

Lessons from the 2003 Canberra Bushfires and other Australian disasters

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4 September 2014

- ▶ 500 homes destroyed; many more damaged



The Damage Pattern:

- ▶ **A patchwork of destroyed and standing properties**



- ▶ **Four Deaths**
 - ▶ **Many Injuries**
 - ▶ **1 600 households affected**
 - ▶ **Many pets killed**
 - ▶ **Livestock and pasture destroyed**
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▶ **Small Taskforce:**
Chaired by Sandy Hollway



- ▶ **Community and Expert Reference Group:**
 - **Community**
 - **Business**
 - **Unions**
 - **Conservation**
 - **Planners / Architects**
 - **Federal Politicians**

A major conduit for emerging issues



KEY THEMES: Task Force Action Plan

- ▶ **Support for people**
 - ▶ **Community participation**
 - ▶ **Safe, timely clean up**
 - ▶ **Facilitating rebuilding**
 - ▶ **Up to date information**
 - ▶ **Learning Lessons**
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THE RECOVERY CENTRE




Immediate help

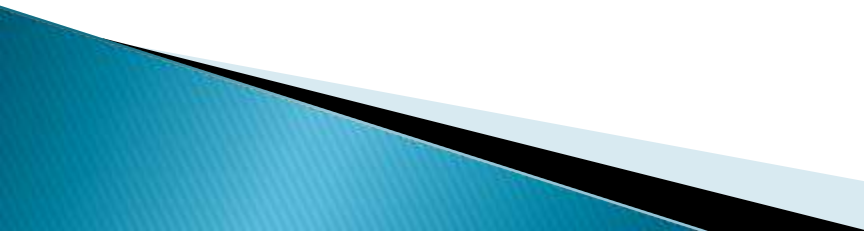
- ▶ By end of week one, 1000 households had registered for the initial \$5000 grant; 1600 in all by 2004.
- ▶ A valuable data base of the demography and immediate needs of the affected group
- ▶ A local community approach/ recovery workers (case managers) in teams based on four communities
- ▶ Four teams of 4–5 recovery workers; four team leaders; admin cell; grants staff.



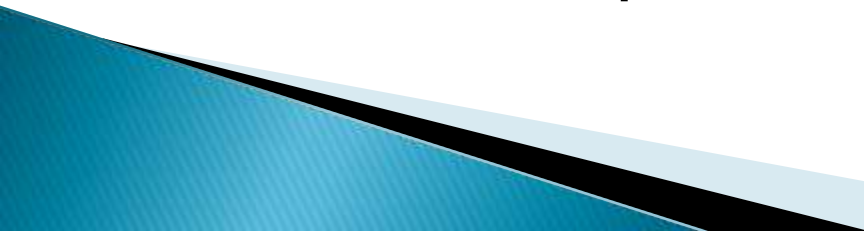
Risk Factors – most vulnerable groups

- ▶ Bereavement or serious injury
 - ▶ Separation through evacuation
 - ▶ Fear of loss of your life or that of your loved ones
 - ▶ Prior trauma
 - ▶ Disadvantage
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Recovery worker roles

- ▶ Assessment of social, emotional, financial and practical needs
 - ▶ Support via home visits, Centre drop ins, telephone contact
 - ▶ Information about services and support available; smooth access to services
 - ▶ Advocacy for flexibility in service provision
 - ▶ Brokerage between affected households and top decision-makers – information and feedback loop to influence policy.
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Recovery workers and counsellors worked together

- ▶ ACT Health and Relationships Australia provided counsellors at the recovery Centre
 - ▶ Psychological first aid; normalising; supported families to support each other
 - ▶ As time went on, specialised counselling required for those with lingering symptoms—maybe 10 to 15%
 - ▶ Recovery workers and counsellors worked together at community events, on park benches, in paddocks, over a beer
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Recovery workers were also community workers, working with

- ▶ Communities of place–Neighbourhoods, streets, towns
 - ▶ Communities of interest eg aged, new parents, men, women, young people, owner/builders, schools
 - ▶ Emerging leaders and new organisations arising out of the disaster
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New community groups emerged, providing advocacy and mutual aid

- ▶ Mt Taylor Estate Residents Association
- ▶ Pierces Creek Resident's Association
- ▶ Phoenix Group
- ▶ Chapman Residents Association
- ▶ Uriarra Residents Association
- ▶ Mt Stromlo Residents Association
- ▶ Singed sisters

The Recovery Centre worked with and supported these groups even when they were hostile to government.

Some groups eg those whose horses died in the fire, were not financially recognised, but were supported by the Recovery Centre.

Singed sisters

My greatest source of support and friendship was a small group of women bound by the fact that our children all attended the same school and we all lost our homes. We started meeting for coffee a few weeks after the fires and, six years on, we still meet regularly for lunch. We call ourselves The Singed (as in “slightly burnt”) Sisterhood. I don’t know how I would have got through the last six years without these wonderful women who have now become close friends.

Getting women together in an informal way allows them to support each other and share their stories. In the months to come, as the victims are spread across the State, they will need avenues in which to come together and discuss what they, and their families, are going through. There is enormous comfort in knowing you are not alone


Liz Tilley of Duffy, ACT, in a letter to those affected by the 2009 Victorian bushfires. Liz was a member of the ACT Bushfire Recovery CERG.

Community groups and recovery workers organised community events


- ▶ Regeneration Walk
- ▶ Parties in the Park
- ▶ Children's Art and Writing Competition
- ▶ Children's camp
- ▶ Boat cruise for over 70s
- ▶ "Parenting after Disaster"
- ▶ Rural men's BBQs




The unexpected....

- ▶ The Bushfire Recovery Task Force worked hard to facilitate rebuilding to recreate local community, and most householders said initially that they would rebuild
 - ▶ But, less than half actually rebuilt
 - ▶ Some people changed their minds up to six or seven times before coming to a final decision to rebuild or move to another part of Canberra
 - ▶ Those who rebuilt with the same design did not necessarily achieve their desire to get 'back to normal'
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Fluffy Asbestos – community vulnerability

- ▶ What do we know now about the vulnerable, without a comprehensive client data base?
 - ▶ The dislocated, evacuated
 - ▶ Children –long term anxiety, uncertainty, lack of resolution
 - ▶ Retirees and the elderly – potential loss of primary asset – shattered expectations of secure retirement
 - ▶ Parents – loss of primary asset; debt through mortgage; deep guilt and anxiety for children and anxiety for themselves
 - ▶ Everyone faces the loss of our home; loss of the safety that home provides and uncertain futures
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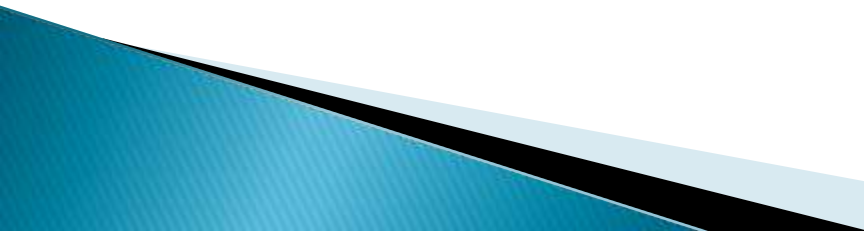
Fluffy asbestos – community resilience

- ▶ We are a strong community who are vulnerable at times and yet resilient
 - ▶ We would like everything to ‘go back to normal’, but we are forever changed by this adversity
 - ▶ We now have to create a ‘new normal’ to adapt our lives to our changed futures
 - ▶ In doing that, we have many important decisions to make
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What helped the bushfire-affected to make those decisions?

- ▶ Information on the psychosocial processes that affect people in recovery from disaster trauma, provided by people such as
 - ▶ Dr Rob Gordon, consulting psychologist, Red Cross; Deborah Inge, children's counsellor, Bushfire Recovery Centre; Dr John Irvine, advisor on parenting in adversity
 - ▶ Information on the financial and practical decisions to be made on rebuilding or buying homes – MBA/HIA expo
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Some lessons for us

- ▶ A comprehensive and rich client data base would provide the information we need to identify and reach out to the most vulnerable
 - ▶ Community mutual aid and advocacy promotes resilience. This is being well provided by FORAG, and other informal groupings will arise. These groups should be supported by government even if they are not always in agreement with government
 - ▶ When government decisions are announced hopefully most will be advantaged, but some groupings will not; this will create comparisons and conflict
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A few more lessons

- ▶ To adapt to the Mr Fluffy adversity we have to create a 'new normal' and not yearn for the old
 - ▶ The decisions we have to make to adapt are difficult and we will change our minds many times, so we could benefit from..
 - ▶ Psychosocial information to support coping and decision-making eg from Dr Rob Gordon, Debbie Inge
 - ▶ Stories of inspiration from Canberra bushfire affected people and others
 - ▶ Financial and practical information to support decision making in demolition, buying, renting or rebuilding
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Useful References

- ▶ ACT Government (2003) *Report of the Bushfire Recovery Task Force* Canberra, Australia
- ▶ Gordon, R. (2011) *The Course of Recovery after Disaster*, Crisis Intervention and Management Australia Conference, Melbourne
- ▶ FireFoxes Australia (2012) *'Creating a New Normal'* <http://firefoxes.org.au/firefoxes-documentary/>
- ▶ Winkworth, G., Healy, C., Woodward, M, & Camilleri, P.(2009) *Community capacity building: Learning from the 2003 Canberra bushfires* Australian Journal of Emergency Management Vol.24 Issue 2