

BUSHFIRE RECOVERY PROGRAM, ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY CANBERRA/GOULBURN, AUSTRALIA

The spring and summer of 2019/20 saw Australia ravaged by huge bushfires from Queensland through to South Australia, with some of the greatest impact occurring in the region covered by St Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn (SVDP-CG). Within the Canberra/Goulburn region, over 1000 homes were destroyed, along with numerous outbuildings (often the basis for income), farm fencing and livestock, and community facilities. Although no statistics are available for the number of people who lost jobs and/or income as a direct result of the fires or for those who suffered mental trauma, the Society is aware that these were very significant numbers. Many, including those who did not lose property, also suffered mental trauma as the result of uncertainty and evacuation (sometimes repeatedly).

As did each region of the Society, Canberra/Goulburn became engaged in assisting those impacted even as the fires raged around them. The initial response was generated by those Conferences located in the bushfire affected regions, with the provision of food, clothing, temporary accommodation and empathy. When it quickly became apparent that the volume and nature of the need would soon overwhelm our local members, a Bushfire Taskforce of Canberra-based members was convened to assist.

The Vinnies Bushfire Appeal opened in late 2019 in response to the bushfires raging in northern NSW (New South Wales) and was later expanded to a national appeal to support communities across Queensland, NSW, the ACT, Victoria and South Australia that were impacted by the Black Summer Bushfires. The appeal raised \$25.9 million from donations from the public, businesses and philanthropists. That money was distributed to each of the Society's state and territory councils.

The plan of the bushfire response in the Canberra/Goulburn region was modelled on the approach adopted by the NSW region of the Society, with the details modified according to Canberra/Goulburn's particular needs and capabilities. The NSW approach consisted of three elements: emergency relief, a Community Grants Program and a Community Development Program, to which SVDP-CG added a Sanitation Facilities Program.

Emergency Relief

Members of the Bushfire Taskforce travelled to bushfire relief centres at Batemans Bay, Moruya and Eden where they were able to extend the work of local Conferences by providing cash grants of up to \$4000 to those who had lost property and/or income as a result of the bushfires. The funding was made up of \$1000 in Australian Government grants and \$3000 from the Society's Bushfire Appeal funds. After an initial period in the relief centres, the distribution of emergency relief funding was transferred to Canberra where staff and members processed claims submitted online. The emergency support funding continued to the end of 2020 because many people were slow to request support. There were several reasons for this slowness, among them were views that "others need this more than me" and "I was okay at first but only now realise that I need assistance" as well as some who were too traumatized to function effectively for many months after the fires and some who thought that applying to another agency (e.g. Red Cross) automatically gave them access to support from the Society.

Canberra-based members and staff also operated at the Dickson Emergency Relief Centre in Canberra to provide new clothing and toiletries to people displaced by the bushfires seeking safety in Canberra.

Community Grants Program

The Community Grants Program aimed to recruit local knowledge to assist in the recovery of communities from the impact of the bushfires. The program was advertised through a variety of media and online outlets to attract local groups to propose projects. Applicants were required to identify the need, the section(s) of the community that would benefit and the means by, and the extent to which the project would meet those needs. The nature of eligible projects was not specified. Funding was provided at three levels (to \$5000, to \$10,000, and to \$20,000) to ensure that small projects would be submitted. Grants were advertised in July and September 2020, and again in June 2021 when the maximum was raised to \$30,000.

Each application was sent to the relevant local Conference for comment before a panel of Bushfire Taskforce members assessed them against nine criteria. The work of advising applicants of outcomes, sending and receiving grant agreements, transfer of funds, and monitoring progress and final reports was handled by staff. Over \$990,000 was allocated to 63 projects covering all the affected areas.

The range of applications was very broad. It included infrastructure, arts, youth, indigenous activities, and mental health support projects, costing from as little as \$1900 to the maximum of \$30,000.

Community Development Projects

This is being achieved by the appointment of five Community Development Officers (CDOs) from the affected shires and who are now working with local groups to develop activities and Community Development Program and projects. The goal of the Community Development Program is to assist community recovery by promoting cohesiveness, resilience and preparedness in bushfire affected communities. The focus is on the hand up rather than the hand out.

The CDOs were directed to meet a wide a range of individuals and groups within their allocated communities and utilise good listening skills to identify needs and capabilities within each community. They were also asked to identify those communities that might have been left behind or are in greatest need. They are collaborating with other agencies (government and non-government) operating in their target communities to collaborate in avoiding overlap and promoting synergies.

The initial focus was on working through community gatherings. This enabled the CDOs to become known within these communities and opened the way for meaningful conversations. For example, the lead was taken in organising a community day for all fire-affected areas south of Eden, which involved nine other agencies to provide a day of food, music and children's games.

After establishing relationships within communities, the CDOs have started a range of activities. In assisting in the preparation of grant applications, they have focused on raising skills in planning, writing applications, managing and reporting on projects that will deliver on one or more of the program goals. Some other projects in development involve working with an indigenous men's group, developing a support network for farming women, and supporting a project to have all community members contribute to a memorial by making the component parts. The program is developing a relationship with TAFE NSW to fund courses that will provide valuable skills for resilience and preparedness.

Sanitation Project

Some people who lost their homes in the bushfires are still living in temporary accommodation on their own properties as they try to re-build, a process that has been hampered by the shortage of tradespeople, building supplies, altered building codes and/or under-insurance issues. A proportion of these people are living in sheds or containers that have no sanitary facilities.

An employee of Catholic Social Services Australia identified the use of flat pack bathroom and toilet facilities as a solution. The Society accepted a request to fund a project in the Bega Valley Shire and extended an offer to fund a similar project in the Eurobodalla Shire. These projects, each involving about six agencies, not only provide the flat packs and cladding but additional assistance as required. Some recipients require a shed to house the flat pack unit while others already have capacity to house the unit. Recipients may or may not have a suitable sewage system, so a septic tank or composting toilet is installed. Similarly, recipients may or may not require assistance with erection of the flat pack, electrical and/or plumbing connections; tradespersons are engaged to provide specialist assistance.

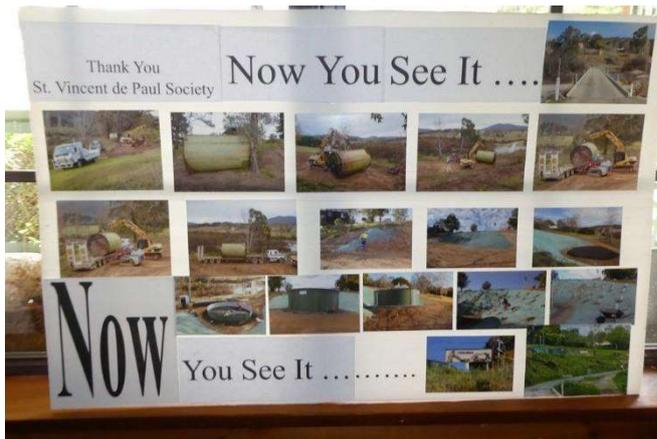
Conclusion

One of the positives that arose from the 2019/20 bushfires was the willingness of aid agencies to work together. SVDP-CG has participated since early 2020 in regular multiagency meetings (Anglicare, Red Cross, Salvation Army, government agencies, etc.) that have promoted co-ordination and collaboration. This interagency co-operation contributes to both the Community Grants and Community Development Programs.

The SVDP-CG Bushfire Recovery Program has assisted hundreds of families to date and will continue to help communities regain control through the Community Development Program until the end of 2022.



An indigenous community youth project to develop skills in canoe building and explore options for employment on the far south coast



Installation of a rapid-fill water tank to prepare for the next bushfire season



Children's playgrounds were installed in several schools to assist children's recovery from bushfire trauma



Toilet and shower facilities have been purchased and installed for people who are living in temporary accommodation on their own property as they wait to rebuild after the bushfires,

