



20 May 2020

Senate Finance and Public Administration Committees  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Finance and Public Administration References Committee

**RE: Lessons to be learned in relation to the Australian bushfire season 2019-20**

The St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia Inc. ('the Society') welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission in response to the following items under the terms of reference namely

- (f) existing structures, measures and policies implemented by the Federal Government, charities and others to assist communities to recover from the 2019-20 bushfires, including the performance of the National Bushfire Recovery Agency
- (h) an examination of the physical and mental health impacts of bushfires on the population, and the Federal Government's response to those impacts, and
- any related matters.

**Background**

The Society is a lay Catholic charitable organisation that comprises over 60,000 volunteers and members and over 3,000 employees who provide on-the-ground assistance in the form of emergency relief and other support and community services across Australia.

The Society has consulted with its state and territory entities in preparing this submission. The information contained reflects the views of members and staff who provided direct relief to those affected by the 2019-20 bushfires through Vinnies' centres/shops, helplines, visits and attendance at community events and Recovery Centres.

To date, the Society has raised around \$23 million in donations, distributed and committed around \$13.5 million and assisted 4,835 people (NSW, ACT, Vic), mostly during the crisis phase. This has entailed:

- providing food, clothing, essential items and grocery vouchers to people who have lost everything
- providing cash payments of up to \$3,000 from the Vinnies Bushfire Appeal to those who have experienced significant property loss or damage during the emergency response phase and up to \$10,000 in the recovery phase, depending on assessed need
- paying unexpected bills as people go through the recovery process
- referring people to other organisations that provide crisis accommodation and specialised services
- assisting students returning to school with books, uniforms, laptops and dongles
- giving emotional support and practical assistance after homes are lost, and
- assisting with community development and recovery programs.

The Society also received an additional \$11.059 million in Commonwealth Emergency Relief Funding and has expended just over 40 per cent, through cash payments and other emergency relief assistance.

The Society has an extensive history of providing emergency assistance and delivers services with minimal overheads due to its large volunteer base in all states and territories. It is able to mobilise resources quickly in the aftermath of disasters, usually relying on local conference members who live in and are familiar with their local communities (for example, Black Friday bushfires, 2011 Brisbane floods, 2018 Cyclone Debbie, 2019 Townsville and NW Qld Floods).

The Society implemented a three-tiered service response to the bushfires that comprised:

- Tier 1 (Emergency), immediate to 6 weeks after the event. The person seeking assistance is assessed either face to face (eg Recovery Centre of Vinnies Conference) or over the phone (or online in SA). The person must meet criteria for Commonwealth Emergency Relief assistance (\$1000 cash payment) and Vinnies assistance (up to \$3000).  
This includes having experienced significant property loss or damage as a result of the fires and may take into account a person's loss of income from businesses. The person may also be under-insured or uninsured. Assessments are made by members (who often live in the same community), staff or in partnership with a Client Support Officer. Referrals to other services may be made.
- Tier 2 (Recovery), 6 weeks to three months after the event. The person seeking assistance is assessed, usually through a face to face meeting. The person may require additional specialist support through a case worker e.g. for addiction, mental health challenges, trauma and /or being at risk of becoming homeless. Further financial assistance up to \$10,000 is available.  
To qualify, the person must already be experiencing disadvantage prior to the bushfires and is now experiencing greater financial hardship. The person has suffered significant property loss or damage, was under-insured or uninsured, has limited prospects for short-term financial recovery and is experiencing some other crisis as a result of the bushfire.
- Tier 3 (Rebuilding), 6months+ after the event. Longer term requirements for assistance and support will be identified and provided for both individuals and communities. The response will be driven by needs assessments with communities.  
This will include community engagement and development activities.

Case studies are contained in the Society's Autumn 2020 edition of [The Record](#).

***Existing structures, measures and policies implemented by the Federal Government, charities and others to assist communities to recover from the 2019-20 bushfires, including the performance of the National Bushfire Recovery Agency***

*Commonwealth Grant Rules and Guidelines*

The Society appreciated the additional Commonwealth Emergency Relief funding made available to existing grant holders. However, the requirements that Government agencies must meet under the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013* (Cth) and the Commonwealth Grant Rules and Guidelines (CGRGs) make it very difficult for them to respond quickly. For instance, conducting open grant rounds or varying existing grant opportunity guidelines are lengthy processes and, as such, are not feasible in emergency situations.

Options are limited to funding only pre-defined activities specified in existing grant opportunity guidelines, through current grant agreement holders. This stymies opportunities to fund what is needed, through local services and businesses. Similarly, current grant agreement holders are limited to what they can sub-contract because they too are limited to only using Commonwealth grant funds on pre-defined activities specified in the grant opportunity guidelines. For example, health services are limited in the Lower South Coast NSW and it became very apparent, early on, that mental health support services were needed, were not available and could not be sub-contracted through Commonwealth grants, as they did not constitute emergency relief.

*Working collaboratively*

Working well collaboratively is not easy. It takes effort, resources, and a willingness to be collegiate, to co-operate and to compromise. For many agencies, this means operating differently, letting go and stepping outside a mind-set of "this is how we do things." This applies equally to governments, government agencies, charities, not-for-profit organisations, and businesses. This is even more difficult when expediency is essential, people are traumatised, and the usual systems that can be relied on are either not available or seriously compromised. At the end of the day, what matters is that people get the assistance they need in a timely and efficient way that does not further stress them. This requires Commonwealth, State and local governments and agencies, charities and businesses all working together.

The Society is open to working collaboratively with other agencies including charities, governments and government services, and businesses. In the immediate aftermath of the bushfires, this was done in many different ways, such as through attendance at Recovery Centres or community/information sessions, participating on local working groups (often established by local councils or business chambers) and working with local Land Councils, schools and parishes to coordinate service

responses. For example, South Australia developed strong relationships with all associated government departments and other external stakeholders and worked closely with case managers at the Recovery Centres who were managing traumatised applicants. This included aged applicants where a family member had come from interstate for support, those with mental health issues, those with disabilities, and those in financial hardship.

However, in some locations, there were very few pre-existing services, or the location itself was difficult to access due to road closures and/or infrastructure failure. Consequently, local Vinnies members were sometimes the only presence and, as such, were seen as first-responders. This is not the role of the Society, created unrealistic expectations, led to frustration on the part of those seeking assistance and burnt out our volunteers. Conversely, in other locations, multiple charities were in attendance. This worked well when the approach was coordinated, tasks or services were divvied up and roles and responsibilities were clearly defined, particularly between first responders and other support agencies. Unfortunately, this did not always occur and resulted in people becoming frustrated because they did not know who was providing what. Clearer delineation between services and the amounts and types of payments available through the charities and governments would benefit those seeking assistance.

#### *Case management*

Effective collaboration requires more than just co-location. Recovery Centres are ideal for implementing a case managed or team approach to assessing need. Either method ensures that those seeking assistance only need tell their story once, do not need to know what is available and where to get it, and receive all available assistance in a coordinated manner. It provides one seamless contact point for the person through which they can engage with 'the system', for as long as they need. A case management approach also ensures that each support service is provided with the information they need to tailor the assistance provided. Although there were case managers at some Recovery Centres, the handover of information between providers, particularly from first responders to other providers, was inadequate. People were frustrated about having to re-tell their stories multiple times to different agencies to get assistance.

#### *Timely data and standardised reporting*

Ideally, case management should be supported by an online, real-time data portal through which service providers can access, enter and update data. Being able to see what assistance has already been provided by governments and other charities would expedite the assessment process and avoid people having to provide the same information to multiple agencies.

Service and payment information would also be useful, not just in the immediate aftermath of the bushfire, but longer term, when people are transitioning from emergency to recovery phases. The Society is open to sharing data, so long as consent is obtained from those we assist. Privacy principles and legislation tend to be misused, particularly by government agencies, to restrict the multi-use of data, even when the owners of personal information have given express consent for their information to be shared.

Any data process must be efficient, accessible, accurate, done in real-time and easy to use. Currently, data entry efforts are being duplicated by different agencies across 'the system', with no linkage. Government reporting could also be streamlined if data files exported from the data portal are developed in a way that satisfies all Government reporting requirements.

Improved information sharing would enable all agencies to work better together, assess need quickly and allocate resources appropriately. It would reduce duplication of effort (in terms of administration and service delivery), eliminate gaps in service provision, reduce the risk of fraudulent activity, improve service planning, streamline reporting requirements and, most importantly, improve service responses.

#### *Planning data*

The nature of the fire, with some localised areas being hit very hard, meant that typical data analytics (such as population/census data at local government level) were of limited value. The inability to access up to date data at the Local Government Area level made response planning very difficult. Funding allocations based on population levels resulted in the less populated but more bushfire-affected areas not receiving funds commensurate with the high levels of demand being experienced in these areas. Data held by state government agencies and the Commonwealth government (such as number of houses and outbuildings damaged and destroyed, disaster recovery payment allowances and pensions) would have improved resource allocation and helped identify gaps earlier.

### *Outreach models*

Outreach models are essential to the service response as there will always be cohorts of the population who are unable or unwilling to come to town and seek assistance. These people tend to rely on information through agencies such as the NSW's Rural Fire Service (RFS). The Society worked closely with organisations such as the RFS and, where needed, conducted home visits. Some people did not attend town because they were busy trying to clear their properties during daylight hours, while others felt they could not leave their properties because they were concerned about looters. Some did not seek help because they felt that there were others who needed the help more than they did, while others felt that they could not seek assistance because their dwellings and outbuildings were not compliant with local council regulations. In short, there are many reasons why people do not engage with service systems, so alternative options must be made available. Some Recovery Centres implemented an outreach model but it has become apparent over time that increased outreach and other service options were needed.

For instance, the Society did not have a presence in Kangaroo Island but engaged an external provider with experience in managing mental health to collect and process applications for assistance. The Society also worked closely with the SA Recovery Centre who had a strong outreach program designed to engage those on the Island who either could not get to the Recovery Centre or chose not to do so.

### *Cash Payments*

The Society was grateful that the scope of Commonwealth Emergency Relief funding was expanded to include cash payments of up to \$1,000. However, to qualify, applicants had to demonstrate that they were at imminent risk of not being able to pay their bills, over 18 years of age and living or working in a bushfire area. The payment was limited to one per household and the applicant had to declare that they had not accessed any other Emergency Relief payments. The requirement of being 'at imminent risk of not being able to pay their bills' caused a lot of angst. Many people were reluctant to agree to this for many reasons including personal pride, even if they had been heavily impacted by the fires. Also, it is not uncommon for bush properties to have more than one home per address.

Many applicants had very high veterinary bills and became distressed when they could not pay them. Understandably, applicants were in a heightened emotional state due to the impact of their losses and these large, outstanding bills. Having a Vinnies member ask them if they were at imminent risk of not being able to pay their bills was considered inappropriate and insensitive. Additionally, expecting applicants to remember exactly what funds they had received and from whom meant that the question about whether they had previously accessed Emergency Relief payments was also seen as insensitive.

The Society conducted most assessments face to face, at Recovery Centres or through visits. This took time as members were also supporting people, determining what else was needed and how to get that assistance to them when road closures were in place and there were few other services. The time required to assess need and meet the additional criteria in order to make the Commonwealth Emergency Relief payments made it difficult to get these funds out quickly. The Society had foreshadowed that this would be an issue and requested that cash payments be increased from \$1,000 to up to \$3,000, during the grant negotiation stage in January 2020 but the Department of Social Services advised that the funding limit had been set by Government.

On the other hand, once an applicant satisfied the Society's assessment criteria for cash payments from its own Bushfire Appeal Fund, cash payments of \$3,000 could be expended as needed. This flexible, client-centred approach provided people with dignity and autonomy and is essential given that people's needs vary significantly.

In circumstances where there has been a sudden and significant event (that involves the damage or destruction of property), the capacity to make quick Government cash payments is vital to allaying fear and anxiety within a community. The Commonwealth Government is best placed to do this because many people already have a myGov account. As such, their identity has been verified and they have a Customer Reference Number (CRN). Checks can be made on where the person resides, what government assistance they are receiving and what they have claimed. Applications can be processed quickly, with payments automated. In short, the need to ask insensitive and inappropriate questions and gather evidence, at a time when people are traumatised, is reduced. Notably, the Government was already processing applications during this period for disaster recovery assistance and allowance payments.

### *Amount of Government Reporting*

Although the grant variations for additional Commonwealth Emergency Relief Funding indicated no changes to government reporting, weekly reports to the Department of Social Services were required

and this has only just been changed to fortnightly. Different fortnightly reports are also required by the National Bushfire Recovery Agency (NBRA). While the Society understands the need for reporting with respect to Commonwealth grants, there has been pressure to report regularly on bushfire donations and expend these funds early in the bushfire response. However, a significant portion of funding is required for the recovery phase, where the number of requests will be less than that experienced during the crisis phase but are likely to be more complex. A nationally consistent reporting framework would reduce the administrative burden of having to report on different items to multiple agencies.

As a registered charity, the Society already meets the Australian Charities and Not-for-profit Commission's (ACNC) reporting requirements. The additional reporting requirements with respect to bushfire donations (not Commonwealth grants) have added to the Society's administrative overheads.

#### *National Bushfire Recovery Agency (NBRA)*

The line of visibility with respect to how the NBRA uses information reported to it has not always been clear. Numerous requests for information (such as contact details by service locations) were frequent particularly during the emergency period, but development of apps and resources took too long and were not completed until after the emergency phase.

The length of time taken to establish and operationalise the NBRA meant that its effectiveness during the emergency period was difficult to gauge. Its role, during the recovery and rebuilding phases, may become more evident as it mobilises all levels of government services and agencies to help people rebuild their lives.

#### ***An examination of the physical and mental health impacts of bushfires on the population, and the Federal Government's response to those impacts, and***

##### *Commonwealth Mobile Service Centre*

The Commonwealth's Mobile Service Centre was an important resource for people. However, its operational hours were limited (from 9:00 to 4:00), it was not available on sequential days and not much notice given as to when it would be in a particular location. Recovery Centres also operated during business hours only. Consequently, many people were unable to get to the Mobile Service location or Recovery Centre as they could only do so after business hours. Daylight hours were spent cleaning up and attending to more basic needs.

##### *Primary Health Network and access to other services*

In general terms, medical services in the Far South Coast of New South Wales are limited at the best of times. Those presenting for assistance often needed referral to specialist trauma counselling. The time taken to provide information on and access to local mental health services available through the Primary Health Network was too long and, as outlined above, it was not possible to sub-contract these services using Commonwealth Emergency Relief funds.

Additionally, mental health and wellbeing are not limited to sessions by trained professionals. The need to hold community get-togethers and build community spirit is important. The Society's members are well positioned to assist with this, but this is now extremely difficult given social isolation requirements. Further, limited government funding has been made available to support these types of activities that are important to rebuilding community cohesion and spirit.

##### *Transitioning from emergency to recovery*

The Society is aware that transitioning from emergency to recovery can often bring frustration, exhaustion, despair, disappointment and sometimes blame. This will be exacerbated as communities are also dealing with COVID-19.

Transitioning to recovery means a shift from assisting individuals to assisting communities. However, individual assistance will still be provided, where required. The Society's service model accommodates fluidity between these levels to enable a full and tailored response to need. This is important as the Society is still receiving initial requests for emergency relief funding, some six to seven months after the bushfires. These people are only now coming to terms with their losses and making judgements on what they need to purchase to keep going. Over the coming months members will be providing additional support to individuals, which may be specialised and through a case worker, particularly for more complex matters. This includes assisting those living with disability, experiencing family violence, addiction, mental health challenges and trauma and who are at risk of homelessness beyond the temporary dislocation caused by the bushfires.

Members and volunteers are reporting that many people also feel as if they are in a holding pattern, unable to progress to recovery and move on with their lives as they are waiting on the state government to clear bushfire-affected areas. The Society would ordinarily assist in this re-building

phase through the funding of items such as essential household appliances, but this is difficult to do if people are unable to rebuild their homes or find suitable accommodation.

The Society is also relying on members to identify community needs. This is ordinarily done on the ground but, again, social isolation has made this difficult. Assistance might take the form of supporting a local men's shed, community hall or school group. The need will vary from community to community but may include activities such as:

- sending out bushfire recovery coordinators to consult with communities and develop local recovery plans
- conducting a grants round for communities to support re-building activities (in NSW)
- providing opportunities for the community to reconnect especially for people who have been displaced
- creating space and opportunities to hear the stories and strengths of the community
- connecting individuals, families and the wider community with key leaders, including Vinnies members
- creating and supporting online platforms to consult with isolated communities
- offering community training such as psychological first aid and managing complex behaviours
- facilitating or co-facilitating groups on relevant topics such as parenting, financial literacy

These activities are important, particularly as it is predicted that mental health issues are likely to increase in the coming months. However, these activities do not attract government funding and will be covered by the donations received through the Society's bushfire appeal.

### ***Any related matters***

#### *National Charter*

The Royal Commission has suggested that a National Charter between governments and charities might be a suitable means of improving disaster responses. The Society is mindful of the fundraising laws and of its obligation to donors to be clear about why funds are being collected and how they will be used. Donors make donations for many reasons, but it is reasonable to assume that the ethos of an organisation and its works are taken into account when making a donation. The Society's governing documents are defined by The Rule which outlines its Vision, Mission, Aspiration and Values and it would not be able to engage in activities that were contrary to these governing principles. It is likely that other charities operate in a similar way.

It is not clear how a National Charter would be operationalised, what it would mean for compliance with fundraising laws and how it could be done in a way that respects donor intent and aligns with the Society's governing principles. If all donated funds from across agencies are pooled, decision-making processes would need to be quick and responsive and include representation from all agencies. Lines of reporting and accountability would also need to be resolved. At the same time, those on-the-ground in local communities would also need latitude to be able to determine what is needed and how best to provide it.

#### *Fundraising laws*

The Society considers that fundraising laws in each state and territory are no longer fit-for-purpose as they were enacted at a time when appeals were conducted jurisdiction by jurisdiction, often door to door, or through charity shops or local events. They do not accommodate national, cross-jurisdictional online appeals that are now common. The Australian Law Reform Commission, in partnership with the ACNC, should review fundraising laws with a view to streamlining compliance processes for national charities, while at the same time honouring donor intent and improving transparency and accountability (to donors).

### ***Conclusion***

The Society believes the following aspects of its operations worked well:

- mobilising local conference members and volunteers - they are part of the community they serve, understand it, know what needs to be done and are best placed to work in partnership with key people to develop local solutions.
- spending time with people, being respectful and building trust – this enables the Society to provide the support that is needed and empowers people to be the best they can be.

- calling on members and volunteers from surrounding areas and working with other agencies to increase on the ground support where we do not have enough local people (such as Volunteering and Contact ACT)
- reinvesting in the local community by supporting local businesses (through vouchers and purchasing power) and helping to rebuild community capacity and resilience, and
- a willingness to work with other agencies.

The Society believes the following actions could improve service responses:

- recognising when immediacy is required and acting accordingly – this requires more agility across all levels of governments and agencies.
- implementing emergency provisions in grants administration, particularly through the Commonwealth Grant Rules and Guidelines, to increase the type of grant recipient and scope of activities delivered instead of being limited to operating within existing grant opportunity guidelines
- resourcing Services Australia to manage Government cash payments in emergency situations
- operationalising collaborative responses through a more structured approach that is informed and organised at the local level. A ‘bottom up, not top down’ principle should be applied, along with a clear delineation of responsibilities across agencies and improved case management.
- sharing data across all agencies, where appropriate consent is obtained. The principle of ‘ask once, use often’ should be applied. A data portal and reporting framework should be developed. This would improve service responses and planning, identify gaps, avoid duplication, detect fraud and streamline reporting.
- reviewing national fundraising laws as they are no longer fit for purpose, are complex and do not support national online fundraising activities – this would streamline compliance, accountability and transparency of donations.
- developing clear and consistent communications at the outset, with information on services by locations produced immediately
- taking action sooner and not waiting until bushfires have progressed across multiple states and territories before developing a coordinated response. As the Queensland fires occurred early in the season, service responses and assistance were limited and, in some locations, the bushfires came on top of hardship already being experienced, such as drought.

We thank you for the time you have given our submission. If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

Mr Toby oConnor  
**Chief Executive Officer**