

Philanthropic Response to the Victorian Bushfires

Philanthropy Australia and FRRR co-hosted a meeting in the Melbourne Town Hall on 17 February to discuss how the philanthropic community can best respond to the Victorian bushfires and support affected communities. This was well supported and included a key cross section of the philanthropic community in Victoria, as well as visiting Members from interstate.

Summary of key messages:

1. There are 2 parts to disaster response – emergency relief and longer term recovery. Philanthropy's role lies more in the medium to long term in the recovery effort.
2. Stop, listen and gather information before responding. While we experience a desire to give as soon as possible, it is better for us to wait and plan and give strategically in the longer term.
It is also vital to understand each community affected and what they need, to listen to and work with them. Aim not to do things for but with people.
3. Collaboration will be vital for the philanthropic response, so gathering good information from communities, charities, government and other funders, and sharing details of who is doing, or planning, what - becomes vital.
4. Philanthropy Australia has a role in coordination, liaison and information dissemination.
5. Rebuilding of long-term infrastructure, research into community reconstruction after disasters, understanding of and preparation for the impacts of climate change are examples of good focus for our efforts – we should be thinking outside the square.

Introduction:

Gina Anderson, CEO Philanthropy Australia

- Key statistics:
 - 209 people dead
 - 1834 house destroyed
 - 7000 people homeless
 - Over 400,000 hectares burnt
 - Over \$100 million raised from the public (for the Victorian Bushfire Fund, not including CFA, wildlife rescue, the Salvation Army etc.)
 - A Royal Commission will provide an interim report by 31 August
- Foundations are set up for the long term, we have the ability to think and act long term.
- In the aftermath of Gulf Coast hurricanes in the USA most funders remained engaged nearly 2 years after the disaster. “We learned a lesson after 9/11 that no matter how great the instinct to give, we try to discern and evaluate what the need is ... and resist the urge to give until we have developed a good plan” (Josh Jarrett, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation).
- What it takes to be effective post disaster is often a system-wide approach to rebuilding communities: “The scale of the problem is huge, but the scale of the solution is much smaller.” (Jarrett, Gates Foundation) Ten \$500k grants played smartly will have 100 times the effect of one \$5 million grant.

Hon. Peter Bachelor, Minister for Energy & Resources and Minister for Community Development

- The Government's biggest challenge is to help groups with immediate funding for on the ground assistance. Grants are now available for less than \$50,000 to volunteer organisations which can be used for things such as training, equipment replacement, travel, food expenses, phone and copying expenses.
- Government is sponsoring a coordinated volunteer information line, and more than 10,000 people have added their names to the register to date.
- Neighbourhood houses are becoming centres for assistance at the core of the community.
- Government will have a register for in-kind donations and offers of assistance.
- Government role is in emergency relief and rebuilding infrastructure.
- A Bushfire Reconstruction Authority has been set up to be run by Christine Nixon.

Michael Raper & Andrew Coughlin, Australian Red Cross

- The Red Cross is acting as an auxiliary to government in the bushfire response. It both offers emergency relief on the ground and is connected into the strategic and policy end.
- Long term recovery is about rebuilding lives and communities. A key challenge is the impact of the disaster on community dynamics and community leadership.
- Common needs of those affected:
 - accurate information to lower anxiety and restore predictability
 - personal support & practical care
 - psychological support and mental first aid
 - community development and resources, eg. community engagement, activities, public forums, cultural and spiritual support.
- Some donations are problematic – for example, major car company donates 200 cars for bushfire victims – who amongst all the victims get those cars? What does it do to community dynamics if person A gets a new car and person B doesn't?
- Good to support existing programs and networks in communities
- Information is critical to the recovery effort, especially once the immediate crisis has passed and public attention is diverted away.
- Critical times for those affected are six weeks, six months, and anniversaries. Personal recovery might take an average of five to seven years.
- While immediate help is good, people might take months or years to decide whether they want to stay and rebuild or leave the area, therefore community needs will be fluid for some time.
- Government is to set up a panel of community leaders to spend funds and determine the criteria. 1st phase 30 million response will go to:
 - families of the deceased
 - families of those severely injured
 - those who have lost their primary residence
- Mental health first aid – there are plenty who didn't lose family or homes but had a really bad experience on the day, and will suffer trauma alongside those with more substantial losses.

- People want the money shifted quickly but in fact it is the longer term where it's needed most, which is where philanthropy can play a major role.

Sylvia Admans, CEO of the Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal (FRRR)

- Practitioner reflections from FRRR's experiences with disaster funding.
- FRRR have a unique capacity to give to non-DGRs around Australia.
- FRRR initially thought their role in disasters was in immediate relief – but after the Cyclone Larry disaster in 2006 have moved to believing their role is in the recovery, not relief stage.
- With Cyclone Larry, FRRR formed partnership with Bendigo Bank and had a local advisory panel to assist with the board's decisions.
- FRRR grants were “community renewal grants” given about 3 months after incident, when the insurance and government money had been allocated.
- Learnings:
 - timing is important, we visited communities 3 months after Cyclone Larry
 - process is also important so use simple application forms for minimal hassle.
 - be flexible, let community groups decide what they need. Some of the ideas cyclone-affected communities came up with included community archive, wildlife preservation, fencing, etc.
- As a result of this FRRR has developed a standing disaster response program called ‘Repair, Restore, Renew’ (known as the Pirate Program!).
- Giving must be appropriate – ie, giving to Bendigo where only private homes were lost is different to giving to communities like Marysville where entire town is destroyed including community and public infrastructure.

Suggestions & questions from Philanthropy Australia Members:

- We can help best “when the dust settles”. Some specific suggestions:
 - Collate and publicise the lessons learnt
 - Bring in interstate and international emergency services experts to help equip and train our firefighters
 - Animal welfare – both stock and domestic animals, and wildlife
 - Funding for CFA infrastructure and preparation
 - Fund community groups and locals to present to the Royal Commission
 - Community groups such as CWA – get them together in 6 months time to see what they need and how they're going
 - A large long-term collaborative project could be a longitudinal study of the health of volunteers and workers in the fire areas, similar to that done at Ground Zero in NY after the Sep 11 2001 incident; not to address but to identify health issues, including physiological and psychological
- We need a single liaison with government - suggested Lynne Wannan, Director, Office for the Community Sector, Department of Planning and Community Development
- Is this a chance for us to do some thinking and facilitate discussion on a new paradigm of community?
- We need some big picture mapping of what opportunities there are for us to help and what groups are out there to work with.
- We need a holding response and a position piece to provide to trustees about why philanthropy will be needed more in 6 months time than right now, and how

we can best help in disasters – perhaps a set of best practice principles about why immediacy might not be the best response.

- For community organisations we need understanding and flexibility – they may not have records or financials.
- Leaders from within communities are vital to help those communities exercise power in their recovery. Leaders within those communities may be in such high demand that they cannot give time to work/home commitments. Can we help?
- More lobbying and research around climate change.
- What is the role of philanthropy in helping small business get back on its feet, as they are so much lifeblood of communities?
- We need to publicise what the members are doing or have decided to do about the fires on the website.

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