

WITNESS STATEMENT OF TRACIE LUND

I, Tracie Lund, of Traralgon, Victoria, state as follows:

Personal background

1. I currently reside in Traralgon. I live there with my husband and our three children.
2. I work in Morwell as the Coordinator of the Morwell Neighbourhood House & Learning Centre (**Neighbourhood House**). I became the coordinator of the Neighbourhood House in 2012.

Morwell Neighbourhood House & Learning Centre

3. The Neighbourhood House is a not for profit organisation funded by the Department of Human Services. The Neighbourhood House is supported by a Committee of Management made up of local residents.
4. The purpose of the Neighbourhood House is to provide a place for all members of the community to engage with each other, develop new skills, transition to work and further study, volunteer, become involved in community events, find out about other services and activities in the area, join a class or support group and take up an activity for fun and enjoyment.
5. The Neighbourhood House is located at 48-50 Beattie Street, Morwell. It is in the east of Morwell, close to an area where there is a lot of public housing.
6. The Neighbourhood House is primarily staffed by me and our receptionist Melinda. I am employed to work 30 hours per week. We also have a cleaner and a handyman who assists. We otherwise rely on volunteers to assist with our programs.
7. Our clients are diverse. A lot of our clients have little faith in authorities and the Government. We tried to help with this and I consider that we have made good progress in developing relationships with the community.

My experience with the Hazelwood Mine Fire

8. On the evening of 9 February 2014 I eagerly followed the news on the TV and radio in regard to the fires. I posted information on our Facebook page for clients of the Neighbourhood House.
9. Later that day I sent a message via Facebook to a local councillor offering Neighbourhood House as a respite centre if it was needed. She checked if

we could do that but as Morwell was now surrounded by fire it was deemed unsafe. Respite centres were set up at Traralgon & Moe instead.

10. The following day we decided to close the Neighbourhood House as we were not sure what roads were open/closed and what had been affected by the fire. Together with Melinda I rang all the clients we had on our database to advise them that the Neighbourhood House was closed, and to check that they were okay after the fire. At this stage our main concern was the bushfire and we were not aware of any problems with the mine. People were saying that they were experiencing headaches, sore throats and were feeling sick. However, we were not too concerned as we thought it was due to the bushfire.
11. On 11 February 2014 we re-opened the Neighbourhood House. We stayed open for the rest of the week. There was a lot of smoke in the air, and we were choking in it. People started to call us to say that they did not know what was going on. We didn't know either. We thought the fire would only last for a few days.
12. On 15 February 2014 I received a phone call from the CFA. They asked me whether I could open up the Neighbourhood House as an information centre. At this stage, I knew the fire was serious. I rang the Neighbourhood House chair person who was very supportive. We arranged for a number of volunteers to come in and everyone rallied around quickly. There are a lot of unsung heroes on the ground who did a lot of things very quickly.
13. We opened the Neighbourhood House on Sunday 16 February 2014, as an information point. We put together a flyer for an information session on 19 February 2014 at the Neighbourhood House. On Monday 17 February 2014 and Tuesday 18 February 2014, volunteers distributed the flyers in the area surrounding Neighbourhood House, in Morwell East. Each of the committee members of Neighbourhood House distributed the flyers in their streets and their local areas in Morwell. Those two days were both horrendous days because of the smoke and ash in the air. All the volunteers had sore heads and eyes from the smoke and ash. I was concerned about the volunteers' health. We had intended to distribute the flyers on Sunday beforehand but the conditions were too bad for our volunteers to be outside. They were told to wait until Monday when the conditions were slightly better.
14. The purpose of our information session was to try and reach all the people who would not attend the community meetings. We wanted a more informal setting for people to come in and ask questions.

15. Our first information session was held on Wednesday 19 February 2014. Around 50 people attended the session. The CFA invited all the major stakeholders, including EPA and the Health Department. I invited St Vincent de Paul to the first information session as well. , but only the CFA and Ambulance Victoria attended. Greens Senator Richard Di Natale also attended the information session. The CFA told me that the Department of Health would send a representative, but no one attended. The session got off to a testy start. People were very angry; however the paramedic from Ambulance Victoria was able to calm people down.
16. At the information session, residents made it very clear that they wanted more information about the potential health effects of the ongoing situation with the fires. The CFA told them that it was unclear how long the fires would burn however that they were throwing everything they had at the fires. The paramedic told us that there were health issues associated with smoke and that if people were experiencing symptoms they should see their doctor.
17. On Thursday 20 February 2014, I typed up all the health concerns reported by the residents. It was clear that the problem was across the town. I sent this information to the Latrobe City Council and the CFA engagement team at the Hazelwood mine fire by email. It was my understanding they were feeding the information that I provided to the Health department.
18. On 21 February 2014, I extended the invitation to Latrobe City Council and councillors to attend the following 5 information session
19. Following the first information session, the Neighbourhood House conducted information sessions every Tuesday, with the last being on 25 March 2014. The information sessions were exhausting and quite stressful. The sessions were used to update residents and promote services including the Emergency Relief Respite Centres, community information bus and the Health Assessment Centre.
20. The number of people who came to the sessions varied. The CFA attended every session and, at my request, made sure that the same person attended each week. Representatives of the MFB, EPA, the Department of Health and the Latrobe City Council also attended some of the sessions. I noticed that more people attended the information sessions when the Department of Health was there.
21. I published on our website a summary of each of the first three information sessions. However, I then decided that the summary was more like a

- summary of the stakeholders' comments and not the concerns of the community. I did not publish a summary for the other sessions as a result.
22. I also tried to keep our website and Facebook page up to date with the latest information for the community. I found that this was a hard process. I was ping ponging from different websites to get the right information. I found that the information was changing so quickly. I think that this amplified the distress in the community. It was very difficult to get clear and easy to follow information. The Government websites often published information that did not make sense to me. For example, it was very difficult to obtain any or any clear information about the assistance packages.
 23. It was also difficult to find out who was coordinating the assistance that was provided. A lady contacted me at the Neighbourhood House at one stage, to say that she had a holiday house and wanted to make it available to someone who needed to leave Morwell to get out of the smoke. I passed her details on to the Council, believing that it would know who was coordinating offers of assistance like this. I was really embarrassed when she rang me back a few weeks later, upset that no-one had contacted her to follow up her offer.
 24. The CFA used the Neighbourhood House as a route to speak to the community, however the other organisations did not follow their lead.
 25. There was great admiration for the CFA in the community and also the ambulance service. The community did not see the ambulance service as representatives of the Department of Health. There were no people from the Department of Health on the ground with the community and this caused a lot of anger. There seemed to be a disconnect between the top level messages and the services on the ground.
 26. In addition to the weekly information sessions, the Neighbourhood House also gave out free face masks to the community. The face masks were donated very early on by St Vincent de Paul. This was before face masks were provided to the general population. St Vincent de Paul asked me to promote the face masks on the Neighbourhood House website, as they did not use social media.
 27. Some people questioned why a charity was providing face masks, when this should have been done by the Council. This prompted me to contact the Council to let them know that they were failing to connect with the community.

28. The Neighbourhood House was not contacted by GDF Suez during the fire, and they did not send a representative to any of our information sessions. However, recently I was invited by them to a meeting with community agencies to talk about how they could assist the community. The meeting took place on 31 March 2014 at Saltbush Cafe. I put forward two projects that are run by the Neighbourhood House (lawnmower bank and a fridge for our kitchen), which I hope to receive assistance with.

Improvements for the future

29. There are a number of areas that the response to an emergency of this nature could be improved in the future. The delivery of information was terrible. There appeared to be a lot of talking and not much listening. People did not and still do not know what is safe. It was an epic fail. Clearer and more organised communication from the providers of relief and assistance is required.
30. There was a heavy reliance on the internet to provide the relevant information, however there are a lot of residents who are not connected to the internet.
31. The CFA was clear with the message that they were delivering to the community and went out of their way to hear the community's concerns. This was not the same with all the other agencies. The message was provided like a confused jigsaw puzzle which contributed to the distress of the community. I believe that the community's concerns are primarily directed at the Latrobe City Council, the Department of Health, and the Department of Human Service.
32. In the future I would suggest that the State Government agencies have more people on the ground to accurately assess the needs of the community. It would also help if the State Government agencies would work with the local agencies and people on the ground. In this case, I attempted on many occasion to escalate the concerns of the community to the Latrobe City Council, however it fell on deaf ears.
33. Further information was and is needed in regard to cleaning the ash from the fire.
34. I believe that the people of Morwell felt abandoned. I also believe that the community also saw the bucket program as an insult.

35. There is no Morwell South and I think it was offensive to the community to draw the imaginary line in the town.
36. In a bushfire the healing starts from within with members of the community assisting each other and working together. In the last few months the people of Morwell have felt divided and isolated and because of this there has not been the community healing that there normally would be in a disaster.
37. A lot of work will need to be done in the future to rebuild the Morwell community and also the residents' trust in the government.

TRACIE LUND