

Helping communities to manage their own recovery

By Andrew Coghlan, National Training Consultant, Disaster Recovery.
Presented to the Emergency Recovery Forum, 26-27 November 1997

A recovery management forum was held at the City of Darebin Arts and Entertainment Complex in Victoria on 26 and 27 November 1997.

Mindful of the potential threat of bushfires during the 1997-98 summer, the aim of the forum was to provide participants from a range of agencies with a greater awareness of the recovery process following a disaster. In particular the importance was stressed of individuals and communities being supported in the management of their own recovery.

The forum was jointly sponsored by the Victorian Department of Human Services and Emergency Management Australia and attracted 300 participants during the two days. Participants were drawn from a wide range of agencies, including local government, various State Government agencies and representatives of the non-government sector.

The program

The forum began with an overview of emergency management arrangements within Victoria. Speakers from a number of agencies addressed key aspects, focusing on recovery and the applicability of the Principles of Recovery Management. Later in the program consideration was also given to the different management styles that may be used during the recovery process and their compatibility with these principles.

The overview of emergency management arrangements was followed by a description of the potential bushfire risk during the 1997-98 summer. Two presentations highlighted current and anticipated weather conditions throughout Victoria and strategies being used by the Country Fire Authority to address the current threat. The City of Melbourne also provided a presentation on the broader applicability of risk management in an emergency or disaster context.

The remainder of the forum featured a series of presentations from recovery managers and service delivery staff from a range of different agencies. Presentations addressed a number of broad themes, including:

- bushfire
- media role in recovery
- public health emergencies
- non-natural disasters.

Two presentations on the Dandenong Ranges bushfires of January 1997 highlighted management at the local government level and the critical role of community development officers in supporting and encouraging the recovery of individuals and communities. These presentations were particularly timely given the current threat of bushfire and the upcoming anniversary of the fires. Discussion of the proposed anniversary events, which include the

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development and opening of memorial pathways and release of a calendar and compact disc put together by local artists, highlighted the importance of anniversaries and other significant milestones in the recovery process.

As with all aspects of emergency management the media play a key role in publicising and scrutinising recovery activities. This was highlighted in a presentation which focused on media coverage of recent disasters. A second presentation emphasised the importance of working to develop a positive relationship with the media. In this manner the media may become a powerful information dissemination tool. This point was highlighted later in the program during presentations on the Port Arthur shootings.

Following the shootings a positive relationship was developed between recovery agencies and the media, enabling dissemination of information to a far greater audience than would otherwise have been possible.

A consideration of two public health emergencies, Salmonella contamination and Anthrax outbreak, provided an insight into the broad applicability of recovery management arrangements within Victoria. While a decade ago the definition of disaster or emergency was restricted to natural events such as fire or flood, the recovery management arrangements are now being applied to a range of events with significant community impact. Following a presentation of key aspects of Victoria's Public Health Emergency Management Plan consideration was given to the difficulty of developing and maintaining a

community development program following an event which attracted little public attention or awareness.

Presentations on two interstate events were also highlighted as part of the program — the Port Arthur shootings of April 1996 and the more recent Thredbo landslide.

The Port Arthur shootings may be considered Australia's first 'national' disaster. While the event took place on the Tasman Peninsula in Tasmania, the majority of people deceased came from mainland states, particularly Victoria. The first presentation on Port Arthur highlighted recovery activities within Tasmania, and the second looked at the support provided to Victorian individuals and families affected by the event.

The two presentations emphasised the importance of effective coordination of services and activities which may be provided by a wide range of government and non-government agencies during and after a disaster. The difference in this event was that services required coordination not only within one particular State but also between States.

A presentation on the Thredbo landslide gave participants an opportunity to consider the approach taken to recovery management in New South Wales, where the principles of recovery management have been enhanced by a 'Memorandum of Understanding', developed with key non-government agencies to formalise their involvement.

In summary, the presentations highlighted the need for planning for disaster recovery, particularly at the local level. They also reinforced the fundamental principle that while individuals and communities will need varying levels of support the most effective recovery from any disaster is that which is driven by community needs and input.

One of the main reasons for the success of the forum was the quality of each of the presentations, both in delivery and content. A selection of papers will be published in the next edition of this journal.

Expo displays

In addition to the formal presentations a number of expo stands provided the focus for much discussion and networking opportunities during breaks in the program.

Displays were provided by the City of Darebin, Red Cross, Salvation Army, VICSES, the Department of Human Services and the Australian Emergency Management Institute.

Of particular interest to many participants was the Emergency Recovery Management Information System, recently developed by the Department of Human Services. The system provides a capacity to monitor and record details of individuals affected by disasters and financial assistance and other recovery services provided to them. Use of the system at a regional level will ensure people affected by disasters are provided with the most effective range of services possible to meet their particular needs.

The future

Given the success of the Forum organisers propose that a similar activity be held on an annual basis. The 1998 event will be held in September–October, again as a lead up to Victoria's bushfire season. A shorter one-day program is likely, to enable participation by a greater number of people. Details will be advertised in this journal and distributed to a wide range of agencies later in the year.