

# Strengthening the capacity of remote Indigenous communities through emergency management

*Hocke & O'Brien* show how the Queensland Department of Emergency Services is strengthening community capacity in RICs

*By Irene Hocke & Arthur O'Brien*

The Queensland Department of Emergency Services is focused on improvements to the health, disaster resilience and well-being of rural and remote communities, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. A number of initiatives are being implemented across each of the operational areas of the Department to address the Queensland Government's priorities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities across the State and to strengthen the capacity of these communities to respond to disasters and emergencies.

## Introduction

The Queensland Department of Emergency Services comprises the Queensland Fire and Rescue Service, the Queensland Ambulance Service and the Counter Disaster and Rescue Services.

The Department is an essential community safety agency that either directly delivers or funds a range of critical emergency and disaster management services. These services focus on preventing, in the first instance, or minimising the risk or impact of emergencies and disasters, as well as response to and recovery from emergencies and disasters.

The Department is addressing the challenge of improving services to rural and remote communities within an environment of funding restrictions. A number of innovative and potentially revolutionary initiatives are being, or will be, implemented as part of a collaborative effort between the respective operational arms of the Department, in conjunction with other Government Departments or in partnership with local Community Councils.

Future work of the Department will also include addressing the emergency and disaster response and recovery needs of the outstation or homeland movements, and involving other community representatives and organisations in the delivery of emergency and counter disaster services.

## The context

Historically, fire and ambulance services were established by local communities forming, in the first instance, volunteer services.

Over time these volunteer services iterated into part time or full time services with a paid workforce in those communities that could justify such a service. Communities with a high socio-economic profile could afford a better service, while those relatively disadvantaged communities went without or continued with a volunteer service. The ongoing viability of these volunteer services relied heavily on the ongoing goodwill of the local people.

In 1975, the *State Counter Disaster Organisation Act* was proclaimed and established the State Emergency Service (SES) as a State-wide volunteer based emergency service. SES Units have been established in each Queensland Local Government and Community Council area. SES Units comprise volunteers from the local community who are willing to make a commitment to preparing for disasters and thus protecting and supporting their communities.

In 1989, both the fire and ambulance services in Queensland went through a revolutionary change and became State-wide services. Over the last decade both services have been refining resource allocation models to address some of the inequities of the past and put in place models of service delivery based on population, demand and risk profiles.

In 1994, the SES Cadet Scheme was established as part of the Government's youth strategy. The scheme aims to

train and resource groups of young people capable of assisting their communities in times of emergency and to foster career development in permanent and volunteer emergency services.

More recently, the Department has focused on improving equity of access to emergency services for people living in rural, remote and Indigenous communities.

### Why focus on Indigenous communities?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders generally live in remote coastal regions in greater numbers than other Australians. Their communities are extremely isolated, generally lack effective cyclone shelters, housing and infrastructure is a lower standard than elsewhere and they have limited communications and transport facilities.

Communities also have low levels of education and awareness, a lack of access to knowledge and information on health and safety, and suffer the effects of complex social issues such as alcohol abuse, family violence and dispossession. Adding to this there is the growing movement by traditional owners back to homelands or outstations, who now have access to lands under native title legislation, and through the Aboriginal Land Act 1991. This means that the number of very small communities scattered across very rugged and remote areas is on the increase. These factors combine to make these communities particularly at risk from climate change and natural disasters and therefore reliant on access to emergency services.

The Department of Emergency Services' purpose is to save lives, protect property and help preserve the natural environment. To achieve this purpose the Department needs to ensure that the best value services are provided to communities and individuals throughout Queensland commensurate with the inherent risks and hazards within those communities and within the overall resource constraints imposed by Government.

A recent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) Submission to the Council of Australian Governments' Review of Natural Disaster Relief and Mitigation Arrangements summarised the issues of significance to the delivery of emergency services to remote Indigenous communities. The issues raised by ATSIC are summarised in Box 1.

The extent of the issues raised by ATSIC makes it apparent that the effect of emergencies and disasters go beyond the realm of emergency management and can strike at the foundations of a community in terms of overall health and well-being.

### Box 1: Issues raised by ATSIC in their submission to the Council of Australian Governments Review of Natural Disaster Relief and Mitigation Arrangements.

- **The lack of resources, equipment and expertise means that Indigenous communities are generally under prepared for emergency situations.**
- **There is confusion regarding the respective roles of Commonwealth, State and local government bodies in planning for and responding to emergencies.**
- **Indigenous communities can be overlooked because of their small size and remote location. Local governments, which are usually the responsible bodies through which recovery activities from disasters are coordinated, either may not recognise Indigenous communities as being within their sphere of responsibility or may not have sufficient resources to fulfil their obligations to such communities.**
- **There is a reliance on ATSIC and State Indigenous welfare/development agencies to take leading roles in responding to emergencies in Indigenous communities. However, these agencies have neither the resources nor the expertise to carry out such functions.**
- **Environmental health issues already exist in small, isolated communities and these existing problems are exacerbated during and after natural disaster events. Some Indigenous communities rely on their own generators that are prone to sustained failure during disasters. The consequent malfunction of sewerage and water pumps can lead to serious health problems which are less likely to occur in mainstream towns.**
- **Recovery can be severely affected by damage to access roads that can be a critical factor in the ongoing viability of some communities.**
- **There is a lack of appropriate cyclone shelters or community buildings for use as effective refuges during emergency events.**

Previous community awareness programs undertaken within Indigenous communities have had limited success due to the lack of sustainable funding required to properly support an ongoing awareness program and a lack of suitable materials due to language and cultural barriers. An important lesson learnt through programs attempted to date is that one size does not fit all communities, yet the many sizes to fit many communities is an expensive exercise. Given that there are 32 identifiable Community Councils within Queensland, plus a significant number of outstations, many with differing languages and cultural norms, raising community awareness of emergency and counter disaster issues becomes a challenging exercise.

One possible process for progressing this issue is a prioritisation of community risk based on a variety of factors including:

- accessibility to existing emergency and health services (and information);
- exploring existing community information mechanisms; and
- identification of the existing capacity of individual communities.

This information would then allow an assessment to be made of the vulnerability of that particular community to emergencies and natural hazards enabling a prioritisation of information needs across communities without resorting to a *one size fits all* policy.

While the Department has implemented a number of programs to address shortfalls in terms of the emergency and disaster management systems in place within Indigenous communities, there is a need to go further and to explore our role in terms of the overall health and well-being of communities.

One question with which the Department is currently grappling is – ‘Is the lack of comprehensive emergency services within communities adding to the extent of the social and economic problems inherent in communities, or is the lack of emergency services within communities due to the social and economic problems?’



Yarrabah Emergency Services Unit – joint RFS and SES

## Box 2: Extract from ‘Meeting Challenges, Making Choices’ – April 2002.

**‘Levels of health, education, life expectancy and employment for Indigenous people are significantly lower than for other Queensland communities.**

**For example, Indigenous people on Cape York have some of the poorest health profiles in Australia:**

- **Mortality rates 2–3 times higher than that of Queensland’s population over all**
- **Median age at death at least 20 years below that of non-Indigenous people**
- **Suicide rates among aboriginal males in remote communities over six times higher than that of Queensland’s population overall**
- **The highest prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases in QAlcohol-related death rates are over 21 times the general Queensland rate, and for homicide and violence (much of it alcohol-related) 18 times higher’.**

In addressing this question the Department is also asking – ‘What effect will improved emergency services have on other issues of relevance to that community? If the effect results in a net benefit to that community – how best do we assist communities to develop appropriate emergency management measures within an environment of limited resources?’ Finally – ‘What role does the Department have in terms of building the overall capacity of communities beyond simply emergency and disaster management?’

Realistically communities cannot develop and become sustainable where community capacity is low. Indicators of the dysfunction that exists within a majority of Indigenous Australian communities have been highlighted in numerous reports and studies including the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* in 1991 and the *Aboriginal And Torres Strait Islander Women’s Task Force on Violence* in 1999.

More recently Fitzgerald’s *Cape York Justice Study*, 2001, points out the social and economic problems facing Aboriginal people in Cape York communities as reproduced in Box 2.

Fitzgerald, gravely points out that, ‘Unless the epidemic of alcohol abuse is dealt with, no other development, including economic and educational reform, can occur.’ (Fitzgerald, 2001).

Further to this, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Task Force on Violence argues for an holistic, just, and co-ordinated whole of government approach, that focuses on helping individuals, families and the Further to this, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Task Force on Violence argues for a holistic, just, and co-ordinated whole of government approach,

which focuses on helping individuals, families and the community to heal, become stronger and capable of sustainable development. The implications are an urgent need for reform, and new approaches to address issues and problems linked to individuals and community capacity and social and family networks within communities.

In Australia, emphasis is now being placed on the building of community capacity, through the development of social and human capital within communities. Collaboration between governments and non-government agencies and communities to build on the current assets that exist within communities is required.

### The Department's role in community capacity building

Cavaye (2000) sees capacity building as 'a flexible series of actions conducted by community people that creates economic benefits and helps communities become more able to manage change.'

The Aspen Institute (2000) described capacity building as the combined influence of a community's commitment, resources and skills that can be deployed to build on the communities strengths and address community problems.

In exploring the Department's role in community capacity building, a decision needs to be formally taken as to whether we are simply strengthening the existing capacity of communities in a purely emergency management context, or does the Department have a role in building the community's capacity in other areas. Other areas would of necessity include providing services that respond to drugs/alcohol abuse, domestic violence and environmental health concerns within communities.

A whole of government approach would suggest that the Department would need to play a broader role in capacity building and sustainable community development, particularly given the complexities of social and economic issues impacting on a large number of Indigenous Australian communities.

Obviously, in assisting communities to build capacity in areas outside traditional business, the Department is heavily reliant on working with State and Commonwealth agencies such as Queensland Health, Queensland Police, the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. The Department is no less reliant on community organisations and the continuing goodwill of individuals within the communities due to these partnerships.

The exploration of the role of the Department will continue, particularly given the Queensland Government's commitment to the *Meeting Challenges, Making Choices* – the Queensland Government's response to the Cape York Justice Study. The Department's proposed innovative solutions, outside of the mainstream, may well prove beneficial to both the Government as a whole, and to target communities, for very little up front investment.

### Why build capacity?

The Department is heavily reliant on a volunteer emergency services workforce in those communities, which are unable to justify, in terms of population levels and risks, a part time or full time paid workforce.

Developing a self-sustaining volunteer emergency service within communities across Queensland is challenging and relies heavily on the goodwill and support within communities, particularly from local government and community councils. The Department has historically enjoyed, and indeed encourages, a cultural ethos of community self-help. In addition, there is also a heavy reliance on those individuals within communities who donate both time and money to support the ongoing operations of the various emergency services volunteer organisations.

This reliance on the goodwill of local communities lies at the heart of community capacity. Communities must be prepared to engage with the Department in order for our volunteer service delivery model to function effectively.

Victor Joseph of St Paul Community, Moa Island in the Torres Strait, explained it best when he talked about a triangular relationship between Government, the community (represented by the Community Council and other key community representatives) and the individuals that make up the volunteer services. Importantly, without the support of any side of this triangle the service delivery model falls apart.



The challenge for the Department is therefore to sustain and strengthen partnerships in areas where the model is operating well and to build partnerships in those areas where the model is not yet in place.

The Department, over the past few years has begun to look beyond simply providing training, support and infrastructure to volunteers and is now looking at our role in terms of building the capacity of communities to



*First Aid training at Oriners Outstation a homeland of the Kwanyama Aboriginal Community*

respond to some of the other issues impacting on their lives and our role in terms of building social capital.

### **Our approach to enhancing service delivery**

In responding to the issues and challenges in delivering essential emergency services to remote Indigenous communities, the Department is implementing a two-pronged approach by focusing on both service delivery and on employment opportunities for Indigenous Australians.

Regarding service delivery, the Department is developing a five-year service delivery plan to improve the delivery of emergency services to rural and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities through enhancing partnerships and collaboration with community representatives, local, State and Commonwealth agencies.

The Plan will also improve the cultural appropriateness of our services, and promote positive outcomes and improved quality of life for Indigenous people, particularly those living in rural and remote communities.

The Plan is being developed through engaging with communities to discuss current issues and for communities to suggest possible solutions. Issues raised through community consultations are being prioritised in consultation with the community and will be addressed through the Plan.

Some 21 out of 32 rural and remote Indigenous Communities have contributed to the development of the Plan.

The results of the consultation process with local communities are encouraging. A number of communities have identified the potential role of the Department in assisting community capacity building for sustained service delivery through partnership arrangements. While communities have acknowledged the Department's focus on emergency management, they believe that this focus may well have spin off outcomes in terms of social and economic benefits.

Communities are also seeking outcomes in the delivery of training, equipment, infrastructure, community education and awareness and are seeking ownership and responsibility for emergency services delivery. Locally based individuals are seeking responsibility for local service delivery to maintain the expertise of local people, build sustainable emergency response and recovery systems and to develop culturally appropriate programs delivered by local people.

One of the key directions of this project is to develop innovative and flexible models of service delivery that meet the emergency and disaster service needs of local communities. In this regard it is intended to support the continuing development of a number of joint rescue units in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the Cape, Gulf and Torres Strait areas.

This will entail the enhancement of joint Rural Fire Service (RFS), State Emergency Services (SES) and in some cases Volunteer Marine Rescue (VMR) emergency services units in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. A rationalisation of volunteer commitment, and resource efficiencies, will lead to improved safety outcomes for these communities from this type of initiative.

The Department has also initiated a consultation process with key Government stakeholders both in Cairns and in Brisbane. Part of this process is related to exploring the Department's role in areas outside of our traditional business. More importantly, the Department is building relationships with other providers of services to Indigenous communities (both Government and non-Government) to leverage the very best services at the most effective cost.

The Queensland Ambulance Service (QAS) undertook a major consultation process in 1999 with Indigenous communities in the Cape and Torres Strait, Commonwealth and State agencies, the Royal Flying Doctor Service and other relevant organisations to further determine the QAS response in terms of pre-hospital care and injury prevention for isolated remote communities. The results of these consultations form part of the five-year service delivery plan and led to the formation of the QAS Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Co-ordination Unit.

This Unit was initiated to develop and implement a comprehensive policy framework to provide a better ambulance service to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

This framework includes:

- Guidelines for culturally and clinically appropriate service delivery;
- Educational support packages to officers delivering services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Bridging programs to provide assistance with education and competency requirements to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the opportunity to qualify as student ambulance officers.
- Establishment of a mandatory 10 per cent intake of *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific* student positions within the Student Paramedic Intake for 2000–01 onwards.
- A commitment to provide support to health promotion/equity-based collaborative projects for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and communities to encourage better health outcomes.

As a result of the consultation and subsequent recommendations of the Service Development Plan for Cape York Peninsula, the QAS has established a Field Officer in Coen. This Field Officer will provide training

and assistance to the remote communities of Coen, Lockhart River, Aurukun, Pormpuraaw, Kowanyama and major outstations throughout the area.

The QAS is working with Cape York communities and the Cape York Partnerships Office to establish appropriate service delivery models including the establishment of Field Officer positions in other locations throughout the Cape and within the Torres Straits.

The establishment of QAS Field Officers in remote communities builds on the existing collaborative arrangements in place with Queensland Health and will enable joint planning and service delivery in these areas.

### **The role of QAS Field Officers is:**

1. To assist Indigenous communities in Cape York to establish or further develop effective arrangements for pre-hospital emergency care;
2. To work with Indigenous communities to increase the capacity of community members to respond effectively and appropriately to health care emergencies and to injuries or their prevention;
3. To work with Indigenous communities to identify and assist prepare community members for employment within QAS;
4. To assist/respond to pre-hospital care emergencies; and
5. To assist with health promotion and health education programs.

The QAS has conducted consultations throughout the Torres Strait Islands and has recently launched *Enhancing the Capacity of Islander Communities to Prevent and Respond to Health Care Emergencies and Injuries*.

During the 2001–02 financial year an important milestone in the 25-year history of the SES in Queensland was achieved through the completion of the SES Strategic Plan.

Initiatives developed as part of the implementation process of this plan will address a number of the equity and diversity issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander SES volunteers and their communities. Priority will be given to developing closer working relationships with communities and reviewing SES guidelines and procedures to not only ensure equity in the workplace but to also address the sensitivities applicable to the needs of Indigenous communities.

The Department is also currently collaborating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community councils to develop Natural Disaster Risk Management Studies Program (NDRMSP), funded by the Commonwealth, State and Local Governments. The aim of this program is to aid the identification of mitigation strategies that may lead to a reduction in community loss and suffering caused by natural disasters.



*Horn Island SES Unit at the State Rescue Competition in Toowoomba*

Recent Budget outcomes have enabled the Department to continue its support of Torres Strait Rescue, an organisation that provides a contracted aeromedical and air rescue helicopter service to the Northern Cape York area and Torres Strait.

The Department pays an annual standing charge towards this service and provides training for the volunteer air rescue crew through Queensland Government Helicopter Rescue Service personnel. There are currently five, trained volunteer crew members drawn from Queensland Ambulance Service (2), Queensland Police Service (1) and Torres Strait Islanders from the local community (2).

### **The future**

The Department intends to build upon the strategies commenced in 2001–02 and to increase the focus on enhancing service delivery to rural and remote Indigenous communities.

The QAS has employed a Field Officer at Horn Island, and is in the process of building a field office and employing additional Field Officer at Kowanyama. These Field Officers will assist these communities to establish or further develop arrangements for pre-hospital emergency care, increase the capacity of community members to respond effectively and appropriately to health care emergencies and to injuries or their prevention and to work with Indigenous communities to identify and prepare community members for employment within the ambulance service.

The establishment of QAS Field Officers in remote communities builds on the existing collaborative arrangements in place with Queensland Health and will enable joint planning and service delivery in these areas.

An additional Rural Fire Service and Counter Disaster and Rescue Training Officers will be employed to provide training and support specifically to Cape York and Torres Strait communities and will help build the capacity of existing joint RFS & SES volunteer units as well as working towards establishing new units in partnership with Community Councils.

The Department has also established an Indigenous Project Officer based in Townsville to enhance community safety and prevention capability on Palm Island as part of a pilot project. This pilot will be evaluated for possible expansion into other areas of Queensland.

A number of innovative programs which will assist in building the capacity of Indigenous communities beyond simply an emergency management response has commenced, including a drug awareness program for Indigenous Year 7 children from communities throughout Queensland to be developed and delivered in conjunction with Queensland Health.

The Department also intends to pilot a joint Emergency Services/Environmental Protection Agency rescue unit in Cape York including trialling an emergency services

coordinator at the Land and Sea Management Centre at Lockhart River.

The recent Queensland Government Response to the Cape York Justice Study *Meeting Challenges, Making Choices* recommends, amongst other things, that youth programs such as the State Emergency Services Cadets be expanded. Currently the SES Cadets Program involves 1,000 Cadets in 38 Units across Queensland.

The Program provides leadership skills to young people aged 12 to 16 with Cadets called upon to support the social fabric of their communities.

Potentially the program can be further developed as a youth development program and extended into remote Indigenous communities as a potential crime prevention, suicide prevention, and substance abuse prevention strategy.

In addition, the Department will explore models of community engagement as part of its five-year service delivery plan.

The Department intends to contribute to a new youth development program in Cape York and the Torres Strait in the 2002–03 financial year including the current piloting of a primary school-based program on Moa Island (St Pauls) with the aim of extending it to other centres in Cape York.

The Indigenous Coordination Unit is the Department's most recent initiative was established in Cairns on December 2002 and launched on 23 May, 2003. The ICU will establish a collaborative approach to developing the capacity of staff to work with communities to ensure effective and efficient outcomes. The Unit will effectively co-ordinate resources from a multi-service perspective, and will ensure collaborative consultation and negotiations with relevant Government, Non-Government, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities to meet specific and sustainable community-based outcomes.

Through the Unit, the department will also be able to respond efficiently and contribute to the Government's Cape York Justice Study and Ten Year Partnership Strategies, coordinate the implementation of the Department's *Five Year Plan for Safer and Healthier Murri and Ilan Communities in North Queensland, 2003–2007*, and effectively support a multi-Agency approach for the implementation of and reporting on appropriate planning framework and service delivery outcomes.

## Community engagement

Community engagement has come into prominence over the past few years as a means of planning and delivering responsive Government services, that meet the needs and expectations of local communities.

Engaging with communities, not just consultation has become an important facet in the planning, policy development and service delivery components of Government.

The Department of Emergency Services has had in place a number of excellent examples of community engagement practices – the Local Ambulance Committees (LAC) that have been an important component of ambulance service delivery, and the Emergency Services Advisory Council (ESAC) and the Rural Fire Council (RFC).

The LACs, first established in 1991, advise local ambulance services on the needs of their community, the quality of services provided and manage funds on behalf of the community. The QAS has made a genuine commitment to community engagement both in structural and performance terms through the LACs.

The ESAC is a non-policy-making community based body, which reports to the Minister for Emergency Services on the extent to which the delivery of fire, ambulance and other disaster management and emergency services meet community needs.

The RFC provides advice to the Minister for Emergency Services and the QFRS in respect of fires in rural areas and the operation of rural fire brigades and promotes fire safety, fire prevention and the reduction of fire danger within rural areas.

More recently a Community Engagement Unit has been established. The role of this Unit is to work in partnership with communities to develop policies and service delivery models that meet the needs of those communities.

Another aspect of community engagement has been generated through the establishment of the Department's Strategic Plan for Indigenous Australians. This Plan reflects the Government's commitment to the reconciliation process and the principles contained within the Ten Year Planning Framework for Indigenous Affairs and the *Cape York Partnerships: Some Practical Ideas*.

This Plan was developed through input from senior managers of the Department and Indigenous staff representatives from across the Portfolio. The Plan is underpinned by a Departmental Reference Group, personally Chaired by the Director-General, which comprises Indigenous and management representatives of both the Department and its volunteer groups.

The Plan is being advanced through the establishment of Local Support Network groups in a number of cities and provincial towns across Queensland including Yarrabah, Cherbourg/Murgon, Townsville/Burdekin, Mackay/Bowen and Brisbane. Local Support Network



forums allow a support mechanism for staff and provide a link between the Department and local communities. The development of the 5 Year for Safer and Healthier Murri and Ilan Communities North Queensland 2003–2007, supports the need to investigate the establishment of similar support mechanisms for volunteers and employees in remote locations.

## Conclusion

The Department of Emergency Services has embraced the principles of community capacity building in delivering on its vision to improve service delivery to rural and remote Indigenous communities across Queensland. While only just commencing this journey, the Department recognises that it has a long way to go, and needs the support of staff, Community Councils and community individuals if it is to succeed.

A number of innovative pilot projects will commence in the 2002–03 financial year and will be evaluated, not just in terms of the emergency management outcomes, but also in terms of broader social and economic outcomes for target communities.

A key rationale for these initiatives is the need to invest time and resources into strengthening the capacity of remote Indigenous communities to protect themselves from natural hazards and other emergencies. However, enhancing the communities' emergency management capacity can also have further benefits in terms of the social and economic development of communities and therefore generate real value for money from the resources invested.

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