

Submission Number: NND.001.01036

Submission Of: Pamela Joyce Skelton

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What is your submission based on? I am making this submission based on my professional knowledge, qualifications or experience or on behalf of a group or organisation

What is your area of professional expertise?

If you are lodging your submission on behalf of a group or organisation, what is the name of the group or organisation? St Georges Uniting Church & Disaster Relief Chaplaincy Network

Your Submission

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response worked well?

Best communication from BVSC mayor, Kristy McBain and Ian Campbell (aboutregional.com) and Marty Webster, RFS via ABC radio and community in-situ info sessions throughout the Shire.

RFS management in general.

SES response in Eden, presence, reassurance and information to evacuees at the sports ground Eden.

The repeated encouragement from all quarters to evacuate early.

The provision of services at the key evacuation centres, especially Tura Beach - (which allowed pets), Sapphire Club Merimbula and Bega.

People with mental illness were considered and special arrangements made for them early.

General groundswell of goodwill to respond to needs as they arose.

Survival of essential services in Eden such as ambulance, water-supplies, communication and power.

In your experience, what areas of the bushfire emergency response didn't work well?

People south and west of Eden and Eden residents saw Eden as their evacuation point at the Club and the wharf and sports ovals. The lack of a coherent message and timely continuation of communication re safety, services and where to be caused anxiety and anger and resistance from residents and locals, especially as the Border fire approached the town of Eden.

The township of Towamba, and other communities in Eden's hinterland lacked an adequate evacuation structure, lost power and communication and, on the back of the drought, lack of water storage on properties.

The evacuees from Mallacoota who came to Eden in their thousands needed fuel to move on to Canberra etc and fuel shortages - especially diesel, and misinformation also caused panic and aggression with some. Obviously the impossibility of return via the Princes Hwy to the South was a huge impact.

There was an emphasis on warnings to Eden residents and visitors to evacuate even though it had been previously indicated that Eden was a refuge point. There were many opinions on where the safest places were. Some thought they'd be in their canoes in the bay, others were going to be in the water at the beach, club buildings, churches, the open space at the wharf were all being chosen. Designated refuge points within the town would have been swamped if everyone had moved into these.

With the emphasis on evacuation and it often being pushed in a panic tone, there was little support for those who did feel safe to stay as they were adequately resourced and felt physically and psychologically able to defend or retreat to safety. Advice and support to these stayers would have saved lives and property if the fire had come to within Eden. With 4 days of warning that the fire was coming there were still people who stayed who had not cleared around their houses. Some who did go through the fire would have been better prepared with the offer to fill tanks. (This offer was made after the fires).

Anecdotally, some of the reasons that people stayed (or stayed to last minute) were the difficulty of moving their pets or stock or lack of transport.

Lack of coordination, especially matching Victorian info and NSW apps, and other of web-based information re the progress of the fire across the Border was a problem. Generally not updated frequently enough.

Coordination of the response from personnel from outside the town or outside the Shire was a problem. New arrivals, now in charge, not necessarily aware of even basic infrastructure ie location of key roads, significant buildings in town that would have been suitable for evacuation points, management of urban bush perceived as dangerous by some.

In your experience, what needs to change to improve arrangements for preparation, mitigation, response and recovery coordination for national natural disaster arrangements in Australia?

Recognition and decisive action on Climate Change.

Encouragement by government at all levels to help establish more localised, proactive, coordinated disaster response groups within towns to effect better planning for future disasters. This would include representatives from key localised industries and social services to undertake a coordinated, reasonable assessment of points of danger, to establish methods and practices to mitigate those risks and to establish respect and authority to act alongside emergency services at times of crisis. Assets within the community in terms of resources both material and human that can be relied upon to act in disasters need to be generally recognised within the community.

The recovery process to date has been complex and complicated by many factors. Survivors have emerged as they always do, with a vast variety of needs physical and social and mental. The community goodwill and 'knee-jerk' responses from some pop-up services is admirable on one hand but problematic from the view of established services having to cope with duplication and/or gaps of provisions, confusion as to where to go for what, repetition of story telling and form filling and changing 'goal-posts' for eligibility all not very positive features in the long

run. Survivors and volunteers drop out of the system when the task of reestablishing property and livelihoods is by no means complete because of disillusionment and frustration. It appears that there is the need for a more personalised, case-managed, option for those who would so choose it to help navigate the way forward. Individualised family service plans to overcome issues of confidentiality and mitigate the emotional toll on survivors who have various levels of literacy or access to online application methods, in my view would be helpful.

Is there anything else you would like to tell the Royal Commission?

There is a general view in Eden that the Royal Commission's information gathering visits to fire-affected areas were poorly advertised. I only learned of the sitting in Eden from someone outside the area the night before. Therefore there were sectors of the community and individuals who did not get a chance to make an oral presentation to commissioners on that occasion.

The Black Summer Fires and now the CoVid-19 crisis both point to tremendous resilience and community spirit of Australians. There will be thousands of people whose valuable efforts to act for the common good will go unacknowledged. I suggest a memorial day if not a public holiday intended to highlight stories of service and in order to reflect on how to redirect our corporate future in a changing climate, physical and social. The outcome of this commission must be of value to our children and grandchildren.

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