



**Fw: Morwell Mine Fire Submission**

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Submission

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On the afternoon & evening of 9<sup>th</sup> Feb 2014 there were out of control fires north south and west of Morwell. All roads out were closed, except for the highway between Morwell and Traralgon, though at one stage this was closed too.

With no fire plans due to decision that the larger towns in Latrobe Valley were too big to ever require such, the only advice offered to Morwell residents was to drive to Moe or Traralgon, A lot of people in this town do not have access to private cars, there were no buses or trains running We were left to shelter in our hot houses (the temps were around 40C), for a long while with no power, or as many families did, gather in Mid Valley shopping centre or on the lawn in front of Kernot Hall, this being the designated Respite Centre. With the coal mine fire only minutes away at the Ridge it was, quite sensibly, decided not to open Kernot Hall.

Through the council facebook page the council was made aware of the potentially lethal situation of the large gathering of panicky scared families who begged for help with transporting them to Traralgon Respite Centre. Pleas to bring in buses and/or taxis were ignored with council re-issuing the useless advice for them to drive to safety, then the worker monitoring council facebook finished her shift and knocked off work for the day. Leaving the families with no support at all. Had the CFA not been able to stop the fire spreading there would have been many deaths.

The only source of information was delayed updates on CFA site, some updates on ABC radio, nothing at all on any other media with even ABC concentrating on non-stop reporting of Schappelle Corby's imminent release from jail while the fire emergencies happening in Victoria was ignored.

Through word of mouth I knew there were some evacuations on the west side of Morwell. Or at least, from what I've since been told, those residents including frail elderly residents were told to leave but not actually assisted to do so. Again, off Pension Week, they were left on their own.

But the majority of people sheltering in their homes were left to cope as best they could with no information or assurances at all.

This continued for days. Little if any information. Still trying to cope with my husband's recent death from cancer. He had also been my carer. Alone and isolated, choking on smoke and toxic fine ash through my home, stifling heat, unable to turn on air conditioner or open windows, unable to leave due to it being off Pension week, and nowhere to go anyhow.

I became very ill. Had major problems breathing, with very sore lungs, throat, ulcers on tongue & roof of mouth, skin rashes from the incessant dust, diarrhoea, nausea with periods of semi-consciousness and major chest pain. And intense worsening of symptoms of my already debilitating neurological illness. Unable to access medical help due to not enough money for taxi fare to either my doctor (\$35 each way) or to the hospital (\$14 each way) which has a long history of pathetic response to an illness they have little knowledge of. And with Gippsland Water replacing water mains along my street, day after day the water was turned off. Work continued despite the thick toxic smoke and clouds of dust. My home turned into a filthy dust and smoke covered hot breathless hell as I waited, bags packed, for the knock on my door to be evacuated.

Despite the rather odd safety award it has just been given, the health assessment centre (\$10 distant

each way) set up at the ambulance station was not accessible to anyone without a car. The nearest bus stop is at Mid Valley, several minutes walk away along very busy roads with no footpaths through thick smoke. For those not able-bodied with walking difficulties (walking frame, wheelchair, shuffling gait, lung and/or heart problems) this is a difficult dangerous, for many impossible. Nothing was put in place for these people with disabilities at all. Their needs were completely forgotten.

Same with the free public transport that eventually was offered. For the many who are unable to drive, unable to use buses or trains and rely completely upon taxis for transport, there was nothing in place to assist them to go to ambulance station, hospital, DHS emergency relief centre or to leave Morwell away from the toxic smoke. All pleas to have this clear breach of the Disability Discrimination Act addressed and to have such people included in the relief effort fell on deaf ears.

One wonders why we bother having such legislation when Dept of Health, Dept of Human Services, Shire Council and, at time of writing, even this Inquiry's Community Consultation which seems to consider consulting with service providers is an acceptable substitute for consulting people with disabilities themselves; and this in an area where many people with disabilities are not clients of those service providers who were in fact assessed as contributing to the dysfunction of the broken system in the Shut Out report. No service provider can possibly speak for me. Past experience proved they have no concept of my illness, even less any insight into my needs.

I remained alone, very ill and getting sicker as the days went on, unable to leave my house due to thick coal smoke and falling dust & flyash, from 9<sup>th</sup> Feb to 21<sup>st</sup> Feb, Friday, with nowhere to go until my daughter & family returned from their overseas holiday. Her husband drove to Morwell, collected me and drove me back to their home at Pakenham. He was only in this area a short time yet the toxic pollution affected his breathing. He normally has no health issues with his lungs. He had to help me into and out of the car. Over the weekend I was very ill in a great deal of pain and every breath causing intense sharp agony. I was coughing grey sputum as well as small amount of blood.

At Pakenham there was no news coverage at all of the fires. The radio reception only picked up ABC Melbourne, not ABC Gippsland. Only information available was late at night on the computer once my grandchildren were asleep. This too was piecemeal. I did manage to register on Red Cross site as an evacuee. Also via facebook I learned of DHS Emergency Relief one-off \$500 payment which could only be accessed at their Morwell office.

On Monday 24<sup>th</sup> Feb I was able to see a doctor in Pakenham who was very worried, diagnosing inflamed lungs & one lung with reduced function. He considered hospital admission but as I had no sign of infection deferred doing this unless I became worse. Instead he prescribed Seretide and other medication and allowed me to go back to my daughter's home. He wanted to see me again by the end of the week, but when I tried to get an appointment he was booked out.

On Thursday 27<sup>th</sup>, Pension Day, I was somewhat better. Not well by any means but having forgotten to take overdue bills and morphine prescriptions with me I was forced to return to Morwell. At this point I thought I would be able to see the Pakenham doctor the following day, not realising this wouldn't happen. I was in Morwell only about 4 hours.

I was almost arrested on the train, as after Premier Napthine's announcement of free travel for Morwell residents I hadn't bought a ticket. Thankfully the conductor chose to overlook my inadvertent offending.

Stepping from the train at Morwell the stench & smoke quickly affected my breathing. I caught a

taxi to my house.

As I opened my front door the movement caused a cloud of fine dust rise from where it coated inches deep across the floor. The next thing I noticed the smoke detector had been ripped out of the lounge room ceiling. It had been left on the coffee table on the other side of the room. During my absence someone had broken into my house, had gone through my kitchen cupboards and stolen a lot of food along with other items which I still cannot afford to replace. Hundreds of dollars worth. I rang the police who asked some questions then informed me they would not be able to attend my home that day, so I gave them my daughter's phone number and address for when the police would be able to investigate. She never received any call from them.

Indeed it took 3 more phone calls and a visit to the police station over the following 5 weeks before 2 police from the Investigation Squad finally turned up, failed to get fingerprints off items due to too long exposure to the greasy dusty flyash and to date have yet to return as promised to take a statement from me.

Meanwhile there were several re-assurances given in radio interviews that no break ins or looting occurred during the disaster. I have come across at least two other evacuees who also had break ins not properly investigated.

After reporting the break in and thefts I rang DHS who gave me a 3:00 pm appointment time at the Morwell DHS office. In the very area that people like me were being advised to stay away from. I attended on time but was kept waiting until well after 3:30 pm. While sitting in their reception/waiting area within a couple of minutes of each other, everyone there experienced headaches & symptoms consistent with carbon monoxide exposure.

I was taken to a room where a woman conducted an interview and I was given a plastic card with \$500 credit to be used at an ATM. Because of ATM charges I was not able to access the full amount.

Leaving DHS I walked up the street to council office to pay some off my rates. I became breathless during this short walk. Leaving the council office I walked along Commercial Rd to the train station. During this walk I had to stop at least 4 times, struggling to breathe, Ventolin puffer helped a tiny bit but by the time I had gone through the underpass and was behind the bus shelters I came very close to blacking out. Only the thought that if I collapsed on the footpath I might die kept me on my feet. How I made it up the ramp and into the station waiting room I still do not know. Once there, with more Ventolin, I began to recover a bit. In all my life I have never been so unable to breathe. The pain in my lungs was incredible.

I later reported this as I heard of another person who had collapsed in the same area and thought it likely that carbon monoxide was possibly pooling in this basin shaped hollow. No follow up investigation was done.

Yes, I should have allowed the station staff to ring an ambulance, but my only thought was to get on the train, due soon, and get out of the area. By the time I arrived at Nar Nar Goon station where my daughter and grandchildren were waiting, I was in a great deal of pain (despite taking morphine) and exhausted but at least my breathing was better if still very painful.

The next day Friday I was unable to see the Pakenham doctor so had to wait til Monday to see my usual doctor at Moe. Even though I didn't have an appointment his nurse put me in ahead of the other patients. My doctor was very worried, examined me, prescribed antibiotics and had there been any chance of getting a bed at the hospital would have had me admitted. When he found out I

was unable to return to Pakenham (my daughter and her family needed a break from my presence disrupting the household routine & her small active children were causing me more health problems) and had no choice but to return to Morwell, he gave me strict instructions NOT to go anywhere near the town centre. I paid my bills & had my prescriptions filled at Moe then caught a taxi home.

At least in Morwell I could listen to ABC Gippsland fire updates & felt less cut off from my community's crisis.

I was also able to get my door locks changed and assess how much stuff had been stolen, ring the police...again...and wait for them to turn up. It was the waiting for and not daring to leave my home empty in case the thieves returned that kept me from returning to Pakenham. I was also by now too ill to travel that far by train.

I had also heard the council was doing house to house door knocks to find out how residents were coping and to offer help where needed. It took at least another month for this to reach my door. The volunteers, from Healesville, were very nice & understanding. They provided printed information a dust mask I cannot use & took details including about my need for assistance, promised someone from the council would contact me. This still hasn't happened, nor at this stage likely to.

Dept of Human Services announced a second one-off Emergency Relief payment. I rang and was given an appointment of 3:00 pm at the Greek Church hall in Elgin St on Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> March.

This is what I wrote on Physical Disability Aust site on the 15 March in response to questions by the peak body. I apologise for the repetition:

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We know about the Moe relief centre and the taxi vouchers to be fetched then handed to drivers when you arrive there. We got that much listened to within a week of them finally opening the centre. We also managed to get a couple of supposedly comfortable couches for those unable to sit on hard plastic chairs for hours at a time, but clean air does not limit the use of perfumes so many of us are unable to tolerate, so for such people it is inaccessible.

However, Moe too should have been evacuated, along with the rest of the Latrobe Valley. So going to the town isn't much of an answer. The Red Cross relief centre is a compromise set up because govt has failed in its duty of care. You cannot get a health check there.

The health assessment centre at the inaccessible Morwell ambulance station has no doctors, only nurses with strict limitations on what the check ups consist of, is near a busy intersection complete with roundabout creating poor visibility at traffic comes at you from all directions, with no footpaths, no safe crossing points nor wheelchair access from the bus stop at the not so close shopping centre. No free taxis provided for this place.

Also with residents being advised to self-evacuate (and one-off only pittance handout by DHS very much hit and miss lottery who gets it) with no provision of help or somewhere to evacuate to, the only thing in place if free travel on public transport and the free train travel is only available at Morwell Station so if you leave without knowing when you are coming back so don't have a return free ticket you still have to pay to come back. This is V Line initiative, rather than govt emergency response. And no provision is in place for people unable to use buses or trains but rely on taxis to get around.

Same with the advice to get away from the toxic air for a day and take advantage of free fares and

entry to festivals, concerts, Melb zoo, museum, Healesville Sanctuary etc. Only available for those able to travel by bus or train. Tough bickies for people reliant on taxi for transport. The scouts have opened a couple of their camping grounds for at risk families to escape the poison environment, but only available if you have a car.

And even the emergency relief grant of \$500 per household for SOME health care card holders or (not advertised) concession card holders who have documented pre-existing heart or lung problems...only for some (and it's causing division in the community). Eligibility also doesn't count if the coal fire pollution has caused the heart or lungs ill health. It has to be pre-existing. It is also not available unless you ring up for an appointment, then go down to the DHS ad hoc centre at the Greek church hall, stand in line to have your name ticked off a list, then made to sit on end seat of two long rows of chairs, and as next in line is called, each person moves up, one seat at time, over and over, chair to chair, along first one line of chairs then the next line and when you have reached the final chair you are finally called to wend your way through and around closely packed chairs and circular dining tables, to be interviewed, in front to musical chair sitters in very noisy echoing hall. No hearing loops for the many hearing impaired in this community. You are publicly processed, cops looking on in case you get upset if your are among the many knocked back for the pittance. Then you are left to wend your way back past the tables then the chairs to the exit.

If you are unable to attend the venue, and it is nowhere near any bus stop or train station and no parking as cars line the street (forget disabled parking bays, they don't exist) and go through this ordeal, then you are simply on your own with no assistance available at all. And the venue is situated in exactly that part of town everyone at risk is being advised most important to stay away from. And it takes hours to go through this bull

.....  
What I didn't say in that forum was the shame and degradation I saw mothers with prams and small children, young middle aged and frail aged members of my community being forced to endure. Proud people who under normal circumstances never ask for nor accept handouts. Grandparents and great grandparents retirees who worked hard all their lives forced to go through this humiliation and treated like dirt struggling from chair to chair gripping walking frames, coughing and choking on the fetid air in their desperation. And so many turned away empty handed.

Is this Australia???

Then there were people unable to get Emergency Relief because they were couldn't go through the processing.

The wife of an older taxi driver, who having been discharged from a Melb hospital, sent home with oxygen to help her emphysema, unable to leave her bed, refused emergency relief to help get her out of town to clean air.

The woman next door, crippled from strokes, takes her 15 minutes crying in pain to walk from her house to her son's car to go to the doctor's, Refused assistance due to not being able to go to DHS centre.

I can name at least a dozen people in similar circumstances, left to endure poisonous conditions due to not being able to jump through the hoops.

The receptionist at my doctor's fielding phone call after phone call trying to explain to desperate callers why it was impossible for the over worked doctor to take time out to write dozens of letter confirming the asthma/asbestosis/heart/etc problems of patients to prove their qualification to DHS for emergency relief.

And women, older than me, who were refused for not being old enough.

Yet I needed no letter nor was I too young. There was no consistent system. It seems to depend on which DHS worker one dealt with.

The same goes for the clean up. Some get their floors vacuumed and mopped, others don't. No consistent criteria. And no clean up done properly. And detox not done at all.

Nor has the disaster finished impacting people.

I receive just over \$700 per fortnight, half of this goes straight to my home loan, the rest has to pay food, household bills, medication, taxi travel, rates & any & everything else that crops up. For fresh vegetables I depend on my garden. Some I eat fresh, and any excess I store in my freezer to help get through the winter months when the garden isn't producing. The coal fire ash killed most of my plants. So not only did I lose summer crops but as the cold weather approaches and gas & electricity heating bills soar, I am facing food shortage for the next several months with hard choices between medication and doctor's visits, or freezing without heater, or malnourishment and days between meals. With each choice impacting even further on my already worsened health. An illness that shouldn't be fatal, but after the assault by coal fire pollution and the prospect of inadequate nutrition and warmth, has now the very real probability of becoming so.

This is Australia.

Such things shouldn't happen here.

But it is.

And one thing that has been proven over and over during this whole disgraceful mess. The government doesn't give a damn. There is and never will be any help, for me nor for any of my neighbours.

I would add more to this submission but to do so would mean it would not arrive in time. If you wish to contact me to discuss anything I've written or for more information I will be happy to assist.

Thank you

Julia M Browell