

## Response to the Discussion Paper – **Resilient Recovery**

**Community Representatives**  
**Wye River and Separation Creek CRC**  
**30 April 2017**

We appreciate this opportunity to contribute to the review and reform of relief and recovery arrangements in Victoria. We understand the aim of the Discussion Paper is to enhance recovery outcomes for communities and to meet and adapt to the challenges and opportunities of the future.

We very strongly endorse the goal and purpose of the resilient recovery model proposed in the discussion paper

*A resilient recovery supports individuals, families and communities to be healthy and safe, to engage in and lead their recovery, to be able to live, work and connect within the community, and identify opportunities for growth, renewal and innovation.*

We also very strongly support the holistic focus of this model, which allows consideration of relief and recovery issues from a community outcome perspective

*The Resilient Recovery Model, proposed in this paper, allows us to consider relief and recovery holistically from a community outcome perspective. It is a model that is community focused and driven. It aligns with community needs and authentically connects individuals, communities and business into the recovery process.*

As a result of our experience of recovery and renewal from the fire that ravaged Wye River and Separation Creek on Christmas Day 2015, we have some suggestions as to how the goal and purpose of the proposed resilient recovery model might be best achieved.

### **1. Understanding Communities, how they work and what is important to their members**

It is a truism to say that communities are complex and opaque to the outsider, but it is these qualities that pose a fundamental challenge to emergency services attempting to assist a community they do not know during and following a disaster.

Furthermore when the goal is to assist the community in a way

*that is community focused and driven ... aligns with community needs and authentically connects individuals, communities and business into the recovery process*

the task is even more challenging but not - we would submit - impossible. It needs careful thought, clear policy direction, operational guidelines and the education of all participants about how communities work and how to work with communities in a way that is *community focused and driven*.

Not surprisingly the discussion paper has been informed by research and policy papers concerning disaster management and communities recovering from disasters. However, this inadvertently limits opportunities for the full development of the model. Development of the resilient recovery model needs to be based on how communities normally work, how members of the community usually organise their communal and individual lives, rather than when they are in crisis.

Indeed we note that the research undertaken by the University of Melbourne following the 2009 fires has reached the same conclusion.

*Recognition of the wellbeing of a community, beyond its disaster experience, affords the potential for empowerment and self-reflection through a strengths-based lens. This provides a richer description of context than is gained by only using a resilience framework, which references the community assessment specifically to disaster preparedness and response<sup>1</sup>.*

There is a large body of work on best practices for community development and the proposed resilient recovery model would benefit from the incorporation of the relevant aspects of this work. For example the principles of good practice in community development should be

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<sup>1</sup> [AJEM Community wellbeing: applications for a disaster context](#)

adopted to guide the further development of the model. These include<sup>2</sup>  
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- **Empowerment** – increasing the ability of individuals and groups to influence issues that affect them and their communities
- **Participation** – supporting people to take part in decision making
- **Inclusion, equality of opportunity and anti-discrimination** – recognising that some people may need additional support to overcome barriers they face
- **Self-determination** – supporting the right of people to make their own choices
- **Partnership** – recognising that many agencies can contribute to community development.

These principles also need to be operationalised and used to guide the induction and training of emergency services personnel to ensure they are understood and authentically applied in practice. As the principles above outline, it is important not to impose an 'outside' perspective as to what a community looks like, or who its members are.

There are always different groups with different agendas in all communities and some members will be better equipped to put them forward than others; but all have the right to participate, to have their voice heard and for it to be considered in decision making.

No one group in a community should be singled out as the 'real' members of a community over others. For example in Wye River and Separation Creek many families who lost homes have a very strong connection to the place and to the community, despite having a permanent address elsewhere. Failure to recognise this nuance – especially during the winter landslip event – led to unnecessary trauma for community members.

If the above community development principles are effectively operationalised it will assist emergency service personnel to better understand a community, its psychosocial complexity and to identify what is important to its members, and thereby mitigate unintended negative consequences. For example, in Wye River and Separation Creek

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.communitydevelopmentalliancescotland.org/about-cdas/principles-of-community-development-practice>

<sup>3</sup> [Community Development Principles](#)

the critical importance of the trees to community members was not appreciated by state and local government authorities, despite numerous attempts both public and private, to raise community concerns. Thus when a substantial number of trees were felled after the fire those authorities expressed surprise at the very vocal, significant and ongoing distress articulated by members of the community.

## **2. Understanding what it means for communities to lead their recovery**

We strongly support the proposal that

*A resilient recovery supports individuals, families and communities to be healthy and safe, engage in and lead their recovery, to be able to live, work and connect within their community, and to identify opportunities for growth, renewal and innovation.*

The final report by the University of Melbourne,<sup>4</sup> on community members' physical and mental health and wellbeing following the bushfires of 2009, highlighted the influence of close friends and family, social networks and community groups on peoples' recovery.

*Involvement in community groups was protective ... a healthy community is characterised by having many groups with high levels of participation spread across the community, so that the majority of people participate in several groups... Being involved in community groups leads to better mental health outcomes.*

Consequently the research recommended that

*Government disaster recovery taskforces engage with Municipal Association of Victoria on the best way to recognise and involve local government and community in decision making and service delivery...engage different sectors of the community in emergency planning and recovery processes.*

What is also well known is that simply providing information to people, or consulting people on their views on issues that directly affect them so

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<sup>4</sup> [Beyond Bushfires Final Report 2016 : Melbourne School of Population ...](#)

they can be involved in the activities of recovery and renewal, falls far short of providing the means for people to make decisions for themselves.

Researchers and practitioners in this area use 'the Participation Continuum' to identify the trap of thinking that because an organisation has provided information to a community, assisted it to be involved in the work being undertaken by the organisation, formed a long term dialogue with stakeholders or indeed handed over policy development to stakeholders within a framework developed by the organisation, that the organisation has provided the means for a community to make decisions. But this is not the case - the organisation is still making the decisions to the exclusion of the community.<sup>5</sup> If a community is going to lead its own recovery the organisation must allow the community to make decisions, or have its representatives actively involved in decision making, about the issues that effect and/or impact on the community, its recovery and renewal.

An example of a disjunction between the intention of the resilient recovery model - for a community to be able to lead its own recovery - and actual practice is the Wye River and Separation Creek Community Resilience Committee (CRC). The CRC was established to, amongst other things, to "Inform the development of Resettlement Project Plans that identify all actions necessary to ensure recovery is undertaken in a systematic, effective and timely manner ... (and) Ensure actions are flexible and responsive to emerging community needs, trends and relevant issues ... (and) driving the process of recovery". However the CRC was not a decision making body, it was merely an advisory body.

The CRC had no role in decision-making about projects, their shape or commencement, nor the allocation of resources. All decisions about the recovery and renewal of Wye River and Separation Creek were made elsewhere by the Leadership Group, which was responsible for the oversight of the recovery of Wye River and Separation Creek.

The Leadership Group was comprised of state and local government officers only, some of whom were also members of the CRC. However the CRC Community Representatives were not members of this decision-

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<sup>5</sup> [From principle to practice: implementing the human rights-based approach in community organisations - Sept 2008 \(PDF 798KB\)](#)

making Leadership Group. CRC Community Representatives could only advise or advocate for projects and resource allocation, or alternatively advocate for changes to projects already committed to that were or would have negatively impacted on the community. For example, the CRC was not a participant in the decisions concerning the felling of trees until after the process was well advanced, had it been, a different outcome may have resulted. The CRC's lack of involvement in decision-making about the trees also led to issues of credibility, distrust and anger towards CRC being raised by other community members.

A further example of a disjunction between the goal of the resilient recovery model and actual practice in Wye River and Separation Creek is the production of the Recovery Plan produced by the Leadership Group and presented to the CRC at its first planning meeting in March 2016. The Leadership Group produced a plan for the recovery of Wye River and Separation Creek without speaking to the CRC or asking anyone in the community about its development. The CRC was disenfranchised and had to very strenuously object and insist that this Plan be seen as a draft for discussion with the community as to do otherwise would have upset, caused harm and further disempowered the community.

While the current Renewal Plan for Wye River and Separation Creek was produced by the CRC with the community, the CRC had no involvement in decision-making by the Leadership Group on the adoption or otherwise of initiatives contained in the draft plan.

### **3. Command and Control working within a Community Led Model of Resilient Recovery**

The immediate response to disasters and emergencies is, for very good reasons, organised on a command and control mode of operation. However, this presents a clear conflict with a community led model of resilient recovery. This is not a new issue; the people of Emerald have also identified this conflict from their experience following the 2009 fires.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> [Centre of Resilience \(COR\) and Emerald Community House - Mary Farrow \(PDF - 3.83MB\)](#)

The challenge is how to integrate and locate this immediate command and control response mode within a community-led model of resilient recovery.

Again, there is an example from Wye River and Separation Creek that illustrates the harm that can be caused to a community when a command and control mode of operation was not embedded in a community led model of resilient recovery.

In the winter of 2016 following the fire the community suffered from significant landslips that impeded access to the township and between people and services. The community was left isolated and divided for a considerable period of time.

By this time the CRC had been in operation for 6 months and the community had come to rely on and trust it for information and direction setting. However, following the landslips emergency services reverted to a command and control mode of operation that left the CRC and the broader community not only bereft of information and but also completely out of discussions and unable to express their views on proposals for recovery. This had a very negative impact on people in the community and compounded their sense of lack of control and powerlessness that cruelly, they were just starting to recover following the fire.

The question is: How to embed a command and control mode of response to an immediate disaster within a community-led model of resilient recovery?

Using Wye River and Separation Creek as a case study we have some suggestions to make based on the application of community development principles and the proposed development of a Community Based Bushfire and Landslip Management Plan for Wye River, Separation Creek and Kennett River.

It is our suggestion that the community development principles outlined above be used by the CRC and state and local agencies to guide

- development of the plan for bushfire and landslip management, which will then be in place to support a community-led response to any future disaster in the community, and
- development of command and control policies and procedures covering the immediate response to a disaster.

If we consider what this might entail.

- **Empowerment** – *increasing the ability of individuals and groups to influence issues that affect them and their communities*
  - community representatives, identified through the Bushfire and Landslip Management Plan, be briefed and receive preparatory training on issues and processes involved in problem identification, consolidation of the view of an event and decisions regarding actions and outcomes following a disaster<sup>7</sup>.
- **Participation** – *supporting people to take part in decision making*
  - community representatives, as identified and prepared above, be included in all stages of problem identification, consolidation of the view of an event and decisions regarding actions and outcomes immediately following a disaster
  - community representatives are supported to provide information to community members and to seek community input on issues, priorities and options through a variety of relevant media and forums.
- **Inclusion, equality of opportunity and anti-discrimination** – *recognising that some people may need additional support to overcome barriers they face*
  - identification of members of the community who may need additional support is undertaken as part of the development of the Bushfire and Landslip Management Plan.
- **Self determination** – *supporting the right of people to make their own choices*
  - all relevant information, options and potential consequences are provided to members of the community to enable them to make informed decisions

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<sup>7</sup> [A modern emergency management system for Victoria - Craig Lapsley, Emergency Management Commissioner, EMV \(PowerPoint - 1.57MB\)](#)



- community priorities are identified in the Bushfire and Landslip Management plan and respected in operations to minimise unintended negative consequences of actions
  
- **Partnership** – *recognising that many agencies (and people) can contribute to community development*
  - respect is shown by all agencies, community groups and community members for the views and contribution of others
  - procedures are designed to allow for all to contribute to the recovery, renewal and development of the community.

Wye/Sep CRC Community Rep