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Opening

Communities in Control Conference
Melbourne, 15 June, 2009

Presentation by



The Honourable Jenny Macklin
MP

**Minister for Families, Housing, Community
Services & Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA)**

Thank you, Joe, for that very warm welcome. It's always great to be any place with you, knowing your incredible dedication to the most dispossessed in our communities.

I would like to join with everybody here today in paying my respects to the traditional owners of the land on which we are not only meeting, but from Joe's description you're going to be having a wild old ride with what sounds like a very exciting program. I would like to particularly pay my respects to any Elders who are here today and especially to Elders past.

It's always terrific to be on the same stage as Rhonda Galbally. Rhonda, I know you have enormous dedication to communities, not only to this conference but to always looking for new ways of doing things.

And if I can just highlight one of those new initiatives – some of you may be aware that Rhonda and a number of others have been involved with the establishment of a new community coalition, the Disability and Carers' Alliance. So congratulations to you and to anyone else in the audience who has been involved in establishing this new alliance. It brings together the people from Carers Australia, the National Disability Services, the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, and supported by Our Community – is there anybody here who's not supported by Our Community?

I've already met with the Alliance formally and they're going to be, I think, a terrific new force, providing advice to government, lobbying, being advocates, doing the things that they do so well. I certainly very much look forward to working with you on what I know are some very ambitious agendas.

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When I spoke at this conference last year, none of us could have foreseen the huge challenges that lay ahead of us then. What we now know is we're in one of the worst global financial crises for 75 years. We've seen, especially here in Victoria but also in Queensland and NSW, some terrible natural disasters. I have something more to say about the impact of fire on our communities a little bit later.

What we do know is that these natural disasters and the impact of the financial crisis globally are having an enormous and far reaching impact on so many of our lives. Twelve months ago I spoke about how rapid and complex social change risks further isolating the poor and the most disadvantaged among us.

The events of the last 12 months, of course, have significantly increased this threat of isolation at many levels. I just want to really focus on this because it's a very, very significant and difficult and often threatening issue for many people.

As a nation, I think we really must resist what is, in my view, a false security of turning in on ourselves through a culture of protectionism or isolation. As communities, we've got to resist the urge to turn against and marginalise minorities who live with us.

As a society, we need to strengthen and support especially those individuals and families who are feeling powerless and out of control, for many of them are at breaking point.

I think it is especially important as times get tough that we maintain an open and inclusive approach, both as individuals but also as communities. When we're challenged by uncertainty

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there can always be, and this is true of all of us, there can always be the temptation to shut others out, to retreat into ourselves and the familiar.

All of us know from history that great economic disruption and dislocation – look at what happened during the Depression – took too many of us around the world down the path of seeking protection through greater exclusion. Today we're not immune. Just look at the results from the recent elections in Europe. We've seen that for many there's reassurance in xenophobia.

So through this current economic crisis I'd just appeal to each and every one of you here that we don't relinquish our Australian open outlook or become suspicious of others, the unfamiliar or the unknown.

One of our greatest riches here in this country, this is both in economic and cultural terms, comes from being inclusive and open. One of the things that I certainly intend to continue to strive for is to retain these qualities, even in the toughest of times.

So whether it's the global recession, the terrible bushfires here in Victoria, or the floods in northern Queensland and in NSW, all of these things are testing our national resilience.

I certainly know that for community organisations like yours, these events have challenged your capacity to meet what is a rise in demand for the essential services, but also for the outreach that you provide to so many.

The Government of course has a job to do and we did move quickly last October and then again in February with immediate stimulus payments. These have all been about protecting

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and supporting jobs. Of course you'd know we're following this up with major infrastructure programs, the biggest program of social housing that we've seen in this country ever, building 20,000 new units of social housing, upgrading other houses, rebuilding classrooms around the country. It's all about jobs. Because we know if people are supported to keep their job they're more able to not only look after themselves but look after their families.

You'd be aware that some of the early indicators are that Australia is weathering this economic storm better than other developed countries. But we do know that for many, many Australians they're not going to go unscathed.

You are also telling me that you're seeing many people come through your doors that you haven't seen before as a result of this economic crisis. So whether it's families coming through, looking for emergency relief, who are trying to struggle and hold onto their mortgages, whether it's older Australians who've been hit by the global recession, whose savings are no longer there for them to rely on.

What we've tried to do is step in and help you in these difficult times with a very significant boost to emergency relief. We got quite a bit of that out quickly in March this year to help with the urgent demand on your emergency relief services.

We've also significantly increased the amounts of money for financial counselling, once again not just for the emergency side of financial counselling, important though that is, but also to make sure that we build the financial skills of the disadvantaged so as to enable people to be able to get back on their feet and establish themselves again for the long term.

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Of course, we know that crisis assistance is always critical, and we'll be there with you making sure that that enormous front door capacity that you have is both adequate and going well to help people in these very, very difficult times.

But we do want to be there to work with you to find new ways to help people break through and provide the capacity for the individuals and for families to really bring themselves back together again as soon as they can.

Working on the ground in local communities, of course, is what you know and you do so well. You're the ones that are able to be our eyes and ears on the ground, to really feed back to government what it is that is needed in each and every community around the country.

You're the ones that also see what it does to relationships, what it does to families, what it does to children, the strain that it puts on kids, one of those areas that's not often talked about. We're often short of empirical evidence of the impact on children of these very, very difficult economic circumstances. But I had a very pertinent example come through my office recently from Ron Barr from Youth Insearch. He runs camps for very vulnerable kids. At one of these camps recently he asked the children to put up their hands if their parents had been fighting about money lately. None of you would be surprised to know that every single child put their hand up.

We know that in difficult economic times family dysfunction increases. There's a rise in child protection notifications. Children in families experiencing financial stress are much more likely themselves to be depressed, lonely, to have more significant mental health problems. Of

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course, we know that that's more likely to be even more concentrated in those families which face long-term disadvantage.

So for us, working with you and supporting these families and supporting children in these very difficult economic times is a very important issue.

As you know, one of the success stories that's been around now for a little while is Communities for Children. It's been operating in around 45 different sites across the country, in dozens of different communities, many of them very disadvantaged communities.

I'm very pleased to be able to announce today that we are extending and enhancing Communities for Children for another three years. It is a great program and one that I'm very pleased that we're able to be able to continue to fund. There's more than \$100 million in funding available.

Of course it's going to mean some changes as we and the Communities for Children sites themselves respond to the changing needs in the communities that they represent. One of the areas that I really want to see our Communities for Children's sites on are the most vulnerable children in the most disadvantaged areas.

There will also be an increase in the target age group. We've certainly heard from the Communities for Children providers that they want to be able to provide for children who are a little bit older. So we will now enable them to support children up to the age of 12 where they identify a need.

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We're looking at expanding the number of Communities for Children sites. Just last week in Alice Springs I announced that we would establish a new Communities for Children site in Alice Springs. I'm sure you're aware of the very, very significant need, the very numbers of vulnerable children and families in that part of our country.

Over the coming months we'll also be selecting another site, particularly responding to the commitment that we've given as part of our national framework for protecting Australia's children, another way in which the new Federal Government has demonstrated that we intend to show leadership in one of the most difficult areas confronting our country.

That said, though, I want to really congratulate anyone who has been involved in Communities for Children. The underlying rationale of Communities for Children will continue – it's really about early intervention. Each and every one of you, in whatever field you're involved with, know if it's got anything to do with preventing abuse or neglect, family breakdown, it's always better to get in early. Of course, communities are the ones that are best able to respond to families' needs in this way and that's what Communities for Children is all about.

We'll be releasing the Communities for Children evaluation very shortly. That too shows that communities, and this is what you're all on about at this conference, when they're strong, when they're able to support families and individuals, they improve the resilience of those places, they improve the resilience of the individuals, the families and the children who are part of them.

There's one lovely example I just wanted to share with you from Port Augusta in South Australia. Their Communities for Children site has this group called the Parent Advisory Group

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Extraordinaire. Fortunately they're known as PAGE for short. They're a volunteer group of parents with young children who wanted to create a more family friendly city in Port Augusta.

Over the last four years they've gone about this in ways that many of you would be so familiar with in your work – networking, advocacy, research, consultancy to local programs, project planning, implementation. As a result of all this, these parents say that they've got a much, much stronger sense of belonging and increased confidence as a result of their own work.

Many of them went on themselves, as a result of the strength that they got from this program, to get new full-time jobs for themselves. Others became volunteers. Some set up small businesses while others started tertiary study; all demonstrating what activism in our communities can lead to for individuals and for families.

I know that none of you need evidence that families are at their functional best when they're connected to their communities, exactly the kind of outcomes we need for vulnerable families, especially when times are very, very tough.

So while the impact of the global financial crisis continues to test the resilience of communities right across the country, we do know that here in Victoria, and I hope you don't mind me being a bit parochial just for a moment, about the impact of the terrible fires on 7th of February. These fires left many communities here in our state all but wiped out, all but gone.

Of course many people lost their lives. Many people have been very, very badly injured. Huge swathes of our beautiful bushland were destroyed. Four months later we've still got hundreds

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and hundreds of people still living in temporary accommodation, still sharing with others. Some are in caravans on their burnt blocks in very, very cold weather.

This dislocation to communities, to ordinary family life and what can only be described as the daunting prospect of starting again is very, very difficult for those of us who weren't there to imagine. And of course the task of rebuilding is not just a task of rebuilding the homes and the other buildings that were destroyed. It's also about rebuilding the resilience and also the strength of the families and communities who have been so badly affected in these towns and little hamlets right across our state.

What I do know is that many of you here today have been so intimately involved in helping that process, providing food, providing a shoulder to cry on, organising the thousands of volunteers who put themselves forward and signed up to help.

I know that for many of you, you are there for the long haul. We too are going to be there for the long haul. The Prime Minister has made that clear. We've got a job, of course, to provide support to individuals and families, financial support to businesses, to tourism providers. But it's also about making sure that in these very, very fragile communities we do everything that we can to help rebuild those places where communities come together.

When I was out there the day after the fires it was those community locations, the showgrounds in Yea or Alexandra, the footy ground in Kinglake, that really provided the place for people to have a safe venue where they could be.

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Now we're trying to rebuild some of those other places where we know people love to come together to share a beer, to have an argument about the football, to play a game of netball. So we're working with communities to rebuild those critical community facilities.

It's also, of course, important not just to rebuild those community facilities but to support the community organisations on the ground. So we've got some extra community organisers that we're helping to fund. We're also putting money into some of the very strong community organisations.

I'd like to give you a couple of examples of terrific programs that are really helping people cope with the aftermath of these fires – some other examples of how strong our communities are in the face of these terrible disasters. There's this lovely program called Parenting after the Bushfires, run by Gateway Community Health, which is helping parents manage their children while living in temporary and what can only be described as often very, very cramped accommodation.

Or the Goulburn Valley Family Care organisation, which is helping with an additional men's worker, working with the dads, the husbands, who are able then to talk about their sense of hopelessness following the bushfire experience, a place where they can come along and quietly talk about how difficult it is to confront the loss and grief that they have experienced.

Together, all of these organisations, working together with local government, with the State Government, with the Federal Government, it's all about creating those vital stepping stones, to restore strong, resilient and happy communities.

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So just to go back to the theme I've wanted to share with you today, in these very, very difficult times, it is in my view our national responsibility for each and every one of us not to retreat into ourselves, not to put up the shutters. We must resist resorting to that most basic instinct to turn inwards – as some might describe it, to circle the wagons – to exclude the powerless, the poor, the vulnerable, those who are different.

Instead we must reach out to all of those people, understand that we are all in this together. We are all in this together. And knowing that our connections to one another are our most valuable asset, so that when we come through these very challenging times we can look back and say, "Despite the circumstances that we found ourselves in, our commitment to building the cohesion and strength of our communities did not falter."

Thank you.

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