

Number: 004

CERG Position Paper

Support for social connection

Attn: Taskforce Head

1. TOPIC

The Asbestos Response Task Force Personal Support Team has adopted a brokerage model of case management in which personal support workers provide a case management service to individual Fluffy affected households. This service is providing effective and responsive assistance to individuals and households based on priority of service for the displaced, those with a serious medical condition, households affected by disability, the elderly and the socially isolated.

This seems to have been very effective for these particularly vulnerable people who are readily identified. However, the current service approach is not recognising the needs of groups of affected householders, who seem to be coping and moving on in their lives, but still need opportunities to connect to each other and provide one another with mutual aid and support in formal or informal groups.

The regional Task Force support now being provided at Belconnen, Dickson, Tuggeranong and Woden has been very helpful and has enabled some useful connections to be made, but more still needs to be done. A range of options need to be in place soon- before the re-traumatising events occur, such the commencement of demolition and the end of the "buy back" option. Trauma and grieving is a cyclical process, with episodic distress continuing into the healing process, so these supports should be maintained even if their use seems to be dwindling.

2. CERG COLLECTIVE POSITION

CERG recommends that the Task Force extend support and assistance to the mutual aid groups that have emerged, and that the Task Force facilitates the formation and activities of new groups

CERG is mindful that the Task Force does not want to impede the independence of such groups in any way, or to be perceived to be involved, but CERG is of the view that the Task Force's Personal Support Team can play an effective role in facilitating groups and supporting them.

3. BACKGROUND

Social connection with people who are experiencing similar adversity is one of the most powerful strategies for personal recovery. Only in the company of those similarly affected can people find real understanding and make meaning of their experience. Mutual aid and self-help groups provide knowledge to each other, and tools for recovery, as they encounter different aspects of the recovery journey. Those who are 'ahead' on the recovery road provide tips and encouragement and hope for those still encountering difficult decisions and tasks. Sometimes those who are 'ahead' can suddenly fall behind and are comforted by their confreres. This 'word of mouth' community knowledge carries with it a high degree of trust and credibility.

All the research literature on post-disaster intervention recommends that governments support and enable social connection in recovering communities (Aldrich, 2012; Buckle, 2006; Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2011; Gordon, 2004; Hobfall, Watson, Bell, Bryant, & Brymer, 2007) After the 2003 ACT bushfires, recovery

centre workers provided support to individuals, but also worked with community groups, even where some group members were at times hostile to government (ACT Bushfire Recovery Task Force, 2003).

4. GROUPS OF THE FLUFFY AFFECTED - examples of effective mutual aid groups that have emerged in the affected community.

- **Fluffy Owners and Residents Action Group (FORAG) Walking Group**

This group was initially inspired by FORAG and continues to meet fortnightly at the Yarralumla Nursery. The group walks by the lake in conversation, and spends up to two hours or so over coffee at the nursery restaurant. Attendance is consistently between 10 and 15. The group has formed relationships of trust and support, and much crucial information about the lived experience of this crisis has been exchanged. Group members experiencing stress have been encouraged and supported by others to seek help. Those who have progressed to celebrate have a trusted group to join in their celebration. The members provide tips to one another on managing the process of banks, settlement, auctions, removalists, stress and many other matters.

All group members have at last purchased new homes, and the group is now keen to assist others who lack this sort of support, but this is really difficult because the group is not able to advertise their activities to other members of the affected community.

- **Woden Community Service Seniors group**

This group grew out of the Task Force/Woden Community Service Morning Tea. There are consistently between eight and 16 members who regularly meet for morning tea at Woden Community Service (WCS). The group is hosted and supported by WCS staff.

- **Full Disclosure**

This group is Face Book-based but also has some small sub groups that meet face to face, organising around particular issues. Although some members are hostile to the Government Buy Back program, the Face Book site has around 400 followers, most of whom have joined the Buy Back program and are proceeding with their lives. The Group provides the only social connection and support for many people struggling with this experience. Although the postings are often openly angry, misinformation can often be corrected by others and helpful tips provided.

While the work of these groups is commended, it is concerning that so few groups have emerged, and this indicates a lack of strategic support for this important recovery intervention. For example, there is nothing available to assist children and young people, who have lived in these homes, or have beloved relatives in affected homes, to meet others and be helped to deal with their concerns. This is a very different process from individual therapy through mental health support and can sometimes prevent the need of such services. We are all “community animals” and function better when we can be helped informally to cope with problems. Informal groups are an excellent way to provide such support.

5. CERG PERSPECTIVE

Given the strength of the knowledge of the effectiveness of social connection in recovery, CERG recommends that the Task Force now actively explores ways to extend support and assistance to the groups that have emerged to provide mutual aid to the affected community, and facilitate the formation of and activities of new groups.

ACTION REQUIRED

CERG recommends that:

- The Personal Support Team, through its work with individual households, identify people who would benefit from social connection to other members of the fluffy affected community
- Where appropriate, link those people to the existing groups above
- Create opportunities for others to form new groups
- Work with the local venues to provide meeting spaces, and staff support for developing groups (the Woden Community Service support to the Seniors Group is a good example of how this can be done)
- Where a group requests this, advertise the contact details of the group in Task Force newsletters and on the Task Force website
- Advise groups of other ways in which to advertise their activities and to invite new members

References

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