in smoke-affected areas must be planned well in advance of any crisis. Plans must also be made for high levels of service cancellations resulting from high levels of sickness among workers and clients impacted by smoke.
- The resilience and preparedness of people in the ACT to both bushfire and the secondary effects of bushfires, including smoke and mental health, must be urgently improved. Communities in regions that have previously experienced major trauma from bushfires are highly vulnerable during bushfire season, even if they are not directly impacted by bushfire in that season.
- Homes in the ACT are not equipped for dealing with extreme smoke conditions as witnessed during the recent bushfire season. This had immediate and ongoing negative impacts on the health of ACT residents, which could not simply be solved by PPE or aids like air purifiers. Going into future bushfire seasons, the ACT needs safe properties for people who have significant health vulnerabilities to be evacuated to. There are currently not enough vacant properties to deal with ACT people who need to be rehomed, nor places to house people evacuating to the ACT from bushfire-affected areas.

ACT community service sector preparedness and resilience

ACTCOSS are a signatory to Memorandum of Understanding in respect to Social Recovery Cooperation between the ACT Community Services Directorate and community functional partners. Our role in this is to represent vulnerable people and provide community links through:

- Promotion of good practices for supporting vulnerable people in disaster preparation, response and recovery
- Supporting agencies to identify vulnerable people and groups in the community
- Disseminating information during an emergency to vulnerable people through community.

In addition to undertaking this work during the 2019-20 bushfire season, ACTCOSS also established a P2 mask distribution centre for community services in the ACT. Particularly for frontline workers, the inability to access masks through usual retail channels put themselves and their clients at risk. ACTCOSS distributed over 2,600 masks to 25 community organisations in the ACT.

This territory-wide plan enabled the community sector to communicate efficiently and respond relatively quickly. However, improvements could be

made to ensure an appropriate stock of PPE in case of future smoke events, and clear guidelines for the distribution and use of PPE.

The ACT community service sector played an important role in supporting evacuees from bushfire-affected areas in the South Coast of NSW, and supported NSW colleagues in the provision of services during the crisis and in the ongoing recovery. Many of these organisations have had to rely on reserves and donations to cover the additional costs of supporting the additional services they are providing as a result of evacuees arriving in Canberra to stay with family or to find employment.

Community preparedness and resilience

July 2018 findings from the ACT Longitudinal Survey on Climate Change¹ show that more than one third (39.4%) of adults in the ACT have low resilience to extreme weather events, including heatwave, storm, flood, drought and bushfire. The common reasons for this are:

- Few (20.2%) people have emergency kits
- Very few (13.1%) people had discussed emergency planning with their household in the last twelve months
- Low rates of insurance for extreme weather events
- Renters, younger people, and people in apartments are particularly vulnerable.²

The survey findings also note that in addition to the low preparedness during a bushfire emergency, 25.9% of adults have asthma or other respiratory conditions that increase vulnerability to dust storms.³ In addition, even people with moderate levels of overall climate change resilience (for example, good individual resilience through income and social networks) lived in dwellings that are not protective during a heatwave and had low levels of extreme weather preparedness.⁴

These findings are consistent with our experience of the recent bushfire season. Although the ACT avoided significant bushfire risk, it was severely impacted by extreme smoke conditions that came with the bushfires. Heavy smoke blanketed the ACT for weeks; this was disruptive for all ACT residents and posed significant health risks to people with chronic conditions and people living in inadequate housing.

1 J Schirmer and B Yabsley, *Living Well in a Changing Climate: Findings of the 2018 ACT Longitudinal Survey on Climate Change*, University of Canberra and Health Research Institute, 2018.

2 *ibid*, p.79-81.

3 *ibid*, p.iv.

4 *ibid*.

ACTCOSS members working in mental health have also told us of increases in severe mental health issues in the Canberra community during the bushfires, including a significant increase in suicide attempts. Preparedness and resilience to the secondary bushfire effects must be considered going forward.

As the ACT Climate Council note:

The bushfire crisis was a terrifying reminder of how completely what we all think of as 'normal life' can be disrupted by the heating climate... the long duration of the fires and the ever-present threat of the smoke led people to become housebound, anxious and isolated. This start to 2020 makes the social isolation and anxiety accompanying the COVID-19 crisis all the more challenging.⁵

Major issues

Service disruption

The bushfires caused significant disruption to service delivery and many service cancellations because of staff absence due to persistent heavy smoke.

Staff with chronic conditions, particularly asthma and respiratory conditions, were unable to work. Many staff who live in the surrounding NSW region stayed there to fight fires and defend their homes and communities, and were unable to come to work. Many had to take time away from work to care for family members from the South Coast affected by fires. Other staff members were anxious about leaving their Canberra homes, traumatised by the 2003 fires.

Many individuals who live in NSW come to Canberra to access key services and were unable to do so because of the impact of fires and smoke.

Protection from smoke

Many providers of essential community and health services faced extreme difficulty accessing P2 masks for staff and clients.

Masks were eventually made available for vulnerable clients and services through pharmacies, the ACT Government and ACTCOSS. However, P2 masks do not safeguard against persistent, weeks-long smoke, particularly for staff who would normally work outside or whose work involves physical activity. These activities were necessarily disrupted, consistent with advice on staying indoors from ACT Health.

⁵ ACT Climate Change Council, *Submission to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements*, ACT Climate Change Council, April 2020, p.3.

Further, for staff and clients with at-risk health conditions, or who lived and worked in buildings that provided inadequate protection, P2 masks still feel short of adequate protection. One service working with clients highly vulnerable to the bushfire smoke noted to ACTCOSS:

What we can assume is that clients, like the rest of the community were living in hazardous levels of smoke indoors as well as out, and we can assume that those with fewer means had less opportunity to expel the smoke from their homes. There was also no equipment available that allowed anyone to measure the smoke inundation inside – we could only go by sense of smell.

Mental health support

The prolonged threat of bushfire on the ACT, and the persistent smoke that disrupted lives and risked residents' health, created a direct need for additional trauma, mental health and family support services.

ACT community services reported that clients who had experienced the 2003 Canberra bushfires experienced high levels of distress during the 2019-20 bushfire period.

One service told us they are concerned about the deep trauma impact for people due to the cumulative impact of the bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic. They have recommended an increased need for family counselling to address trauma and build resilience. ACTCOSS heard from one service that:

clients became increasingly anxious and required continual reassurance, particularly those parents/carers of children and young people who either had disabilities or other vulnerabilities.

Another service noted that there are high levels of fatigue among ACT staff in the community service sector as a result of working in bushfire and smoke conditions.

Resource allocation

Services had to reallocate their resources due to people coming to Canberra from fire-affected regions. In addition, those who service ACT and Southern NSW had to reallocate based on a greater need in Southern NSW.

One of the most significant resource gaps was vacant properties. ACTCOSS understands that housing providers were asked to fast track access to their vacant properties to provide relief from NSW evacuees, however, vacancies were limited if available at all because of existing ACT individuals and families waiting for accommodation. This resulted in newly homeless individuals and families moving into motels and other temporary accommodation.

Cost

All the services ACTCOSS heard from said that they did not receive any additional funding to deal with the impact of the bushfires on their work in the ACT, despite the above-mentioned issues.

Although there was disruption to services during the period, services still had increased expenditure due to purchasing of equipment such as masks and air purifiers where possible, but also due to increased needs for client support.

One service told ACTCOSS that due to the intense stress and anxiety in the community during the bushfire period, staff needed to remain in regular phone contact with their clients above and beyond their usual work. Staff particularly needed to check in with clients to ensure that people understood what was happening (for example, the hourly updates on the bushfire situation), and to ensure clients could achieve and maintain self-care, hygiene and access to essential supports.

In addition, particularly those working directly with clients in accommodation services had to increase direct client engagement due to the severe smoke. ACTCOSS has heard that several services were doing regular outreach to every client in shared and self-contained accommodation to ascertain the extent to which they were being affected by smoke, and what the service providers could do to alleviate the risks and impacts on their health and wellbeing.

Conclusion

The overall impact of the 2019-20 bushfire period on the ACT was not due to damage from fire itself, but due to the prolonged impact of heavy bushfire smoke on the ACT. In addition, the secondary mental health and trauma impact of the bushfires was significant and impacted both staff and clients in the community services sector. ACTCOSS notes that despite no major property damage or any loss of life in the ACT due to fires, the ACT experienced a natural disaster that exposed a lack of resilience and preparedness in several domains.

Now, there are significant combined pressures of the bushfire season and the COVID-19 pandemic. There has been almost no crisis-free period during 2020. Both the bushfire crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in:

- Pressure on the retail supply chain for essential services, particularly masks and health-related items
- Service disruption to essential community services
- Increased cost to community services due to requirements to implement new ways of working

- Significant physical and mental health issues and risks to service workers and clients.

As COVID-19 continues, ACTCOSS and our members hold deep concerns for the resilience of the community. In the immediate term, this has disrupted service delivery and service access and come at a financial cost to community services. For services working with families who experience marginalisation, poverty or disadvantage, it has been difficult to ensure ongoing connection between clients and the service system. Services have had to adapt quickly to ensure that clients do not fall through the cracks and have reported an increase in new clients who have not previously accessed the service system, and an increased complexity of issues from existing clients.

In the longer term, our members working in mental health and domestic and family violence predict that the protracted crises will have ongoing consequences due to compounding emotional, physical and financial stress on individuals and families. Both the bushfire season and COVID-19 have been physically alienating and forced people into their homes for extended periods of time. The impacts of this will continue to be seen, and we emphasise the importance of ensuring that recovery funding recognises the dual impact of the bushfire season and the COVID-19 pandemic.