

FOR INTERNAL DHS STAFF USE ONLY

MORWELL FIRES – GUIDELINES FOR THE PAYMENT OF PERSONAL HARDSHIP RESPITE PAYMENTS, 20 FEBRUARY 2014

BACKGROUND

Since January and February 2014, multiple fires have been burning in the East Gippsland area impacting on residents.

The Morwell Hazelwood open-cut mine fire that commenced on the 9 February 2014 is of particular concern because of the number of complexities and issues centred on fire response issues, messaging to the community, air quality issues and health and community impacts.

Because of the health and environmental impacts on the Morwell community, the Victorian Department of Human Services (DHS) in conjunction with Latrobe City Council established a community respite centre at Moe Town Hall on 19 February 2014.

Community members presented to the respite centre citing that they wanted to leave Morwell because their health was being impacted by the smoke. These people sought financial assistance for transport (e.g. petrol) to relocate to relatives to achieve respite.

In response to the Hazelwood mine fire and impact on Morwell residents it was noted that current approvals for personal hardship assistance payments would be paid to assist eligible Morwell residents to achieve respite from the consequences of the fire already applied to this event.

COMMONWEALTH ASSISTANCE

Advice from the Victorian Department of Treasury and Finance (DTF) states that in terms of emergency relief assistance grant activation, that these grants are already activated and were announced for the February 2014 Bushfires for the local government area of Latrobe.

In addition, the Commonwealth has considered the State's request regarding the eligibility of costs associated with the establishment of

HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

respite centres (and inclusive of the payment of emergency relief assistance grants) for the Hazelwood Mine fire incident.

The Commonwealth has agreed that based on the description of the respite centres that it is consistent with the intention of 'personal hardship and distress' assistance under the Natural Disaster Relief & Recovery Assistance (NDRRA), which provides for reimbursement of costs associated with the establishment and operation of respite centres.

The Commonwealth also agrees the costs associated with transporting people to the respite centres for the purpose of providing support and information is also eligible for reimbursement.

ELIGIBILITY

Personal hardship assistance payments (PHAP) are provided to alleviate personal hardship arising from the effects of an emergency by helping to meet immediate essential health, safety and well-being needs of impacted individuals/households.

The PHAP policy and implementation guidelines (December 2012 & December 2013) apply to the assessment of impacted residents in Morwell.

There are additional criteria for Morwell residents to be eligible for personal hardship respite payments. This would include evidence of:

- hardship experienced by the smoke related to the fire
- proof of Morwell address as primary place of residence
- proof of low-income e.g. pension or benefit
- intention of relocation from Morwell for the purposes of respite, and the planned destination.

These additional eligibility criteria and payment amount/s have been applied because of the unique nature of this event.

HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

The amount of the personal hardship respite payment is \$500 per household.

DHS officers may approve more than \$500 per household, up to the capped amounts detailed in the PHAP policy and guidelines (i.e. up to \$1250 per household), by exception. Factors to consider are:

- the size of the household,
- where a family will relocate to for respite purposes
- mode of travel
- accommodation type e.g. whether the family will stay with family or in paid accommodation.

AVAILABILITY OF GRANTS

Personal hardship respite payments will be available for 14 days from the establishment and communication of a process to facilitate payments to impacted residents.

PROCESS TO OBTAIN GRANTS

Residents can obtain information in relation to personal hardship respite payments and their eligibility by:

- contacting DHS on 1800 006 468 – operations will be from 9 am to 5 pm daily.

DHS will discuss the eligibility requirements over the phone and should the resident be eligible, will make an appointment to speak with a DHS officer to fill out an application form and facilitate payment.

COMMUNICATIONS

Information on the availability of personal hardship respite payments will be provided via local channels of communications.