Submission.
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Subject Morwell Mine Fire Submission

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Content of submission (you can choose multiple): Response to fire by Emergency Services, Response to fire by Public Health Officials, Response to fire by Other Government Agencies

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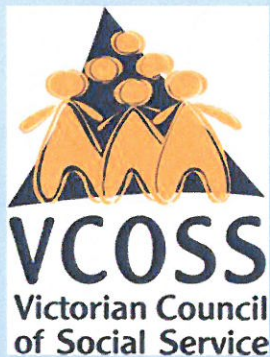AppleWebKit/537.36 (KHTML, like Gecko) Chrome/34.0.1847.131
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About VCOSS

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) is the peak body of the social and community sectors in Victoria. VCOSS works to ensure that all Victorians have access to and a fair share of the community's resources and services, through advocating for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society. VCOSS members reflect a wide diversity, with members ranging from large charities, sector peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups and individuals involved in social policy debates.

VCOSS raises awareness of the existence, causes and effects of poverty and inequality and advocates for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society. As well as promoting the wellbeing of those experiencing disadvantage and contributing to initiatives seeking to create a more just society, VCOSS provides a strong, non-political voice for the community sector.

Executive Summary

VCOSS welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry. This submission presents a range of issues and recommendations identified through consultation with VCOSS members and community sector organisations in Morwell affected by the Hazelwood fire.

The Hazelwood coal mine fire impacted the local community for many weeks and tested Victoria's emergency preparation, response, and recovery systems. The community sector organisation representatives who provided feedback for this submission praised the effort and commitment of emergency services personnel, local and state government departmental staff and community members who responded to the fire in ongoing and uncertain circumstances.

Representatives highlighted the:

- *Invaluable role played by the CFA and other emergency services;*
- *Leadership of the Fire Services Commissioner;*
- *Positive role played by Victoria Police;*
- *Effectiveness of the Health Assessment Centre; and*
- *Valuable role played by local community sector organisations.*

However, representatives also highlighted several issues to address to ensure Victoria is better prepared for future emergencies. In particular organisations highlighted a:

- *Lack of an early response to community concern;*
- *Lack of consultation with community organisations to ensure the safety and wellbeing of disadvantaged and vulnerable people;*
- *Need for improved communications; and*
- *Need for improved emergency management planning at the local level to better address the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable people*

Recommendations

As a result of consultations with community sector organisations in the Morwell region, VCOSS makes the following recommendations to the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry:

- Community sector organisations must be supported to build on existing relationships and to develop new links and partnerships with emergency management branches in local councils, state government departments, emergency services agencies and others, to improve their own and their clients' emergency preparedness, response and recovery.

- The needs of individuals and groups with distinct vulnerabilities must be better planned for in local emergency management planning.

- Local community service organisations should be consulted during the preparation of communications to ensure that messages are relevant to and will reach all population groups, including the vulnerable and disadvantaged.

- Communications should be delivered through a central body that combines emergency management services, government of all levels and local community service organisations.

- Communications should:
  o begin as early as possible in an emergency;
  o include an event-specific website and Facebook page that show all available information and is updated regularly;
  o specifically address the needs and concerns of local communities;
  o be expressed in clear, consistent, plain English;
  o be tailored to local communities and delivered to the various groups within communities;
  o be provided in easy to understand formats with the aid of visual comparisons; and
  o include practical information and advice.

- Local community organisations should be provided with relevant advice and information on an ongoing basis to enable them to inform the most vulnerable clients.

- Emergency management policies and planning must better account for and address the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable people and communities, to achieve improved emergency response, relief and recovery.

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Introduction

VCOSS welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry and congratulates the State Government on initiating it and consulting directly with fire affected people. Listening to feedback on the fire response from a wide range of people will provide an opportunity to improve emergency management policy, funding and operations. Consolidating expertise and learnings from the Hazelwood mine fire will help build a better management model for emergencies of this type.

VCOSS has played a role in emergency management since 2005, particularly around the long term drought and the 2006 bushfires in the Grampians, Gippsland and north-east Victoria. VCOSS was also involved in government planning and policy following the 2009 Victorian heatwave and bushfires. This included conducting community sector consultations and making a submission to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. VCOSS was also active in the response to the 2010-11 Victorian floods and made a submission to the 2011 Victorian Floods Review.

This Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry submission provides a statewide perspective on the responses to the fire to ensure the lessons learnt are recorded and used to improve planning and policy processes for future emergencies. The submission focuses on measures taken in respect of the health and wellbeing of the affected communities, addressing the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry's Terms of Reference No. 4:

4. *The adequacy and effectiveness of the response to the Hazelwood Coal Mine Fire by:*
    I. *the owner, operator and licensee of the Hazelwood Coal Mine;*
    II. *the emergency services; and*
    III. *other relevant government agencies, including environmental and public health officials, and, in particular, the measures taken in respect of the health and well-being of the affected communities by:*
    IV. *informing the affected communities of the Hazelwood Coal Mine Fire and about its known effects and risks; and*
    V. *responding to those effects on, and risks to, the affected communities.*

In preparing this submission, VCOSS consulted widely with Morwell community sector organisations, including:

- In-depth interviews with nine local community organisations; and
- Ongoing consultation with VCOSS members and other community sector organisations.

Morwell

Since its establishment around the 1870s, Morwell has become known as a major energy production centre for Victoria, and as the centre of Australia's coal mining and fossil-fuel power generation industry. The development of the Yallourn open cut coal mine and power station in the 1920s contributed to Morwell's development, providing employment and trade. Brown Coal Liquefaction Victoria was established in Morwell in 1983/84 and ran until 1991.

Thriving on the success of the power industry, Morwell grew into a city offering substantial housing and financial opportunities for its many residents. With the general growth of the Latrobe Valley, Morwell's success appeared destined to continue. However, development of the Mid Valley Shopping Centre in the early 1980s away from the city centre led to a decline of the Morwell central business district. The restructuring and privatisation of the State Electricity Commission in the 1990s led to massive job losses in the region, which further accelerated Morwell's decline. Amalgamation of the local councils saw the major civic centre move from Morwell to Traralgon. With the hope of leading to a revitalisation of the city centre, a new council building was constructed in Morwell in 2005. However this has had little success and Morwell has continued to struggle.

Australian Bureau of Statistics Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) data ranks areas in Australia for relative socio-economic advantage and disadvantage. The concept of advantage and disadvantage underpinning the SEIFA methodology is defined as people's access to material and social resources and their ability to participate in society; relative to what is commonly experienced or accepted by the wider community.

SEIFA data from 2011 shows that Morwell is one of the most disadvantaged towns in Victoria. Specific data shows that:

- Morwell has a significantly low-income population: the median weekly family income is around $930, against the Victorian median of $1460;
- Morwell's population is under-educated: just 22.56 per cent of the population has completed year 12 or equivalent, against a Victorian average of 40.2 per cent;
- Morwell's population is under-employed: the unemployment rate in Morwell sits at 12.1 per cent, against a Victorian average of 5.4 per cent; and
- Morwell has an increasingly aged population: the percentage of the population over 65 years of age sits at almost 20 per cent, against a Victorian average of 14.2 per cent.[1] This is expected to rise significantly over the coming 20 years.

Morwell also has a significant migrant and refugee population, including a large Sudanese community. In 2011, 8.4 per cent of the town's population reported needing help in their day-to-day lives due to disability.[2]

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[1] *2011 Census*, Australian Bureau of Statistics.
[2] Profile id, 2011, Community Profile, *Morwell need for assistance* http://profile.id.com.au/latrobe/assistance?WebID=120

Morwell's children are particularly vulnerable. The Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) - the measure of how young children in their first year of school are developing in Australian communities – shows children in Morwell to be at risk of significant developmental delay. The AEDI data measures five developmental domains as either 'on-track', 'at risk', or 'vulnerable'. The following data represents the percentage of vulnerable children in Morwell against the Victorian average across each of these domains in 2009. It should be noted that this data excludes children with special needs.

Victorian AEDI Data 2009 [3]

Developmental domain	Morwell	Victoria
Physical health and wellbeing	10.5%	7.7%
Social competence	14.3%	8.4%
Emotional maturity	15.2%	8.3%
Language and cognitive skills	13.1%	6.1%
Communication skills and general knowledge	13.5%	8.3%
Vulnerable on one or more domains	28.7%	20.2%
Vulnerable on two or more domains	18.6%	10.0%

While this data shows significant disadvantage in Morwell, local government, businesses, individuals and community sector organisations in the area are committed to assisting individuals, families and communities to overcome this.

At least 30 individual community and social service organisations are located in Morwell, providing advice, support and care to a wide range of individuals and families. A range of other community and social service organisations are located in nearby Moe, Traralgon and other surrounding areas, also provide services to Morwell residents.

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[3] VCAMS Data Outcomes and Evaluation Division, 2009, *Victorian Results from the Australian Early Development Index 2009; Statistical local area mapping supplement*, Office for Children and Portfolio Coordination, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Melbourne.

Hazelwood mine fire

On 9 February 2014 a disused part of the Hazelwood coal mine, near Morwell, was ignited by a grassfire burning on an extreme fire danger day. The coal mine fire burned for a number of weeks and was finally declared safe on 24 March 2014.

Local residents and organisations were significantly affected by smoke and ash as a result of the fire, as well as fluctuating carbon monoxide levels. Some schools were temporarily closed, with students relocated to Moe. Around 25,000 face masks were distributed to Morwell and Traralgon residents to filter out the fine particles and gases from coal fire smoke. The State Government revealed it had prepared evacuation plans for Morwell, but would only enact them in a worst case scenario of significantly elevated carbon monoxide levels.

The State Government also issued advice for temporary relocation of vulnerable residents in the southern areas of Morwell. Advice from the Chief Health Officer specifically recommended relocation for people aged over 65, pre-school aged children, pregnant women and anyone with a pre-existing heart or lung condition.

All emergencies are unique, and the Hazelwood mine fire was no exception. Complications arose from the continuing hot, dry weather, and difficulties in avoiding destabilising or flooding the mine with excess water. There was no certainty as to when the fire would be extinguished and the varying air quality caused concern for local residents. The ongoing smoke, ash and odour caused fatigue, stress and frustration among residents, businesses and other organisations, as well as emergency personnel.

> *"We were struggling to breathe and desperate for answers."*
>
> *"There has been an emotional cost to this – both actual and potential."*
>
> *"It's the fear of the unknown. What will be the long term health effects on the population?"*
>
> *- Morwell community organisations*

Morwell's disadvantaged status meant they were more heavily impacted by the emergency. Research clearly shows that with less resources, social support, mobility and housing options at their disposal, disadvantaged and vulnerable people are at risk of being unable or less able, in the face of an emergency, to prepare for, and respond to, as well as recover from, the hazards and damages intrinsic to a disaster or emergency.[4]

Disadvantaged populations often live in areas of greater hazard, have lower rates of emergency mitigation, preparedness and recovery preparedness, and have lower rates of emergency

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[4] Farber, A., 2007, 'Disaster Law and Inequality', *25 Journal of Law & Inequality. 297*, University of California, USA.

recovery responses. These groups are more likely to experience casualties, property damage, economic impacts, or adverse political impacts.[5]

The Hazelwood mine fire was a long term crisis that will have ongoing and pervasive economic and social impacts. The damage to property, businesses and community facilities, as well as social and health impacts, will have a profound effect in Morwell in the weeks, months and years to come.

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[5] National Research Council (NRC), 2006, *Facing hazards and disasters: Understanding human dimensions*, National Academy Press, Washington, D.C.

Impacts on community sector organisations

Emergencies present significant challenges to the health and human services sector generally and community service organisations in particular. Impacts include damage to organisational assets, staff unable to access their workplaces, negative psychosocial impacts on staff, surges in client demand, and disruption to supply chains and services (e.g. transport, internet, email, telephone).[6] [7] [8] A national survey conducted by the Australian Council of Social Services of its member organisations in 2012, found that 50 per cent of organisations that sustain serious damage in an emergency event would be out of operation for a week and that 25 per cent may never provide services again.[9] This indicates both a resilience gap in the community sector and a risk for those the clients who rely on the services provided.

Community sector organisations were impacted by the Hazelwood fire in multiple ways. Larger organisations were able to absorb much of the impact, but smaller organisations found this more difficult. Smoke and ash caused considerable disruption to day-to-day activities, as well as service delivery. There were ongoing issues around air conditioning, clean-ups, transport and staff health. There were also significant financial implications relating to relocation costs, staff leave, and reduced demand for services. Business continuity and continuity of care was compromised for all organisations. In addition all organisations expressed concern regarding their Occupation Health and Safety liabilities.

> "Our employer does not let us work in a home where the occupier smokes, so then why do they let us work in these conditions?"
>
> - Morwell community organisation employee

Some organisations closed premises following evacuation instructions, or due to the levels of smoke and ash. Some larger organisations were able to relocate entirely but found limited IT, telephone and other support restricted their ability to deliver services effectively. It was also very difficult to keep track of where staff and clients were located, as people came and went according to relocation recommendations. Smaller organisations found it very difficult to locate alternative premises, but were reluctant to close as clients were reliant on their services.

Some organisations experienced reduced demand due to smoke, instructions to stay indoors, relocations and client uncertainty as to whether service was open. Other organisations had services withdrawn as auspices they did not want to expose their staff to the smoke and ash. This

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[6] Queensland Council for Social Services, 2011, *QCOSS Submission to the Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry: Appendix 1: The Queensland Floods and the Community Services Sector: contribution, challenges and lessons for the future,* [online] qcoss.org.au/sites/default/.../Final%20Consultation%20summary.pdf, QCOSS.

[7] Victorian Council of Social Services, 2010, *Community Sector, climate change and environmental sustainability,* Briefing Paper 15 September 2010, VCOSS.

[8] Hawe, P. 2009, *Community recovery after the February 2009 Victorian bushfires: An evidence check rapid review brokered by the Sax Institute for the Public Health Branch,* Victorian Department of Community Services, Melbourne.

[9] Mallon, K, Hamilton, E, Black, M, Beem, B & Abs, J 2013, *Adapting the community sector for climate extremes: Extreme weather, climate change & the community sector – Risks and adaptations,* National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility, Gold Coast.

led to reduced income, which was very problematic for smaller organisations in particular. However, some organisations noted an increase in demand for services, especially those offering youth services.

> *"The (domestic violence) women's refuge was evacuated as it was in the path of fire. We moved clients into motels and hotels but then that area was being evacuated as well and we had to find alternative locations. There ended up being a 3-4 week loss of short term accommodation for domestic violence refuges as all the hotels and motels were booked out. This put women and children at real risk."*
>
> -Morwell community organisation

Many clients sought information and advice about the fire from community organisations, viewing them as a trusted source. Without access to relevant and up to date information, organisations expressed frustration that they were unable to assist with these requests with any confidence.

All organisations involved in this submission stated that their staff were impacted by the fires – both physically and psychologically. Many staff took sick leave due to the impacts of the fire. Respiratory problems were common, as were headaches, stinging eyes and skin irritations. Some staff requested to work in other locations. Some organisations were able to accommodate this, but others found it challenging.

Many organisations expressed concern regarding staff morale. The lack of information and the fear of the unknown caused significant stress. Evacuations caused stress among staff, and conflicts between professional obligations and personal concern caused emotional distress. Local staff were worried about the health effects on their children.

> *"The minimal information provided made decision making difficult. We always consider client and staff safety, and the lack of detailed information provided made this goal difficult."*
>
> - Morwell community organisation

Organisations expressed concern about direct care workers who are already on low incomes. Any reduction in their hours has a big impact on them. Organisations advised that many staff felt inadequate in their role – stating that they felt limited in their ability to assist clients.

Recommendation

- Community sector organisations must be supported to build on existing relationships and to develop new links and partnerships with emergency management branches in local councils, state government departments, emergency services agencies and others to improve their own and their clients' emergency preparedness, response and recovery.

Impacts on vulnerable clients

Victorian communities are varied in their composition and in their level of exposure to disaster risk. Those who experience social, economic, demographic, and housing circumstances that impede their ability to respond to, cope with, recover from, and adapt to a disaster or emergency are considered particularly vulnerable. Major disasters, both natural and human-caused, produce widespread disruption and loss for families and communities. For people who are disadvantaged, the impacts can be overwhelming.

Impacts from the Hazelwood fire on clients of community organisations were varied. Some organisations noted a reduced demand for services, particularly on days of thick smoke or high alert, when local residents were advised to stay indoors. In other instances demand for services increased as clients looked to their community organisations for advice and information about the fire. Organisations reported that continuity of care was problematic, and that this will have flow-on impacts into the future.

All organisations reflected on the concern, frustration and fear of long-term health impacts expressed by clients and the community generally. Organisations indicated that there is considerable fear that a similar mine fire will happen again. There is ongoing anger in the community against mine owners for exposing them to the risk, and also toward the government for lack of regulatory rigour. It was reflected that although there is a level of resiliency in Morwell, extremes like the mine fire are something that can never properly be prepared for.

Organisations noted that unlike other emergencies where there is a range of impacts on differing levels for different people, the entire Morwell community was affected. They were concerned there was no one left in the community with any support left to offer.

Organisations reflected considerably on the impacts of the fire and response on the following client groups:

Children and young people

Children and young people are particularly vulnerable in emergencies. This is particularly true of children and young people who are in out-of-home care, children who have child protection considerations and children of refugees and migrants.

Organisations advised that while some children and young people have immediate reactions, there will be longer term issues for those who take longer to process trauma. Children and young people also respond according to their parents reactions - this can lead to quite complex emotional and psychological issues.

"One mum got sick and had to spend ten days in hospital. This led to dad being primary carer of the kids. He suffered a decline in his mental health which has resulted in a relationship breakdown and a restraining order taken out. The whole family is suffering, especially the kids who have had to go through so much."

- Morwell community organisation

Organisations advised that children and young people who experienced the 2009 bushfires are at additional risk. It was noted that the initial bushfire that led to the mine fire took place on the fifth anniversary of the 2009 bushfires.

Traumatic experiences can amplify existing problems in children and young people, or interfere with development. New developmental stages or transitional points, such as starting school, create additional demands and stress. For example, organisations advised that children and young people who had relocated came back feeling disconnected from friends, and were concerned that they had fallen behind at school. This has led to increased referrals to youth services. Organisations predict that younger children will be increasingly referred, as well as those who were adolescents during the 2009 fires. Organisations expect a spike in demand at the first year anniversary of the mine fire.

Organisations observed that young people did not receive adequate information about the fire and its impact. Young people do not widely access mainstream news, TV or read fact sheets. Information needs to be provided via Facebook and other social media.

Aged people

Older and aged people are disproportionately impacted by disaster. It is not age alone that makes older people vulnerable – their vulnerabilities are generally due to factors associated with advancing age, such as impaired physical mobility, diminished sensory awareness, pre-existing health conditions, and social and economic constraints.

Organisations reported that aged clients had increased sleep and respiratory problems as a result of the Hazelwood mine fire. They stated that some aged clients who had worked at the mine and become sick in the past got sick again from the fire and that this was distressing for them.

District nurses were unable to provide home visits to clients in affected areas on days declared extreme by the EPA and phone services were provided as an alternative. On other days, district nurses were instructed to park as close as possible to clients' homes and stay there for as short a time as possible. This caused concern among staff about the quality of care that they were able to deliver, as well as for the welfare of their clients.

A critical issue for some organisations was that as a result of their clients' complex care needs, it was difficult to identify an alternative location to ensure their safety and care needs were supported.

It was noted that older people tend to prefer traditional media such as television, local papers and local radio.

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities

People who are new to Australia from non-English speaking backgrounds can often struggle to understand what is going on around them in everyday situations, and this intensifies in times of extreme weather or natural disaster. During disasters it can be difficult for people to find information about how to deal with the situation and where to get help. There is often an assumption that

people will access the internet or rely on television or radio for emergency alerts, but there are many people in non-English speaking background communities who rely on other forms of communication.

Organisations expressed significant concern that there had been no effort to engage with CALD communities and there were no translation services provided at respite or other centres.

CALD communities tend to use word of mouth rather than written information, but there was no targeted information provided to organisations specifically for CALD communities. Organisations advised that it is important to engage multiple community leaders, including women.

"Information on the websites was hard enough to read and understand for people who speak English. What about people whose second language is English?"

-Morwell community organisation

CALD communities did not understand the purpose of the Respite, Health Assessment or Recovery Centres and organisations reported that very few people from CALD communities attended these.

Organisations also expressed concern about the welfare of young Sudanese people and the impact of the fire in addition to the trauma they may have already experienced in their lives. Concern was expressed regarding how to address this when their engagement with health services is very low due to a lack of trust and understanding.

People with a disability

Significant gaps exist in current approaches to emergency management for people with a disability. Communications about emergency preparedness are often not in accessible formats, such as those tailored to the vision impaired. There are also often assumptions that people with disabilities are living in households and are dependent on others, when many are either living independently or as heads of households.

Organisations advised that children and young people with disabilities such as autism had trouble adapting to changes in their routines, and this this caused additional stress for families. Other organisations reported that older clients with disabilities found that their ability to manage stress and anxiety was compromised.

One organisation that provides day programs for people with disabilities noted with concern the tenuous position that the fire had placed its organisation in – despite an order to evacuate they had no choice but to accept clients to the day program as the clients' accommodation is not staffed during those hours.

"On really smoky days we relocated our day programs and did trips to the beach. It was very challenging trying to organise at short notice transport for 40 people with varying disabilities."

- Morwell community organisation

The perspectives of local people and organisations should form the basis of emergency management planning in order to adequately reflect local conditions and values. This will help

develop more accurate information about local vulnerabilities, including the needs of vulnerable people, and improve the understanding of problems and options for solving them.

Recommendation

- The needs of individuals and groups with distinct vulnerabilities must be better planned for in local emergency management planning.

Response

In response to the Hazelwood fire, the CFA, the Fire Services Commissioner, local police and other emergency services groups played key roles in providing leadership and information. Community organisations praised the efforts of each of these, in particular noting that 'on the ground' personnel were willing to assist with information and advice whether they were on duty or not.

Organisations also advised that the Health Assessment Centre was an excellent example of local partnering. The Centre was staffed with nurses from local community organisations as well as Ambulance Victoria. Organisations said this worked very well for the community, in having familiar people providing them with advice and information.

Organisations noted the effectiveness of the community-run Gippsland Fires Facebook page, stating that it posted health alerts, fire fighting updates, community meetings and more. Organisations said it had been a valuable and trusted way of keeping the community informed.

Organisations also noted that the community sector was quick to respond to the fires. Morwell Neighbourhood House, Anglicare and St Vincent de Paul were particularly highlighted as having played strong roles in providing the community with advice, resources and information. It was also noted that the Department of Health's aged care division was very quick in engaging with Health and Community Care (HACC) local managers to ensure the safety and wellbeing of HACC clients.

Community organisations felt that the community advisory group, when led by the local CFA, was very effective in providing leadership and information. Organisations reflected that there was some confusion when this was rolled into a bigger agency, stating that trust and relationships are a big part of rural communities, and the new group felt 'foreign' to people.

A broad range of communication and support services were established by local and state governments and other authorities to provide information and assistance to local residents. These included the:

- Information and Recovery Centre (Latrobe City Council);
- Community Health Assessment Centre (Ambulance Victoria);
- Community Respite and Relocation Assistance Centre (Department of Human Services);
- Financial assistance for respite and relocation (Department of Human Services);
- 1800 number for respite and relocation assistance;
- Door knocks and surveys (La Trobe City Council);
- Outreach activities (Victorian Council of Churches);
- Reunification services (Red Cross);
- Full page advertisements in the *La Trobe Valley Express*;
- Letterbox drops;
- Fact sheets (Chief Health Officer's website);
- Daily updates of firefighting tactics (CFA website);
- Daily health updates (Department of Health website);
- Daily recovery updates (Emergency Relief and Recovery Victoria website);
- Victorian Emergency Recovery Information Line;
- Vacuum cleaners, free buckets and sponges for clean-up, and carwash and laundry vouchers; and

- Clean-up assistance (Latrobe City Council).

While these initiatives were welcomed and provided much needed help, information and referral for people in Morwell impacted by the Hazelwood fire, organisations expressed several areas of concern.

Organisations reflected that overall there was not enough engagement with the local community in the response to the fire. It was felt that the community's concerns were not properly addressed from the outset and that this led to significant mistrust among the local community toward authorities and the government, and organisations stated that this trust has yet to be regained.

"The Health Department said to take 'bushfire smoke' precautions - but this wasn't a bushfire - this had many more chemicals and more potential risk."

- Morwell community organisation

The clean-up and relocation assistance for concession and low income households caused division within the community. Many workers in Morwell are on very low wages, including staff of community organisations, yet were not eligible for assistance. Further division was caused by the demarcation of 'South Morwell'.

Organisations observed that staff that were employed in the Respite and Recovery centres were often ill-equipped to deal with the levels of emotion and anger that were prevalent. It was noted that relief centres should be staffed by direct service workers with experience in crisis response, such as domestic violence workers.

Organisations also expressed concern that they would be dealing with the aftermath for a long time to come, and did not know if this was being planned for or funded accordingly. One organisation referred to the response as the "Morwell experiment - an example of where you don't want to be as a community".

"More attention must be given to monitoring and ensuring the health of communities that live alongside important state assets like coal mines and power stations."

- Morwell community organisation

The main area of concern for community organisations however was communications. Community organisations expressed significant concern regarding communications methods and content from authorities and the government. Organisations suggested that it appeared that communications and responses were coordinated from Melbourne and did not acknowledge nor adequately address residents' concerns.

Communications

Communicating and engaging with disadvantaged communities can be challenging. Studies indicate that emergency planning is less effective in meeting the needs and values of the disadvantaged compared to the general population across emergency preparedness and response, mitigation, and recovery.[10]

Research also indicates that disadvantaged groups can be distrustful of government and other authorities due to previous negative experiences, cultural history and life experiences.[11] In these instances, successful community engagement depends on the ability of authorities to establish ongoing relationships. The relationships between authorities and community members need to be built on trust. This is an ongoing, iterative process that, if cut short or otherwise impeded, can undermine previous efforts.[12]

The experiences of community sector organisations reflected this. Organisations stated that the timing, consistency and accuracy of communications were generally poor. All were dismayed that the community was given no official response to its concerns until almost a week after the fire began. By then, the local community felt there was denial that there was an issue and did not trust what they were being told. Messages were consistently that the smoke and ash would only have short term minor health effects, but personal experiences of the continuous acrid smoke, the lack of any monitoring of toxic gases, and the lack of any technical information, made people worried and suspicious.

Communications were provided in ways that did not engage the local community, and no attempt was made to provide information specifically targeted at aged people, CALD communities or young people. Most community organisations were also overlooked in the provision of communications. This meant that while clients were asking organisations for information and advice, organisations were not able to pass this on with any confidence.

All organisations stated that information and advice provided by authorities needed to be clearer and needed to address the specific health concerns that the community had. Organisations reflected that people's sense of place and individual worth was affected due to a feeling that the community didn't matter, that the response was inadequate, and that when information did start to flow that the community was being placated.

> *"The authorities said everything was OK, but staff could see all this dust and smoke - we could just look around and see that it wasn't ok."*
>
> - Morwell community organisation

Trust is a key element in communicating with communities during and following an emergency event. This is particularly true for both rural and disadvantaged communities. It is important that

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[10] Center for Sustainable Community Design, 2008, *Building Capacity in Six Disadvantaged Communities Vulnerable to Natural Disasters*, Institute for the Environment, University of North Carolina.
[11] Communications and Engagement Services, 2011, *Engaging Canberrans: A guide to community engagement*, Chief Minister and Cabinet Directorate, ACT Government.
[12] Brackertz, N., and Meredyth, D., 2008, *Social Inclusion of the Hard to Reach*, Swinburne Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne.

representatives of authorities or agencies have an understanding of local community values, are trusted and have positive interactions with all parties.

Effective communications generally have strong community links, whether they are being issued from a centre located in the community, or having other strong community links or conduits, as this encourages word-of-mouth and drop-in. Word-of-mouth takes time to develop, and it is clear that a good reputation and strong links to the local community are an important part of this process. Multi-agency approaches also work well for providing a wide range of support often vital for disadvantaged people. Familiar faces, known local staff and empathetic, skilled and well-trained people play a key role in this process.

Strategies that should be considered when communicating with people experiencing disadvantage include:

- Basing communications on informed planning – referring to relevant demographic and socio-cultural information;
- Working in partnership with community organisations;
- Identifying and meeting with local community leaders;
- Utilising the experience and expertise of local support workers;
- Publishing promotional materials in a variety of languages that includes visual representations for ease of comprehensions; and
- Providing translation and interpreter services.

"We are a leader in primary health, but due to poor communication in the early weeks it was difficult for us to play a role in protecting the community's health. It was very difficult to advocate when the focus was on the emergency response and the community health impact was secondary."

- Morwell community organisation

Recommendations

To improve communications of this type, it is recommended that:

- Local community service organisations should be consulted during the preparation of communications to ensure that messages are relevant to and will reach all population groups, including the vulnerable and disadvantaged;

- Communications should be delivered through a central body that combines emergency management services, government of all levels and local community service organisations;

- Communications should:
  - begin as early as possible in an emergency;
  - include an event-specific website and Facebook page that shows all available information and is updated regularly
  - specifically address the needs and concerns of local communities;
  - be expressed in clear, consistent, plain English;

- be tailored to local communities and delivered to the various groups within communities;
- be provided in easy to understand formats with the aid of visual comparisons; and
- include practical information and advice

- Local community organisations should be provided with relevant advice and information on an ongoing basis to enable them to inform the most vulnerable clients by phone call or house call as required.

Emergency management planning

Disadvantaged and vulnerable people, and the organisations that care for them, are frequently underrepresented in emergency planning processes. Consequently, emergency plans do not always reflect the unique conditions, concerns, capabilities or needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable communities.

"Gippsland has a disaster every season - where are the learnings and disaster plans? Why haven't we consolidated the expertise?"

-Morwell community organisation

Victorian emergency management policies make provisions to address communities' needs in relation to the preparation, response/relief and recovery phases of emergency management. However the needs of people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged have not been specifically considered within these, and there remain significant policy gaps in how to most effectively build the resilience of and meet the needs of these groups following an emergency event.

Victorian communities are becoming more diverse and the costs of disasters are rising. Paying more attention to the different needs of vulnerable people in emergency management planning will help address this diversity and mitigate material costs and human losses. Taking this approach in emergency management will provide policies and planning that is tailored to the needs of different communities, identifies and provides targeted assistance to the most disadvantaged communities, and assists the most vulnerable within communities.

Local community sector organisations work with the most vulnerable and disadvantaged Victorians on a day-to-day basis, and play a key role in assisting these people and communities following an emergency. Community sector organisations deliver important services across local communities and have in-depth knowledge of local people, history, risks and vulnerabilities. Emergency management planning must work much more closely with these organisations to assist in ensuring emergency plans best meet the needs of disadvantaged people.

However there are numerous and constant demands on community organisations. Some organisations, particularly smaller ones, barely have the resources or capacity to fulfil their own organisational goals, let alone further contribute to emergency management planning. They need support to play an effective role in emergency management planning.

Understanding and addressing disadvantage and vulnerability will encourage better prevention and preparedness, response/relief and recovery programs. Victoria's current emergency management reforms are an opportunity to ensure that the needs of all vulnerable people in Victorian communities are met prior to, during and following emergencies.

Recommendation

- Emergency management policies and planning must better account for and address the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable people and communities, to achieve improved emergency response, relief and recovery.

Appendix A: The community sector

Community sector organisations play an important role in assisting individuals, families and communities to overcome disadvantage. Community organisations assist and support individuals, families and communities in need, contributing to their wellbeing and quality of life through a vast range of services. Examples of services include:

- Advocacy;
- Alcohol and other drug support;
- Child welfare, child services and day care;
- Child protection and youth justice;
- Community development;
- Community health;
- Disability;
- Early childhood;
- Employment/training;
- Emergency relief (material aid and financial assistance);
- Family violence and sexual assault services;
- Financial counselling;
- Family and relationship services;
- Housing and homelessness services;
- Indigenous support;
- Information, advice and referral services;
- Legal services;
- Mental health services;
- Migrant, refugee and asylum seeker services;
- Neighbourhood houses and learning centres;
- Residential aged care and nursing homes, and other services for the aged and elderly; and
- Youth services.

People facing disadvantage have widely varying needs, and can require broad, targeted, simple or complex assistance. Many clients have complex, multiple needs. Community sector organisations are often these people's primary connection to the broader community and form the basis of their resilience in dealing with everyday adversity, as well as times of crisis such as emergency events.

Appendix B: Consultation

VCOSS consulted with the following organisations in preparing this submission:

- Anglicare Victoria (Morwell)   *Children, youth and family services*

- EW Tipping (Morwell)   *Disability services*

- Gippsland Multicultural Services   *Multicultural, migrant and refugee services*

- Headspace (Morwell)   *Youth mental health services*

- La Trobe Community Health Service   *Health and allied support services*

- Morwell Neighbourhood House   *Community services*

- Noah's Ark Inc. (Morwell)   *Child inclusion and disability services*

- Quantum Support Services   *Children, youth and family, child protection, housing and homelessness services*

- Southern Cross Care Victoria (Morwell)   *Aged care services*

VCOSS would like to thank each of these organisations for providing their valuable insight, feedback and suggestions in order to inform this submission.

Appendix C: Interviews

CEO or equivalent level staff from local community sector organisations were interviewed using the following questions:

Response

- What do you think worked well in terms of the response to the Hazelwood fire?

Overall impacts

- What was the impact of the fire and the response on your organisation?
- What was the impact of the fire and the response on your staff?
- What was the impact of the fire and the response on your clients?

Health impacts

- What, if any, were the health impacts as a result of the fire?
- Did the public information about the health impacts of the fire address the concerns that the community had?
- Did any of your clients attend the Respite Centre? Did the advice they were offered or the treatments they received help?
- Are there any ongoing health issues? If so, are they being addressed?

Relocation

- Was the information about relocation understood by your clients?
- Did any of your clients act on the relocation advice?
- Were your clients given advice about where they could relocate to?
- Was this information appropriate?
- What, if any, were the issues surrounding your clients relocating?

Recommendations

- What do you think could have been done better in terms of the public health advice?
- What do you think could have been done better in terms of the relocation advice?
- How do you think the public information could have better addressed the concerns and needs of Morwell residents?
- Do you have any other comments?