



OUR COMMUNITY SUPPORTING RECOVERY

BUSHFIRE FORUM - FOLLOW UP SESSION

Bushfire Forum - Our Community Supporting Recovery Follow Up Session – June 2020

REPORT

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Introduction

At the beginning of 2020, the Upper Murray region was reeling from the impacts of bushfires and many people were involved with recovery efforts – some as a part of agencies, and many as ‘accidental’ leaders – those who others seek out for information and advice, and who find themselves in co-ordination and connection roles.

Experience following the 2009 fires shows that long term community recovery is best led by community people, but they need support to understand the bigger picture, and the long-term nature of recovery.

Regional Development Consultant Susan Benedyka and Alpine Valleys Community Leadership combined to stage the event - *Bushfire forum - Our Community Supporting Recovery* in Beechworth on 23 February, 2020. The forum was a practical, hands on event with key speakers discussing bushfire impacts from past experience followed by interactive workshops on ways to connect with and offer support to fire-impacted communities.

The event was attended by almost 200 participants including government and support agencies operating in the region. The key discussions were captured in a report, which can be found on the AVCL website at <http://avclp.org.au/bushfire-forum-our-community-supporting-recovery>. The Report can be accessed directly at <https://bit.ly/3ilXBqX>

After the initial *Bushfire Forum*, organisers and participants realised the need to hold a follow up session within the following 3 months to ensure that there was a continuation of supporting local community leaders and their efforts (and continuing to build capacity) whilst maintaining ongoing communication between the community and government.

The free online Bushfire Forum - Follow Up Session was held on Sunday 21 June 2020, 11am – 12:30pm via Zoom. This Report covers the conversations and outcomes of the Bushfire Forum Follow up Session.

Purpose of Forum

The objectives of the Bushfire Forum – Follow Up Session were:

- To update community leaders and community members on Bushfire Recovery activities (since the first forum in February 2020)
- To build on the coordinated community led approach to recovery activities, events, and actions
- To learn and practice useful tools for one-on-one and one-to-many conversations and recovery actions – e.g. Cards for Calamity; Resilience systems thinking

The agenda covered:

- **Lee Miezis**, CEO of Bushfire Recovery Victoria provided an update from Bushfire Recovery Victoria.
- **Dr Helen Haines MP**, Independent Federal Member for Indi provided an update from a Federal level, including meetings and consultation with Mr Andrew Colvin APM OAM, Coordinator, National Bushfire Recovery Agency.
- **Paul Ryan**, Director of the Australian Resilience Centre, provided an overview of how individuals and communities would be coping at this stage of the recovery process, and introduced systems thinking.
- **Jolie Wills**, Co-founder & Director of Hummingly, NZ, ran a practical how-to session using Cards for Calamity designed by Hummingly to create conversations after disasters.
- Check-in and small group discussion to provide updates about community led activities that have occurred since the February forum and what has worked well and what gaps have been identified.

Presentation Summaries

Speaker presentations can be viewed on the AVCL website at: <http://avclp.org.au/bushfire-forum-our-community-supporting-recovery/>

Lee Miezis -- CEO of Bushfire Recovery Victoria

- Provided an update on BRV activities and funding allocations.

Dr Helen Haines MP -- Independent Federal Member for Indi

- Provided an update on her bushfire advocacy work at Federal Government level on behalf of Upper Murray communities.

Paul Ryan -- Director of the Australian Resilience Centre

- Paul Ryan presented a session on Building Resilience for Positive Futures. The presentation provided an overview of defining the different types of resilience: disaster, personal, community, systems and psychological.
- Paul provided information about how we orientate after a disaster and how we process stress over time and the fundamental steps along this path.

Jolie Wills -- Co-founder & Director of Hummingly, NZ

- Jolie Wills presented a guide to community recovery conversations. The presentation included an overview of how to use the Cards for Calamity in a group setting to assist with normalising the reactions people experience, encourage social connection and peer support, support group-efficacy and constructive problem-solving, and provide a recovery-knowledge base for informed decision making.
- Jolie also presented a how-to workshop on using the Cards for Calamity in a variety of settings and provided an overview of the framework which consists of starting the conversation, finding out what's happening for people, providing a space for emotions and moving towards the constructive.

Participant Interaction

Small Group Discussion

Attendees were assigned to random groups in virtual breakout rooms. Each group were asked three questions to reflect on and provide updates and feedback.

Question 1: What has happened since the last forum?

- Due to COVID-19 face to face community engagement has significantly reduced.
- Job losses due to COVID-19 have been considerable for 16-year old's and over.
- Older people in the most affected communities are not engaging online.
- Younger people are focused on schooling, so community discussions have reduced.
- Economic impact focus on getting people back in town; had to quickly pivot to change overall operating model due to COVID-19 and also changed the way clean-up was delivered.
- No live performances or events due to COVID-19.
- DELWP on the ground, heavily involved in practical side - opening roads, fencing, biodiversity. Team will be implementing things to restore the community - particular focus on Towong. Significant priority.

Question 2: What has been working well?

- Headspace has been connecting young people through to Centrelink workers.
- A new creative recovery initiative was launched with grants available in July.
- Upper Murray Support Services – Towong Local Area Recovery Officers (LAROs), Gateway Health Case Managers and AgBiz Assist are working well together.
- Startup Shakeup - Innovate North East Vic Startups – a consortium including Benalla Rural City Council with Rural City of Wangaratta, Mansfield Shire Council and Indigo Shire Council has conducted a program of events to build start-up capacity in North East Victoria - <https://startupshakeup.co>
- RDV provided seed funding to pilot a series of websites for online sales - helping those affected by the visitor economy Buy from Beechworth, Bright, Myrtleford. These were enacted by Start Up Shake Up.
- People really committed to working with affected communities and households.
- Grassroots groups Blazeaid, Fencing for Fires, Tradies for Fire Affected Communities have been making a tangible impact on the ground.
- Primary Producers grants have been taken up well.
- Grocon doing a good job in cleaning debris and sites, but it is a slow process.

Question 3: What are the gaps that are now apparent?

- Slow approval of Rural Finance concessional loan resulting in business unable to re-open
- Grant gaps – eg elderly farmers with no ABN; and when the farm being leased.
- Clients who haven't sought assistance as yet – they are still coming forward.
- Rural Financial Counsellor based in Corryong is desperately needed.
- COVID19 has created significant gaps around visibility to community. Huge amount happening but the focus of State and Commonwealth Government is COVID19 so ability to share messages is not the same.
- People working hard on the ground but still difficult to get the message out.
- An issue which has been raised in the Upper Murray region is the availability and uptake of temporary housing for people who lost their house.

- Community and some LGAs appear slow to motivate to prepare adequately for coming bushfire season – although this is an emerging community anxiety.
- People looking to rebuild need more than planning advice, need independent building advice.
- Connecting the resources available "preventing the silos".
- Getting the information out to people to what is available
- Mapping all the resources we have for fire recovery that every person can access
- People wanting local contact and face to face but unable throughout COVID-19

More detailed discussion notes are included in Appendix 2.

Contact Details

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Agenda

Bushfire Forum – Our Community Supporting Recovery

Date: Sunday 21 June, 2020

Time: 11am-12.30pm

Location: Via Zoom -

<https://theexecutiveconnection.zoom.us/j/93149127581?pwd=UkxkeUdtbFVBYXpSUlRPNW90U1RLUT09>

Meeting ID: 931 4912 7581

Password: 507093

Objectives:

- To update community leaders and community members on Bushfire Recovery activities (since the first forum in February 2020)
- To build on the coordinated community led approach to recovery activities, events, and actions
- To learn and practice useful tools for one on one and one-to-many conversations and recovery actions – e.g. Cards for Calamity; Resilience

Agenda

Time	Session	Presenter/Process
10.45am	Zoom meeting opens Participants arrive	
11.00am	Welcome Acknowledgement of country Outline of the session Protocol – mikes off when not speaking; meeting being recorded Update since our previous Bushfire Recovery forum	Susan Bedyka Roberta Baker
11.05 am	Check in Online poll	SB Poll set up in zoom
11.10 am	Small group discussion - Breakout Rooms Introductions What has happened since the last forum? What has been working well? What are the gaps that are now apparent?	SB Random groupings 4-5 per room (Note taker in each group to photograph and send back to us)
11.25 am	Update on Bushfire Recovery support (Federal and State level) Dr Helen Haines MP, Independent Federal Member for Indi Mr Lee Miezi, CEO, Bushfire Recovery Victoria	SB to intro 10 mins 10 mins Chat function Q&A
11.50 am	Resilience – what is it, what does it mean, how does it apply now? Paul Ryan	SB to intro 15 mins
12.05 am	Community Recovery Conversation Jolie Wills – using Calamity Cards	SB to intro Slides plus breakouts 3 per room
12.30 pm	Thanks, next steps and close	SB

Appendix 2: Small Group Discussion Notes

Small Group Discussion – Breakout Rooms feedback/comments

Small group discussions were held to advance the conversations, update on the progress to date, and identify barriers.

Participants names have been used where appropriate.

Group 1: Lee, Bushfire Recovery Vic; Sue, CFA Community education; Georgia, Headspace; Joe – Regional Arts Vic; Joan Simms

What have we done since?

- CFA
 - Worked out of Wodonga ICC during, delivering communications and information
 - Since forum, community engagement has shut down face-to-face (due to COVID)
 - Older people not engaging online
 - Focus on surviving frost and less on fire
 - BoM coming to talk bushfire weather in the area (hoping we can still do this)
- Headspace: Similar story for 12-25 yrs end of the spectrum
 - A lot of young people focused on schooling, so community discussion for this age cohort not gaining traction
 - Feeling safe in bubble at home, not wanting to talk about fire
 - Going back to school reasonable transition for a lot
 - Job losses due to COVID for 16+ has been huge
 - Headspace connects young people through to Centrelink worker
- BRV – solely focused on recovery
 - This event has been more challenging than any other
 - COVID impact on bringing people together to drive their own recovery very difficult
 - Economic impact focus on getting people back in town; had to quickly pivot to change overall operating model
 - Also had to change way clean-up was delivered
 - Community recovery meetings through Zoom instead of through Town hall planning sessions
 - Revisiting grant programs, about to roll out based on recent change of restrictions
- Regional Arts Victoria
 - Pivoting following COVID-19 – no live performances or events
 - People on the ground with small grants
 - Program launched: <http://www.rav.net.au/news/funding/creative-recovery-for-bushfire-affected-regions>

Group 2: Reported by Lyn Shannon

- Upper Murray Support Services – Towong LARO's (Local Area Recovery Officers), Gateway Health Case Managers and AgBiz Assist are working well together.
- Gaps
 - Slow approval of Rural Finance concessional loan resulting in some businesses unable to re-open
 - Grant gaps – elderly farmers with no ABN and farm being leased
 - There are clients who haven't sought assistance as yet – they are still coming forward
 - Rural Financial Counsellor based in Corryong is desperately needed

Group 3: Clare, Emma, Jolie, Kerry

What's happened since Feb:

- Emma
 - Regional Arts Victoria - funding from creative Victoria - will include full time position for 16 months for creative recovery officer
 - Also Start Up Shake up - RDV provided seed funding to pilot a series of websites for online sales - helping those affected by the visitor economy Buy from Beechworth/Bright/Myrtleford etc
 - What's working well - hoping to get it to a point where it becomes a permanent income stream for small businesses
- Digital working group chaired by Jon Hutchins - Buy From initiative came from this working group
- Clare DELWP - Regional Director
 - On the ground, heavily involved in practical side - opening roads, fencing, biodiversity. Team will be implementing things to restore the community - particular focus on Towong. Significant priority
 - What's working well: people really committed to working with communities and households affected,
 - Gaps: COVID19 has created significant gaps around visibility to community. Huge amount happening but the focus of State and Commonwealth Gov is COVID19 so ability to share messages is not the same
 - People working hard on the ground but hard to get the message out

Group 4: Reported by Denis

- An issue which has been raised in the Upper Murray region is the availability and uptake of temporary housing for people who lost their house.

Group 5: Reported by Anna

- Community and some LGAs appear slow to motivate to prepare adequately for coming bushfire season
- Peter Williams – Deloitte has documented and reported on Bushfire Recovery Activities in this region:
 - COVID-19 double whammy has prevented normal recovery activities
 - Money slow to roll out
 - Recovery process still vague
 - People looking to rebuild need more than planning advice, need independent building advice
 - BRV starting to get momentum
 - Towong Shire Council under resourced for the work that needs to be done
 - Temporary housing is a big issue, as Denis has raised
 - Grassroots groups Blazeaid, Fencing for Fires, Tradies for Fire Affected Communities have been making a tangible impact on the ground
 - Business hurting
 - Primary Producers grants have been taken up well
 - Grocon doing a good job but it is a slow process
 - Recovery Committees – role and structure still being rolled out in Towong Shire
 - Businesses across whole region struggling and not a lot of assistance
 - Tradies for fire affected communities – great work in conjunction with Givit foundation
 - People are tired and still vulnerable

Helen Haines reported:

- Her focus has been on bushfire recovery rather than covid-19. Her job since February has been to raise awareness in parliament of the issues of recovery in bushfire areas
- COVID has hit everyone, and the usual mechanisms we use to deal with one emergency kicked in but 2 major catastrophes at the same time for bushfire areas has made the situation more than twice as hard
- She has been listening to people's stories, talking to MPs and Ministers, and acknowledges the good work done by BRV and national body
- Primary producer grants take up is strong
- Business recovery grants – some problems, urged everyone to encourage businesses to apply. Don't self-assess
- Bottlenecks in state and federal process in getting money into the hands of people who need it.
- Very hard for small business now, as they must tender for work and its very competitive.
- Where communications issues occur or money not coming through let Andrew Colvin at national bushfire organisation know, and also state level (can do this through Helen's office as well)

Bushfire Recovery Support (Federal and State level) feedback/comments/chat

Peter Williams –

- Would that suggest that the grants haven't really hit the mark (other than primary producers) and perhaps need to be reassessed and direct money to where it may be needed more. Eg Fencing
- Community is not feeling empowered, feels more council led than community led
- Lee and Helen, it would be great to see a few community projects get moving, eg Community halls, Parks, whatever is a priority so locals can see some tangible momentum in the recovery
- Case managers are doing a good job connecting and solving individual problems for people.
- Issues around infrastructure on properties septic, water, power, fences. people are reluctant to spend grant money as they are unsure about whether they will have funds to rebuild

Maria Berry –

- Money out to communities
- Tapping into those disappearing or not reaching out due to COVID-19 fear
- COVID-19 prominent concern, not the fire recovery
- Connecting the resources available "preventing the silos "
- Getting the information out to people to what is available
- Mapping all the resources we have for fire recovery that every person can access
- People wanting local contact and face to face but unable throughout COVID-19
- Peter a really great point. It is about listening to the voices of the people effected. "Doing it with, not for approach"

Alicia Keogh –

- And please encourage businesses not to self-assess - it's important that they go through the application process. Many businesses aren't applying because they don't think they are eligible.
- Diarmuid Kelly will also be joining BRV later in July as well.

Denis Ginnivan –

- Agree Peter and Maria.. community endeavour, no matter how nuanced and focussed, is important to flourish, and to be supported.

David Chitty –

- Re - grants - too many people self-assess and think that they are not eligible

Maria Pantling –

- Rotary has helped an enormous amount in Corryong.

Roberta Baker –

- AVCL will be looking to support leadership and resilience training for people working in the fire recovery space, over the next year.

Georgia Vujic –

- The feedback received by headspace Albury Wodonga is that young people want their support to happen in the community (not schools) and they want outside people to discuss their mental health issues with, not locals (they report not wanting to talk to people they know, who were also directly impacted by the fires, etc.). They report wanting active, community projects alongside individual counselling.

Helen Haines –

- Yes - absolutely agree. Awaiting clear guidelines from Federal Govt on (Local Economic Recovery Projects) LERPs

Questions/Feedback for Lee and Helen

Peter Williams –

- One observation is money is being thrown at people akin to "Who wants to be a Millionaire" where most I am seeing need more a "Renovation Rescue" style model. With the trauma it is very hard to make decisions and get moving.
- Would be good to wrap support around them to help them through.
- Agree Rotary did a good job on containers, had to arrange funds themselves
- I think projects on the ground will be a big contributory to helping with mental health issues, will be good to see things starting
- I think the clarity of the journey is a big issue right now, good point Jolie

Maria Pantling –

- Rotary provided several adapted shipping containers to some farms.

Helen Haines –

- Georgia at Headspace - will the latest funding allow Headspace to do outreach to communities such as Corryong?

Georgia Vujic –

- Yes Helen, that's me, I'm doing outreach to Corryong. I will be when we resume face to face service.

David Chitty –

- We must ensure that we do not lose the lessons and information etc that come out of this fire event - we had amazing systems and communication etc in place over the fires from 2003 to 2012 but most of this was lost in the period 2012 to 2019 when we had had fire seasons that were not as serious - We MUST ensure we manage the next years better and as a total community be better prepared for whatever happens in the emergency sector

Resilience and Community Recovery Conversation feedback/comments

Peter Williams –

- I think the clarity of the journey is a big issue right now, good point Jolie.
- Link to the grant Finder tool I built with my team, finds specific list based on circumstances
<https://au-deloitte.neotalogic.com/a/bushfire-support-finder?productid=94>

Paul Ryan –

- People can get in contact with myself or Catherine Fuller if they are interested in the PCP Resilience Corps project, the process will be focused in specific geographic locations and there will be some requirements for participants that are still being developed.

Appendix 3: Outline of Initiatives Identified at February Forum

At the February forum in Beechworth attendees were asked to write down what was working well, what needed to happen and ideas they had.

This feedback covered a range of issues including:

- Building resilience,
- tapping into local knowledge and wisdom,
- mental health,
- counselling,
- financial advice,
- communications,
- arts and culture as a recovery mechanism, and
- factoring in climate change in ongoing long-term community recovery work.

The full report is on the AVCL website. The impact of Covid-19 hindered ongoing work but there are initiatives being put in place in fire-impacted communities in both the Upper Murray and Gippsland regions in the coming 12 to 18 months involving people working in the recovery space.

Access to the February Forum Report: <https://bit.ly/3iXBqX>

Appendix 3: Cards for Calamity

?

It all takes longer than anyone expects.

It has been heartbreaking to see people who work so hard to tick off all the practical tasks of rebuilding and recovery, only to find what truly matters to them lying in tatters — their relationships and their health.

Life isn't something you can pause and get back to when you've finished all the tasks that disaster brings your way.

Question: *What matters to you most?
How will you protect it?*

?

“

“I wouldn't wish a wildfire on anyone. It was a terrible thing and it affected me and my family in so many ways. But it did make me realize that I had been living on autopilot. Every now and again I'd thought about how great it would be to be an architect, but I hadn't actively pursued it. One life choice rolled into the next and my life wasn't bad... The fire got me really thinking about my life. I'm now studying architecture and it feels like this is what I was meant to be doing all along. If not for the fire, I might still be living on autopilot.”

— CHARLOTTE (CANADA, WILDFIRE)

Question: *Is there anything about your pre-disaster life that you fell into, haven't thought to examine, or haven't felt brave enough to reconsider? What might your post-disaster life be?*

?

*

Is post-disaster life taking its toll?

Your body's resources are not endless. This is a confronting reality. So how do you refuel your body? The basics are a good place to start. Sleep the best you can, eat good food and exercise. A vital source of energy can also be found in all the activities that bring color to your life.

Ask yourself:

What makes me smile?

What makes me feel alive?

What have I let go that I used to enjoy?

*

“

“After the disaster, I knew that my body and mind were kind of 'out of order'. I started accepting that I could not operate at 100%. I thought, if I'm at 70%, then what is reasonable to expect of myself? I stopped making too many arrangements. I kept business conversations short because I wouldn't remember the details of a long call. It helped a lot just to accept that it was a natural reaction. It's normal and it got better with time.”

— PER (DENMARK, STORM)

Question: *Are you being too hard on yourself?
Or on others?*

?



When push comes to shove, a local with a big heart can get things done.

Mike Hoffman, a Staten Island local mobilized boots on the ground following Hurricane Sandy. He pulled together skilled tradies from across the U.S. who wanted to do their bit to rebuild and beautify whatever they could. Mike says:

“The little fish can be quick and nimble. They find their way into places where the big fish can’t.”

Creativity can thrive in chaos and uncertainty.



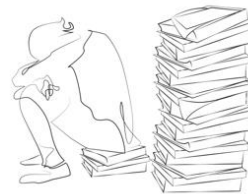
“If I had Duct-tape I could fix that!”



After disaster, things get stuck in the system.

There is no quick remedy for bureaucratic constipation, but you can decide what your wait is going to be like for you.

Question: *Are you putting your energy into the things you can control or ruminating on those you can't?*



Use the quote below when feeling a lack of power and control.

Recovery is a collective effort. A lot of citizens doing little things will make a big difference. Everybody brings something different to the effort. You might be a kind, listening ear. You might be able to explain an assistance grant. You might be handy with a hammer.

“If you think you are too small to make a difference, try sleeping with a mosquito.”

— DALAI LAMA XIV

Question: *What is going to be your little thing?*



Have you noticed that the post-disaster united vibe is now wearing a little thin?

Do you have less space to take on or listen to other's problems? Not up to socializing? Are people on the roads a little quicker to shake their fists? Do work colleagues have more trouble getting along? Are people quicker to rise to battle?

This is the stress hormone cortisol. It takes emotional energy and resources to maintain our many relationships but cortisol is tight-fisted with your energy, so it is normal for your emotional and social world to get a bit tatty.





“The earthquake brought me kicking and screaming towards the core of who I am. Issues that had festered under the surface of a comfortable life could no longer be ignored. The question of what type of house should I rebuild, led me to question who I wanted to live with? Did I really want to stick with the same job for the sake of a big mortgage? Now I see that this questioning led to a new and better life for me.”

— KELLY (NEW ZEALAND, EARTHQUAKE)

Question: *Do you have a constant churning feeling? Is this because new things are emerging in you and your life?*



Completion Anxiety?

“I’m someone who really feels good about completing something. Big or small, I get a kick out of crossing things off a list. I push, put in the hours and never quit until I have completed. After the hurricane my ‘list’ wasn’t in my control, it felt endless and everything was messy and unclear.

As bad as it has been, it taught me to be better with ambiguity, improvising and being cool with an unfinished list.”

— JOANNE (USA, HURRICANE)



Disaster has incredible power to unify and to divide.

Conflict can be felt within families, neighborhoods and cities. When people have different needs and beliefs, asking good questions is a step toward finding a way forward together. Where might the common ground lie? Is my approach to this issue adding unnecessary pain? Am I adding fuel to the fire or working for a compromise?

Tip: *When someone is angry with you, check — what is yours that you should take responsibility for and what might be someone else’s hurt, frustration and fear in disguise? Understanding this can change the way this interaction goes.*



Within the word emergency is ‘emergence’.

Disaster signals a departure from certainty, safety and normality. Recovery from disaster is both about pain and discovery.

Tip: *The question to contemplate is what could emerge in me, my life and my community as a result of this experience?*

