

13/2/14



**FIRE SERVICES
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Planning for and providing feedback from Community Meetings

Background

At the State Emergency Management Team meeting on Thursday 13 February 2014 there was extensive discussion on the importance of gathering accurate and timely feedback from community meetings. This is particularly important to ensure issues can be addressed at the level most appropriate, in a timely manner.

Issues highlighted were:

1. A level of representation from all relevant departments that can add value to the flow of information and advice to the community on relief and recovery issues.
2. Having experienced and senior members of local government present to support the conduct of community meetings.
3. Collection and sharing of key issues raised at the meeting in a timely manner to support situational awareness at all tiers of control.
4. The need to ensure awareness of all planned community meetings through advice to the SCC (date/time/location). Regional Controllers are to ensure that appropriate liaison occurs with senior local government officials regarding the organisation of and agency / departmental attendees at community meetings.

Principles for conducting and organising community meetings in emergencies

General principles

- Community meetings will be well advertised locally and regionally.
- Senior government and relevant non-government staff should attend to respond authoritatively and honestly to issues/questions.
- Trusted community leaders are included in all community meetings.
- Acknowledge the impact for people and communities.
- Respect all views when conducting meetings.
- Understand that the community have a right to know about the relief and recovery processes and the assistance/services available e.g. psychosocial support and practical assistance such as generators and water tanks etc.
- Provide clear/correct information – it is counter-productive to use communications that sound bureaucratic or public relations 'spin'. (e.g. imagine that one of your family members was at the meeting - how would you like them to hear the information and what support and advice would you want them to be given?)
- Meetings can act as a conduit for disseminating other forms of relevant communications such as print material e.g. application forms etc.



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Community meetings – general information

- Are a vital part of communication and community recovery.
- Establish early contact and provide information to the community.
- Allow for instant feedback from people, they can ask questions - you can spend time explaining issues rather than trying to condense information into written form.
- Can signal a turning point for people from response to recovery.
- Are an opportunity for people to reconnect, get information from one another, can at times be therapeutic and can build community cohesion.
- Are 'face to face' and are therefore a highly effective, efficient and trusted form of communication.
- Give people the opportunity to meet the 'decision-makers' and express their views.
- Are an effective way to gather information on the needs of community members.

Conducting meetings

Before:

- Source an MC to host the meeting that is respected, knowledgeable and experienced.
- Source senior experts or agency spokespeople that can provide correct/clear information.
- Prepare a clear agenda and structure that is communicated at the beginning of the meeting, this can be projected on a screen, written on a whiteboard or printed and distributed to people.
- Focus on the critical information that needs to be covered and ensure that you leave adequate time for questions and if possible provide an option for further feedback.
- Consider whether you require microphones, audio/visual facilities, food, or any other material aid.
- Ensure you have someone identified and responsible for recording the key issues/any outstanding questions at all community meetings.

During:

- Start the meeting by providing an overview of the agenda/provide a summary of the situation and indicate that there will be plenty of time for questions.
- Make sure all communication is active (asking questions, listening, receiving feedback) as well as passive (giving information and informing the public about what is happening).
- Be prepared that some people may be highly charged and emotional.
- If you do not have the answer, take contact details and indicate that you will get back to them.
- Where possible, assign a responsible person and a completion time to each action item.

After:

- Have the contact details of the speakers available.
- Make a list of all follow-ups committed to, and ensure they are followed up.
- Have rooms available for private discussion after the meeting (if possible).





- If needed, consider holding more specialised meetings for groups within the community, e.g. youth, women, people with a disability, businesses.

Resources Available

- A community meeting template is available (attached) in the IMT Tool Box (Public Information) and should be used to record a meeting summary and feedback. The IMT Tool Box also contains a number of resources for community meetings.

Post meeting Reporting to State Control Centre

- All community meeting information must be reported back to the SCC Public Information Unit asap (email- sccvic.pubinf@scc.vic.gov.au) using the 'Public Information Section Community Liaison Unit Meeting Summary/ feedback form'. Please provide contact details for any points needing clarification.
- This process is to ensure that the State Controller is aware of all major issues and these can be addressed in a timely/proactive manner.

Trevor White
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