

BEING TRAUMA INFORMED AND CONSIDERED WHEN RESPONDING TO VICTIMS OF VIOLENT CRIME AND DISASTERS

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Abstract

Since 2020, New South Wales, Australia came out of an eight-year drought and experienced the worst summer bushfires in 2019/20. This was quickly followed by the worldwide pandemic with international and national border closures and restrictions throughout 2020 and 2021. Then in 2022, devastating floods and storms made international headlines. Throughout this period, countless bio-security disasters affected agriculture as well as land and water farming included. The public and private sectors along with the not-for profit organisations were pushed beyond the capabilities to support victims of these disasters. Mental health was continuously front and centre and yet policy and response did not adequately meet the needs and expectations. Policy and response delivered what was thought was needed by the community and the community were not being listened to what they wanted. Working in each of these disasters, there were several considerations that were continually not being factored in planning: a) How to respond to disasters holistically as opposed to individually. b) How to effectively engage with the communities, businesses, and leaders to actively listen to their needs, wants and expectations. c) How to prepare the communities for the next disaster so that their mental health as well as their properties are resilient. d) Communities who had been resilient who were now at survival stage, providing the right level of support. e) What individual circumstances need to further be factored when responding to disaster trauma, for example, domestic and family violence, sexual assault, homelessness and socio-economic considerations, mental illness, and cognitive impairments as well as disabilities. Looking at the practical application of policy, programs and initiatives and key lessons from each of these disasters, the session will present how being trauma informed is not one dimensional. For example, during COVID-19 border closures and restrictions, victims of domestic and family violence were impeded from escaping. While the 2022 floods affected communities that are significantly disadvantaged socio-economically, hence the reason many sought refuge within floodplains became homeless and the recovery program purchased remaining homes that were shown to place people at significant risk contributing greater to the home shortage and homelessness issue. This session will take a broader look at trauma, considering its multi-dimensional impacts not only from violence, but as an added factor to disaster trauma, emergency management planning, policy and initiatives.

Keywords: *Trauma informed, disasters, violence, policy.*

1. Introduction – a New South Wales, Australia context

No matter where you are in the world, each country faces emergencies and disasters. As our climate changes, environmental or ‘natural’ disasters are becoming more frequent and their impact more devastating.

Bushfires, floods, drought, and a worldwide pandemic has swept through many countries in recent years. In Australia, and particularly New South Wales (NSW), all of these have been experienced in the past five to 10 years. Additionally, there have been several bio-security hazards that have affected agriculture, flora, and fauna. Other nations have experienced devastating snowstorms and blizzards, tsunamis, earthquakes, tornados, and hurricanes.






Governments and the non-government sector play a significant role in the response and recovery of these disasters. Our emergency services take a leading role with our defence forces often supporting due to the high demand to manage such disasters. Hospitals and shelters become overwhelmed, agencies race time to ensure essential services are restored and governments will be criticised for their failures to prepare communities, providing services and support fairly and equitably and not building communities to be resilient to withstand the impacts of disasters.

While these disasters are becoming more frequent, there are locations that are subject to greater frequency. For example:

- Brisbane, Queensland and the Northern Rivers of NSW, Australia have a higher risk of flood
- California, United States of America has the highest risk of earthquakes
- Japan location makes it vulnerable to tsunamis after earthquakes
- Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands and Hawaii are at the greatest risk of hurricanes
- Over the past 5 years, Africa, South America, Australia, Asia, Europe and United States have all experienced drought
- In the past 10 years, Australia, Russia, Canada, United States, Greece, and Africa have experienced devastating wildfires or bushfires.

Disaster planning (using an Australian lens of approach) considers who the key combat agencies are. In NSW, legislation – the State Emergency and Rescue Management Act (SERM Act) 1989, outlines which agency will lead recovery efforts as well as the role and responsibilities of supporting agency's when responding to disasters.

Figure 1. NSW Combat Agencies.

NSW combat agencies Specific control responsibilities				
NSW Police Force	Fire and Rescue NSW	NSW SES	NSW Health	NSW Department of Primary Industries
				
Law enforcement during a declaration Terrorist act Search and rescue	Fire (within a fire district) NSW Rural Fire Service (within a rural fire district) Hazardous material	Flood Storm and tempest Tsunami	Pandemic	Animal, plant disease, rodent or insect plague
Source: NSW State Emergency Management Plan (EMPLAN)				

Complementing the SERM Act is the EMPLAN, being the State Emergency Management Plan, providing a coordinated and comprehensive approach to emergency management. The Plan outlines actions, roles and activities across combat and supporting agencies, across jurisdictions, not-for-profit partners and the three levels of government (local, state, and federal). Within emergency management, the PPRR model is adopted universally within Australia.

Figure 2. Emergency Management Cycle.



2. Case study – the Northern Rivers floods

While planning for disaster response is comprehensive, it is the stages of the cycle that follow, recovery, preparedness, and prevention where government policy and community expectations may not align. In considering the Northern Rivers of NSW as a case study, several towns experienced flooding in 2011, 2017 and 2022, with each flood being more devastating than the prior flood. The 2022 flood and storm event saw water levels rise above 14 metres, leaving many residents stranded on their rooftops awaiting rescue. The event was described as a 1 in 100-year flood, with some landowners also experiencing landslides.

The devastation left people with homes that were either destroyed or beyond repair. Many people buy in the floodplains due to its affordability. However, due to the frequency and the damage from each flooding event, insurance prices increased, leaving many to have no insurance by the time the 2022 floods. Those who had no choice but to return to their homes were faced with mould and tried to make their homes liveable despite the health risks.

The State and Federal Government announced as their recovery package the most adaptive program to be delivered in Australia. Extensive flood mapping provided insight into locations throughout the region that presented the greatest risk to life or risk to property in the event of a 1 in 20-year flood.

The program introduced prioritised buying homeowners' homes in locations identified as risk to life at pre-flood value with the intention to enable homeowners to purchase no homes in towns and regions that are not at risk of flood. For homes where the risk to property was greater than the risk to life, the program provided for home-raising or home-retrofitting enabling the homes to be more resistant to the next flood.

However, as the program was being delivered, several key considerations emerged. To enable a pathway for homeowners to appeal flood mapping and eligibility criteria and outline their personal circumstances, a new policy and process was introduced with regards to individual and exceptional circumstances. Exceptional circumstances were limited and defined as:

- homeowner experiencing domestic and/or family abuse
- homeowner has been diagnosed with a serious psychiatric condition or terminal illness
- Homeowner is at serious risk of homelessness because of the flood event and exhausted other reasonable available assistance
- Homeowner is suffering from serious financial hardship because of the flood event
- Adjustments were made to or planned for the home due to physical or intellectual disabilities prior to the flood event which may affect their eligibility (for example, a house raising may not be suitable for a person with accessibility constraints).

Individual circumstances factored the homeowners age, disability or medical condition affecting their physical or cognitive abilities, being a refugee or asylum seeker and the impact of added trauma, homeowner being First Nations (Aboriginal) affecting 'sense of place' and cultural identity and disadvantaged associated with the homeowner's socio-economic status.

The benefit of these circumstances being factored allowed homeowners to demonstrate how they may be at risk to life despite their home being mapped as risk to property. There were examples of homeowners who due to their physical or cognitive impediments being unable to evacuate, placing them at greater risk. Appeals were upheld where domestic violence risk factors enabling victims and families to escape a violent home or the abuser who remained in the same town.

Importantly, the program was able to maintain integrity and transparency while being balanced with empathy. While the program may have continued to be faced with political, media and community scrutiny, the consideration and implementation of such a policy and process showed the need for trauma informed policy in disaster planning, in each stage of the emergency management cycle.

3. Trauma informed emergency management

In policy development and planning, we tend to base our expectations on past incidents, thinking the next major event will be like the last. Past experiences, while useful, may set a misleading expectation. While previous experiences can invoke meaningful change in the future, they should be relied on more as templates than as set paths.

Similarly, being trauma informed needs a template in each stage of emergency management. Further, expansion of being trauma informed is necessary to ensure that emergency management is person-centred. One critique many governments face is they are city focused in their policies. In NSW, government is often criticised for being 'Sydney-centric' and considering regional, rural, remote and border communities after the fact. This was particularly noted in the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The state of NSW shares its border with four jurisdictions; Queensland, Victoria, South

Australia, and the Australian Capital Territory. Residents of 29 local government areas in NSW regularly cross a border into adjacent states or territories and have strong social and economic ties with these communities.

Border closures and restrictions throughout 2020/21 impeded many people from accessing work, health care, education and essential goods and services. As a response ‘critical worker’ permits and ‘border-bubbles’ were established enabling people to move around without incurring penalties and minimising risk. Considerations for domestic violence were only factored after a victim attempting to escape her abuser in Victoria was stopped by law enforcement from entering NSW several times until police questioned her reason for crossing the border without a permit.

However, the lessons learnt from the response highlighted the importance of being community informed. The impact of policies, legislation and regulations throughout the pandemic emphasised how individuals, communities and businesses are impacted and respond to disasters and how circumstances need to be factored.

Trauma is just one type of vulnerability experienced by individuals and communities. Yet trauma is multi-faceted. Individuals and communities experience trauma from the disaster or emergency they have faced, be it flood, drought, bushfire or any other form. There is trauma from personal experiences outside of the disaster. Further, these traumas could be multi-faceted themselves and can create a situation of higher vulnerability, such as disability, domestic violence, asylum seeker or refugees and victims of crime.

When considering the preparedness stage of the emergency management cycle, vulnerability considerations mean taking steps to ensure safety before, during and after a disaster or emergency. This can include ensuring emerging communities who have escaped war and torture understand the role of combat agencies or the military in disasters and emergencies, that adaptive recovery solutions lead to further social impact, for example contributing to homelessness when housing stock and a housing crisis is already being experienced or people with a disability have access to information and have adequate planning and live simulated evacuation processes.

In Malibu, United States, the city coordinates social preparedness programs for the businesses and the community, providing skills and understanding of disasters to enhance adherence to evacuation warnings, strengthen social cohesion in responding to a disaster, and ensuring an informed community increasing capacity to prevent, prepare, recover and be more resilient by understanding the psychology of the disaster and the operations of emergency services.

The United Nations Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015 –2030, outlines how enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response is a key priority. Reducing risk, exposure and vulnerability because of a disaster is captured within this priority. It captures the principal that the trauma of a disaster creates vulnerability. Therefore, a people centred approach ensures that those in our communities who already have vulnerabilities, including women, children, youth, persons with disabilities and mental health/illnesses, socio-economically challenged, migrants, indigenous, elderly, regional and remote geographically are included in the consultation and design of policies, plans and emergency management.

To successfully achieve this, a whole-of-society approach is critical in emergency preparedness to enable recovery. This approach therefore requires engagement and collaboration among government agencies at each level, the private and not-for-profit sector as well as community organisations.

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