



Australian
Library and
Information
Association



Report

**ALIA Disaster Recovery
Project**

Bespoke Results

Introduction

In response to recent natural disasters impacting on Australian communities, ALIA seeks to develop a Collaborative Planning Response. The purpose of the Planning Response is to gather information about current relief activities and to aid:

- Implementation of a collaborative approach
- Identification of key priorities of need for affected communities
- Avoidance of duplication of effort
- Maximum impact of disaster responses in supporting the redevelopment of affected communities.

In support of ALIA's decision to develop a Collaborative Planning Response for natural disasters, the experience of YPRL is captured in "Jane's Story", an edited account of an interview conducted with Jane Grace by Dr Anne Hartican of Bespoke Results. Jane is the Manager of YPRL's Outreach Services and has acted in the role of Disaster Recovery Project Manager for ALIA pending a permanent appointment to the role.

Background

In the summer of 2009, a number of bushfires swept through various areas of Victoria including areas covered by Latrobe, Nillumbik, Whittlesea and Murrindindi councils. The impact of the fires was devastating; 78 towns were directly affected, 7,500 people were displaced, 2,029 houses were destroyed and 173 people lost their lives.

The most destructive of the season's bushfires occurred on Saturday 7 February 2009. These fires swept through the Yarra Plenty Regional Library catchment area causing unprecedented loss of life and property damage. In the Murrindindi Shire, 106 lives were lost and approximately 40% of the Shire's total area burnt. Since what have now been called the "Black Saturday" fires, Yarra Plenty Regional Library (YPRL) has been active in supporting affected local communities. This experience has been recorded with the aim of assisting ALIA to develop a Collaborative Planning Response; the objective being to assist public libraries to determine the role they may play in assisting the community they serve in the days, weeks and months after a natural disaster has impacted the community. Many examples of the support public libraries can provide to their local communities after a natural disaster were displayed in response to the 2009 bushfires. For example, both the Kinglake Library (Murrindindi Shire Council) and the newly opened Churchill Community Hub (Latrobe City Council) served as recovery centres. As the recovery efforts continued public libraries have been active in finding ways to re-connect the communities affected by the fires.

Jane's Story

Getting Involved

In my role as Manager of Outreach my duties include working with clients from the Nillumbik Shire and the City of Whittlesea; communities in both areas were affected the “Black Saturday” bushfires. My work for these councils, and the communities they serve, involves working with council units associated with the arts and culture, family services and early years, education services, aged services and community health.

On the Monday following the bushfires our CEO, Christine MacKenzie, received a phone call from the Community Services Director of Nillumbik Shire requesting that I be made available to provide assistance at the Shire's Emergency Relief Centre. The initial request for assistance was for YPRL to provide the services of myself and another person to manage phone calls from the corporate sector; many organisations were seeking to make donations to support the relief efforts.

I believe I was asked to take on the role because of the partnerships and experiences I have had in working with the Nillumbik Shire council and community. I nominated Felicity Macchion (Branch Manager of Lalor and local resident of Diamond Creek) to join me because of her management expertise, her ability to deal with complex situations and her knowledge of the community.

Getting Started

On Monday morning Felicity and I arrived at the Nillumbik Shire offices and sat for three hours waiting for someone to direct us on what they wanted us to do. While we were waiting for our brief we discussed how we might manage a database and the task of returning the calls of all the organisations that had made contact with the council seeking to provide assistance. By lunchtime we decided to call the Shire staff, who were all in meetings, to indicate we would return to YPRL until they were ready to brief us on what we were required to do. The response to this was to direct us to go out to the Diamond Creek Relief Centre with instructions to work on the phones taking calls, returning calls and co-ordinating the delivery and distribution of corporate or large agency donations.

When we arrived at the relief centre, a temporary centre set up at the YMCA, it was like a bomb site. To give you a sense of the disorganisation, visualise this; it was an oval, full of cars. You walked up the driveway, there were security personnel trying to control traffic going in and out. There were donated goods littering the driveway all the way up to the building, you walked into a sea of stuff; papers, bikes, prams, cots, pots, highchairs, boxes, people, people and more people. When you went to the clothes area, it was a space the size of a basketball stadium with piles of clothing that were as high as the ceiling.

We finally found Tara, the site manager for the day. There were another twenty people all wanting to talk to her at the same time. Tara assigned us the task of “meeting and greeting” which involved directing people arriving at the centre. It was left to Felicity and I to work out the layout and operations of the site. Initially people did not know where to find things in the centre, it was all over the place. The key challenge was in managing the influx of volunteers and donations. We were getting boot loads of shoes and food and other items that were not wanted. Partly that resulted from what was being published on the radio.

After the first twenty minutes we decided to draw up a map of the site based on the way various functions had been set up e.g. there was a reception desk for registering volunteers and donations, areas for goods such as bedding, areas for clothing, toiletries, a volunteers refreshment / break area, food packaging areas for food donations, toilets and showers. In another area all of the key agencies were set up; the police, DHS, Red Cross, Centrelink, the chapel, psychologists, doctors and bedding on which people could sleep.

Organising Chaos

While we arrived at a scene of chaos order started to emerge; for example, toiletries were bundled up into “hotel packs” so that people could get a complete set of items to help them clean themselves up. On day one of the relief effort this was one of the most valued supports for bushfire victims; one woman approached me and said all she initially wanted was a toothbrush as she had not cleaned her teeth for three days.

Felicity and I recognised that people packing items for the victims were not in contact with the people at the entrance of the centre who were providing directions on where to find things. What Felicity and I started to do was to work out ways of improving the communication and co-ordination across the relief centre. For example, we developed a list of items needed so if someone came and told us they were going to the supermarket and asked if there was anything needed, we had a list of the top ten priority items based on the actual needs of the victims at a given point in time. Initially the priorities included toothbrushes, toothpaste, toiletry bags and sanitary products. Once these needs were met the priority became food. Victims wanted cereal and UHT milk; but for some reason never weetbix! There was always plenty of this.

People donating goods were well intentioned but failed to appreciate the logistical issues associated with a large number of people suddenly finding themselves homeless. Volunteers would bring in fresh bread and milk but there was no refrigeration so it was going off before the food was consumed. Donations of canned soup and baked beans were good but we needed to make sure people donating these goods also brought a can opener so that the canned food could be opened.

It became evident it was critical that people assigned to the centre’s “reception area” were up-to-date with the current needs of victims so the community’s generosity and willingness to give could be managed effectively. In the beginning there were more volunteers coming to the centre than there were bushfire victims. The donations were incredible but this quickly created a storage problem. It also became evident that two sites were needed; a site for volunteers and donations and a site for the bushfire victims as they came down from the

hill. This separation of sites occurred a week later i.e. a tent was set up to accommodate donated goods. The council later arranged storage facilities to store all of the items. This included church organisations that also took on the role of distributing items. But it wasn't long before the churches reached their capacity to store donated goods as well.

The advantage of working at the Relief Centre was you could see the chaos and the volume of activities occurring. You are directly and personally impacted by what has happened. The people most affected by the bushfires were like bomb victims; they were talking to you but looked like robots and functioned like robots; they seemed devoid of emotion. They would come and tell you of their experiences over and over again and insist that they were alright when clearly they were not alright. It was important to judge when to be directive with people and when not to push too hard. You need to be sensitive to the different ways people respond to trauma especially if you take a "meet and greet" role at a relief centre.

Our Immediate Value Add

Felicity worked at the Relief Centre for two days. The Monday and Tuesday, and I did a day and then two, half days. Apart from our "meeting and greeting" role we were also asked by Nillumbik Council to develop a Bushfire Fact Sheet outlining the supports and resources available to affected communities. We did this but it was not taken up. What was used was the fact sheet we developed on library services, programs and information specific to the needs of community members affected by the bushfires.

I feel an important thing for libraries to do during the first week following a disaster is to provide "leisure reading" such as magazines, romance novels and young adult and children's books to the relief centres. The children's books can assist to entertain children while their parents are doing what they need to do to deal with the impact of the disaster. It can also provide children with a sense of normality in what is otherwise a very disruptive time for them. One of the sad but pleasing sights I saw was a father speaking to a chaplain and the mother being counseled by a counselor and the child was sitting between the legs of his mother reading a book; he seemed immune to the chaos going on around them. The books give kids something familiar and safe to do. Books can also provide adults with a temporary form of escape from the chaos surrounding them.

Working with Municipal Emergency Co-ordination Centres

Each local government council has a Municipal Emergency Coordination Centre (MECC) and plan for disaster recovery. Consequently, Whittlesea Council's approach to the relief effort was different from the approach taken by Nillumbik Council. One of the things Whittlesea Council did was to hold a community partnership meeting. Whittlesea has a group called Whittlesea Community Futures. The group runs a regular monthly meeting where all key stakeholders, that is organisations and businesses, as well as council departments, get together to work on issues associated with the developing growth corridor of Epping. It was evident that the people at this meeting, including the developers and organisations such as

City Mission and Victoria Police, have a history of working together and that a strong bond existed between the group's members.

The relief work was all consuming for the council staff. Their regular work activities were put on hold for four weeks. During that time staff were rostered on a twenty-four hour roster focusing on the relief effort. Whittlesea Council staffed three relief centres while Nillumbik Council set up two relief centres.

One of the challenges in having multiple relief centres was maintaining effective communication and coordination. This impacted on the victims in subtle ways. For example, some community members expressed frustration that they had been sitting at one relief centre waiting to speak to someone from the Department of Human Services and were given some magazines that were five or six years old. They wanted something to read that was more current. My reaction was that if I had known the centre did not have up-to-date reading material I would have addressed that. When I learnt of the request, I emailed YPRL staff and we put together a collection of the latest Who Weekly, New Idea, Okay, Woman's Day and other popular publications. We then went and dropped these at the relief centres. I think the main focus of the relief centres was on providing physical support i.e. keeping people together and ensuring they were physically healthy. I was seeing things at a different level. I was looking at ways of providing emotional support.

Another key challenge in establishing well coordinated relief centres is that they can quickly evolve into becoming administrative centres for volunteers. When this happened it became difficult to maintain the focus on the relief work.

As with any project work, regular meetings are critical. The most useful ones seemed to be those that helped us to learn about what we were dealing with. For example, at the Whittlesea Community Partnership meeting, the meeting convenors explained what the council had done and what direction the relief efforts would take. Presenting at that meeting was the Director of Save the Children, an international organisation that supports communities after disasters. Also in attendance was Stephen Young from Turning Point. Stephen talked about his organisation's experiences with the relief effort after Cyclone Larry. It was interesting to hear how similar the difficulties we were experiencing in managing the relief response and donations were to those experienced after Cyclone Larry. That meeting was good; after it we were clear who the key bodies associated with the relief effort were and who was doing what in the Whittlesea area.

Nillumbik Shire conducted a lot more in-house meetings. They also engaged specialist psychologist, Dr Rob Gordon who had worked with the communities impacted by the Ash Wednesday bushfires. In a presentation I attended Dr Gordon explained how communities can break down after a disaster. He highlighted that community members may become very insular and initially cut everyone else out. But then that community often becomes fragmented when two people, or groups within the community, don't agree about an issue; it is this conflict that then breaks the bubble. Dr Gordon emphasised the importance of getting affected people to tell their stories. He encouraged us to establish "community lounge" sessions so victims would have an avenue to talk about their experiences.

What I learnt from Dr Gordon is that people have a tendency to disengage after a major trauma and you have to learn how to deal with people who are feeling disengaged. Confronted with a life-threatening disaster people accept death; when they survive a disaster they now need to re-engage with their life and their community. This idea resonated with me. You could see the struggle in the eyes of those directly affected by the fires and you heard the struggle in their conversations.

In response to Dr Gordon's suggestion about creating an avenue for people to tell their stories we decided we would provide a link to Wikinorthia. Wikinorthia is an established online resource which YPRL created to encourage library users to document stories of their experiences of living in the northern suburbs of Melbourne.

Library Sector Support

The State Library of Victoria and ALIA actively sought to support the relief effort. This effort commenced with a meeting convened by Margie Anderson. The purpose of the meeting was to determine what could be done by the library sector to support bushfire affected communities. Those who attended the meeting included Colin Morrison, representing the Department of Planning and Community Development, the President of Public Libraries Victoria Network, John Murrell (who was also there as his region was affected), representatives from the public libraries servicing affected communities, school libraries and booksellers. This group has now met approximately every six weeks. Out of the initial meeting arrangements were made for distributing second-hand books. It was also agreed to appoint a Project Manager for Victoria and Queensland to oversee the response from public libraries to the bushfires and the Queensland floods.

The group also considered my recommendation that responses to natural disasters needed to take into account the actual needs of the community and that these needs will differ in a number of ways and will change over time. To explain, there is an immediate need for novels, magazines and light reading. Then there is a requirement to meet the needs of people who are in temporary housing, which may be different from the needs once people re-settle into permanent housing. Once people are re-settled they will be more interested in replacing their personal book collections. These changing needs require an approach that is rolled out over a period of up to five years.

Addressing the needs of library staff is also an important consideration. The library services managers in the bushfire-affected areas received a lot of emails from their library colleagues offering support and inquiring about the impact of the fires on libraries and their staff. YPRL staff were affected by the bushfires both directly and indirectly. One staff member lost her business. Staff working on the YPRL mobile library service were confronted with the reality that a number of library members had perished in the fires. These same staff also became unofficial counselors as community members talked to them about their experiences and loss. Counseling was offered to staff. I think one of the most important things you can do to support staff during such times is to provide as much information as possible.

The Disaster Recovery Project Manager's Role

A decision was made to create a Disaster Recovery Project Manager for ALIA. The role will initially focus on the relief efforts for the bushfires and the recent Queensland floods. In creating the role the intention is that the person appointed will create a framework for states to use in response to natural disasters. I have taken on this role in a temporary capacity. To date this has involved managing the distribution of books and donations and co-ordinating some programs .

Based on my experiences I think that to be effective in this role pre-existing partnerships are critical; you need to have knowledge of the relevant organisations that will be involved in disaster recovery programs and, ideally, have established relationships with key people. You also need a good knowledge of the communities affected by the disaster and for them to know you and the library. It is helpful if the community is aware of the ways in which libraries can support communities in need.

I think it would be difficult to bring in people who are not known in the community and have no local knowledge. Having said that, even when you are involved in the local community people can look at you suspiciously; i.e. they want to know who you are, are you media, are you someone they can trust? The most crucial partnerships need to be with those who will be responsible for managing the relief centres. You need to understand the roles of the different organisations who will be associated with a relief effort. I gained my understanding of the roles of the different agencies from news bulletins and from talking to people.

As a Disaster Recovery Project Manager you need to be able to facilitate links and act as a conduit between communities in need with those who have the ability to provide the necessary support. For example, a woman who was the principal of a Healesville school rang and told me that a number of students at the school were now housed in a portable classroom as a result of the bushfires. She asked for help. As I had been to the Whittlesea Community Partnerships meeting and learnt about Save our Children I contacted Save our Children and they arranged to send a portable play centre to Healesville. Also, a child at the school kept walking around saying he had to “put the fires out” and he had to “protect his friends”. I found out the Children’s Hospital has a counseling service. I subsequently created a database with relevant contact details for people who needed referrals to support services. The principal of the school also advised the school needed materials so I rang the libraries stationery supplier Office Max and they provided exercise and drawing books, pencils and textas. Office Max delivered these materials. I contacted a publisher and asked for posters and books. All these materials were donations. Instead of the principal having to ring around, cold calling, I contacted my connections, got them to contact the principal and she was supplied with what she needed.

Managing Donations & Volunteers

Creating a central point for the acceptance and distribution of donations is an important function library services can fulfill. YPRL have assisted with the collection and distribution of second hand books as well as clothing, stationery, pet food, toiletries and cash. Staff at the YPRL branches posted a notice listing the items bushfire victims needed and the branches became a collection point for donations.

We have tried to manage what people want to give. We received a lot of second hand books. The books donated of high quality have been used to meet individual requests for replacement books from bushfire victims. We are also working with booksellers to provide new book replacements. Our aim is to have 20,000 items distributed to 2000 individuals within the next twelve months.

We have a lot of the surplus donated books. To move these books we are going to hold a National Book Sale in October to raise funds. A significant proportion of donated books and materials were in poor condition or out of date and require recycling. The solution to this has been to form a partnership with Visy who are keen to use old books to conduct education programs in schools on pulping.

There are many ways of helping. The cash collected by YPRL will assist purchasing new books. YPRL has created a ledger line in our accounts for the cash that will be used to provide replacement books. We have also received donations from historical societies who have been donating photos of affected areas before and after the fires.

I have already alluded to the challenges associated with the sensitive management of volunteers; this is an important aspect of the Disaster Recovery Project Manager's role. Volunteers can feel affronted when they feel they want to help but no one seems to want their help. Often they seek to provide immediate assistance but the way in which they want to assist may not be helpful in the days immediately after a disaster. For example, some volunteers wanted to conduct story times or lead craft workshops in the first week of the recovery effort.

I think the act of helping can assist those seeking to volunteer feel valued. In the first few weeks I had to learn to say, "Yes I'd love you to help but there is nowhere to store these donations. At the moment the victims need to attend to getting food, water and finding somewhere to live. They need to arrange to get their Medicare card replaced and have their papers and accounts sorted. They may value attending your craft workshop next month".

Educating people about when their help will be most appropriate to the needs of victims is important. I found that it was necessary to explain to some people seeking to volunteer that the support provided to the victims needs to be staged and that some of their help would be more useful in the months or years ahead once the disaster had gone off everyone's radar. But some volunteers don't want to be put on a database to be contacted later.

YPRL have engaged volunteers to sort the second hand books that were donated and deliver the boxes of books to homes. We had four volunteers who sorted 800 boxes of books in two weeks. My experience suggests it is worthwhile planning how you might engage volunteers in the event of a disaster.

Support Through Information Management

A key way in which libraries can support a disaster recovery effort is through creating and managing a central information point. As previously mentioned, YPRL created a wiki we have called "Bacwiki" i.e. Bushfire Affected Community wiki.

The wiki has provided a central repository of information for the community and the library sector. It contains news, photos and information about events. The information includes details about where communities can obtain grants and where they can find professional help. Bacwiki also provides links to the councils' website pages relating to the bushfire recovery efforts. Bushfire victims can use bacwiki to build their collections of books. The wiki contains a form that enables people to request books from different genres/subject areas or request a gift voucher so they can go out and buy a favourite title.

I write a weekly bulletin at present. The frequency of the bulletin will drop back to fortnightly in July and then monthly over time. I don't get a lot of feedback on the bulletin but I do know it is helping a lot of people. One of the booksellers sent me an email telling me he finds the bulleting really informative and reads it on his blackberry on the way home on Friday nights! I really think letting people know what is happening is vital to the recovery effort.

The bacwiki has generated overseas interest. The library service in Marysville in the USA has contacted us wanting to assist the bushfire victims. One of the ways they wanted to provide support was by setting up a pen pal system between primary school students in Marysville USA and Marysville Australia. I have subsequently become a pen pal agent!

The Rewards

My role in supporting the relief effort was funded for one day per week but in reality you are working on it every day. At the beginning it was a twenty-four hour job; you have to be accessible and your regular daily activities have to be put aside for a period of time. I have learnt a lot and you know you are helping people. It was gratifying to be able to supply books to people who really appreciated them. For example there was Jackson, a young primary school child affected by the fires who was not sleeping at night because he didn't have his "Hairy Maclary from Donaldson's Diary" When I found out about this I got a couple of the Hairy Maclary titles and posted them to Jackson's primary school. Jackson's teacher has written a letter thanking me for this.

Another lady was upset that she did not have books for her grandchildren; we provided her with books and then received a letter from the grandchildren. The letter thanked us for the books and informed us that the grandson had sorted through the books allocating the scary ones for himself and the girly ones for his sister.

On the bacwiki we received a request from a man for books. This man told us that on his way to collect the books he had to pull over to the side of the road as he was in tears, overwhelmed by the fact that someone was willing to provide him with books. I understand he was then thrilled when he opened the box of books and found a leather-bound bible, which he had requested. We did not have the bible in our second-hand collection so the volunteer packing the books for his request went and got her great grandfather's leather bible and packed it in the box of books for this man. We later found out the recipient was a former member of the Pseudo Echo Band. It freaks me out that the people you have contact with can be quite high profile. This was another interesting insight; people who are severely affected by disasters are often not used to receiving assistance from others. I remind people that we are not helping the homeless or people who are used to being in need of assistance. Many of the people receiving our help have been working all of their lives. Many worked hard and had gone to the bush to retire and have now lost all their material possessions. They also loose their ability to feel safe. We think that if we ring 000 we will be taken care of and these people have learnt that this is not always the case. In fact on that Saturday no amount of fire trucks would have saved Marysville.

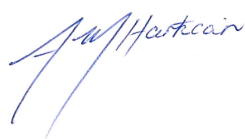
Acknowledgements

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Jane Grace

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