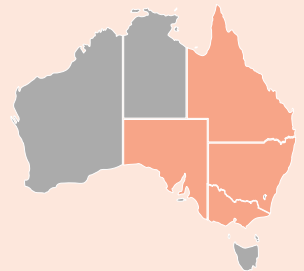


The Red Cross Black Summer Bushfire Recovery Program Evaluation

(Final 2023 Report)

About

The Australian Red Cross Black Summer Bushfire Recovery Program (the Program) aimed to **provide support** to bushfire affected communities over three years following the 2019/2020 bushfires across Australia. Red Cross has been funded by donations from the general public, businesses and corporate partners to deliver the Program.



Running January 2020 to March 2023 across 4 states (Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria), the Program focuses on provision of **long-term psychosocial support, capacity building and advocacy** work for bushfire affected communities.

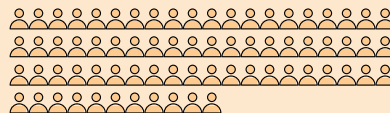
The University of Melbourne **conducted an evaluation of the Program** to understand how it has been experienced in communities. This evaluation aimed to explore the appropriateness, relevance and impact of the Bushfire Recovery Program, and to inform ongoing program strengthening and the strengthening of future programs.

Sample

4 case study communities



71 participants



Focus groups & interviews



Methods



An in-depth **case study approach** to explore how the Program has been experienced across different community contexts.

Staff interviews & focus group discussion

20 Red Cross staff members at national, state and local levels

Service provider interviews

19 service providers across all communities

Community member interviews

32 community members across all communities, including 17 community members who were also service providers

This year of the evaluation (2022-23) was focused on understanding how the Program closed down in four case study communities. There were 17 participants who participated in follow-up interviews for this final year of the project.

SA Case Study



Over 2020–23, the Program supported **Resilience Groups, BMX and bike activities**, ran the **pillowcase project in schools**, and supported the relaunch of a **major community festival**, among other psychosocial and capacity building supports.

Program end

The Program ended in January 2023 in this community. Community members and service providers generally expressed that it **felt like the right time to end**. Many participants in the final year reflected on the positive impacts that they had seen from the Program.

INTERVIEWEE: I think for some of us, it probably enabled us to have a **different relationship with the Council**, than we would have otherwise.

INTERVIEWER: The Red Cross did?

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah... The whole process of the **Red Cross, the resilience group coming together and then working with the Council**, probably some of us hadn't realised the Council could have that role and some of us probably hadn't gone to the Council run community centre so, it enabled new networks and relationships to be established. And they are ongoing.

(Community member and service provider)

INTERVIEWER: Are there any ways that you think the impacts of this Program will live on in the community even after it ends?

INTERVIEWEE: I think certainly the education side. **Having age-appropriate, relevant ways to talk with children** and particularly for some of our educators that may not have lived through this trauma. So, to be upskilled to be able to have these conversations with the children as well. I think that's been a really handy part... it's certainly an important thing that we've seen to support the children.

(Community member and service provider)

Community members and service providers felt that the Red Cross Program was likely to have **ongoing impact in the community**, even after Program end, through provision of psychosocial support, capacity building within community, and developing knowledge of how to support children, families and educators after a bushfire.



VIC Case Study



Over 2020–23, the Program **ran training sessions** on bushfire recovery, connected stakeholders, delivered soup lunches for staff at the local school and hospital, Farm First Aid courses, and attended community events to provide resources, leaflets and psychological support.

Program end

The Program ended in June 2023 in this community. Community members and service providers **expressed mixed views on whether it was the right time for the Program to end or not**. Some raised ongoing needs due to recent industry closures and continued stressors in the community and outlying towns, while others felt that people were 'over' recovery and ready for Program end. Red Cross staff also noted the mix of recovery needs.

...what I'm seeing now is [community is] probably **back on its feet** to a large extent, but when you look at those outlying towns, they could certainly do with at least a couple more years of support.

(Red Cross Staff)

Many community members and service providers reflected on **positive impacts of the community including building unity**, and suggested it would have long term impacts in the community even beyond program end.

Other participants noted that the Red Cross had **helped the community realise what they were capable of** in bushfire recovery, and that this is something that would continue to be impactful.

INTERVIEWER: ...do you think the impacts of what they've [the Red Cross has] done will live on in the community in any way, even after the program ends?

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. I would say so, because the community from my perspective has **actually come together a lot more closely** than it has been in the past. It was a pretty cliquey type of a community. And now, again from my perspective only, is that I feel **there's a strong sense of unity**. Very, very strong sense of community.

(Community member)



The Program in Mogo was delivered through a First Nations Recovery Officer. Over 2021–23, the Program supported the **Mogo NAIDOC Big Day Out events** which were recognised in Parliament for their significance in bushfire recovery. The Program also **supported cultural healing workshops, the River of Art festival, advocacy work for community members** to speak to disaster organisations and government officials, and linking of service providers through a new community of practice, among other supports.

Program end

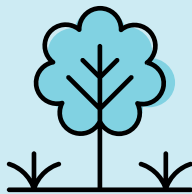
The Program ended in June 2023 in this community. Most service providers and community members who participated in 2023 stated that they **felt it was not the right time for the Program to end** in Mogo. Most estimated that a further 12–24 months of the Program would be necessary at minimum. The reason for this was continued unmet recovery needs and the withdrawal of multiple agencies at once.

At the same time, there was also recognition from community members and service providers that there had been benefits from the Program, especially in bringing people together:

INTERVIEWER: Do you think there is any type of impact of those types of activities that were delivered through the Red Cross that will live on in Mogo even after the Red Cross Program comes to an end there?

INTERVIEWEE: Absolutely. I mean, it brought community back together. ...I think those events get the chance to get people back together and re- cement what community's about 'cause there was too much of it got lost there for awhile.

(Service provider)



Others felt the impact of this would continue, even after the Red Cross program ended:

I think the feeling will live on.

(Service provider)

There were overall **positive experiences about what had been achieved** in previous years of the Red Cross Program, at the same time as there were concerns about unmet needs at a time when multiple major programs were ending.



Over 2020–22, the Program was adapted to support a **Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Disaster Ambassadors program** in partnership with another social organisation and local government. The group involved regular meetings, the creation of disaster resources in multiple languages, and new two-way learning between CALD communities and government.

Program end

The Disaster Ambassadors project ended in 2022. Following the resignation of a key Red Cross staff member who was involved in the Program in late 2022, there was a **loss of connection between Red Cross and the service providers involved in organising the project**. There was some disappointment that some ideas for volunteer training through the Red Cross had not been possible.

I think going forward, it's also good for local members to come along and [the idea was] this would come from the local contingency or arm of Red Cross, about becoming trained as volunteers to work in emergency evacuation centres when required. **That fell short**. And, **I was a bit disappointed** by that because I thought a great outcome would be for some of the participants, the ambassadors to actually become volunteers in emergency services.

(Service provider)

At the same time, service providers pointed to **new advocacy** work that had been possible in the community as a result of the project.

I think the other outcome is that, and thanks to [service provider] being invited onto the local languages' disaster management team, which [includes] the mayor, chair and co-chair... [there] is more [awareness] about what different participants may need in the event of an emergency and/or having to go to an evacuation centre. So, we talk about things like halal food, men's and women's areas. All that sort of thing that are a bit more culturally appropriate, for most of the different cultures that are here in [community], whether they're from the Middle East or African countries... (Service provider)



Considerations

From the findings of this evaluation, the University of Melbourne team presented the following points for consideration to Red Cross for future programs.

Consider: Explore how to develop systems within the Red Cross to preserve knowledge that Recovery Officers have developed in communities, so that knowledge loss is minimised when Recovery Officers leave their roles or the Program ends.

Consider: Explore whether the Resilience program (now Redi-Communities) could be made available in future to any community that is transitioning out of a Recovery Program.

Consider: Ensure that programs in First Nations communities are planned with longer-term funding (e.g., at least one additional year on top of mainstream program length), due to historical and contemporary behaviours of mainstream organisations such as Red Cross and the heightened need to establish and maintain relationships of trust and respect.

Consider: Offer recovery officers contracts that are longer than 12-months at a time for any Programs that are funded to continue for longer than one year.

Consider: In future Programs, ensure that staff receive clear and definitive communications about timing of Program exit with sufficient time for them to manage exit transition in communities (i.e., at least 6 months prior to proposed exit date).

Consider: Internally review the decision-making process for determining which communities received extension funding.



Overarching findings

A key strength of the Program was its **community-led approach** and **long-term presence**, which was appreciated by community members and service providers across all years of the evaluation.

This evaluation finds that **job insecurity, uncertainty** and **staff turnover** were a key challenge to Program delivery.

In all case study communities, there were **discussions happening about the potential for future disasters**. Some community members felt better prepared for future disasters after the Program, while others felt that the Program was ending at a time when they felt fearful and unprepared.