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Federal, State and Local Government: Working in partnership to rebuild communities

Communities in Control Conference
Melbourne, 16 June, 2009

Presentation by



**The Honourable Lily D'Ambrosio
MLA**

Parliamentary Secretary, Community Development

Thank you very much Rhonda. And thank you to all of you. I'd like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we're having this terrific group meeting today, and pay my respects to Elders past and present and any Elders who may be with us here today.

I have been asked to speak on local, state and federal governments working in partnerships to rebuild communities. Partnerships is, I suppose, a catchphrase that is very true to my heart because with partnerships and understanding, the equal of that term, I think we can all achieve a great deal in our community and certainly instil a greater sense of ownership of where we go as a community and the consequences of that, good and bad. Once we understand that, then I think we all have a greater responsibility for the outcomes of how our community fares into the future.

What the Victorian fires have made very clear to us in Government is how crucial those partnerships are in dealing with large-scale emergencies. In Victoria, those partnerships included everything from matching dollar for dollar contributions to the bushfire recovery fund from the State and Federal Governments, to the work that the army did with fire fighters and the police on the ground, to the support the Victorian Government provided for local councils in fire-affected areas, to the shared distribution systems for goods and services that were donated by communities and businesses, most of which were very spontaneous.

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There were undoubtedly many areas where we will need to do better in any future crisis. I know that Daryl will reflect very heavily on where we can do better and the lessons that we've learned from the crises that we've encountered of late.

But what I'd like to do this morning is share four of our key learnings from what happened in February.

The first learning is about the need to have systems that can harness people's overwhelming desire to help after an emergency. And no doubt each and every one of you, like myself, will be able to recount the flood of assistance and questions of "How can I help?" in the situations that confronted us in February.

In the weeks after the fire, the Government set up a volunteer registration service for the more than 20,000 Victorians who said they wanted to help in some way. We also set up a donation coordination service to help match the offers of goods and services that came pouring in with local community needs. For example, there was 500,000 tonnes of food aid provided to people affected by the fires. There were 10,000 offers of accommodation. That's pretty big. When you just look at those offers you think "Wow!". People's hearts certainly did open up.

It really does remind us of how people do genuinely and spontaneously feel a part of their broader community when those types of crises happen. I remember saying to a number of people around me at the time, and I couldn't help but say it sometimes, that unfortunately it takes these types of disasters to really know the people who really rise up to it and perhaps

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the small number who fall a little bit short of it. But what was certainly overwhelming were the numbers and swells of people who actually rose to the occasion if you like.

That really reinforces or holds up the sense of community that we actually do have. I think it's salutatory for us to reflect on that whenever sometimes we say, "It's not like the old days," whenever the old days may have been. The fact is we are still a very resilient community. That's something that we need to build on and take great comfort in and know that the prospects for volunteering and community building certainly are there for us well and truly for the future.

And those two figures alone, the 500,000 tonnes of food aid and the 10,000 offers of accommodation, those two figures alone give us a good sense of the logistical challenge that confronted us.

We also learned that it is incredibly important to be able to cut through the red tape and regulations that often inhibit community action. No doubt some of you will be able to recount a number of those barriers, if you like, or little hurdles along the way to community action.

That can mean something as straightforward as removing the need for planning permits to clear land that had been burned by fire. But it also means being as flexible as possible about emergency funding arrangements. One good example of that flexibility in emergency funding arrangements is the extra support we provided neighbourhood houses in fire affected areas. I'm sure all of you will be aware what neighbourhood houses are. There are about 360 of them across Victoria, providing a range of social, educational and recreational activities for their

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local communities. For that reason they played a very important role in the recovery effort from day one. They were often the place for a lot of families to turn to in the most crucial days subsequent to the bushfires.

Early on, we fast-tracked \$10,000 in funding to each of the 21 houses affected by fires to help them respond to the needs of their local community. That extra funding was totally flexible in how it could be spent.

The third learning is really just a reinforcement of what anyone working in the community sector already knows. That learning is about the importance of having good coordination and clearly designated responsibilities of who does what. Without good coordination there is a huge potential for resources to be wasted and opportunities to be missed.

Of course getting that coordination isn't always easy, especially at moments of unexpected crisis. It often requires organisations to be prepared to work in new ways and with new groups of people.

That can certainly be a challenge for government, as it can be, of course, for community organisations. Even with good coordination it can still be hard for people to navigate their way through the range of services that are available. That was one of the reasons we offered a government case manager to each person, each group of families affected by the fires. Twelve weeks after the fires there were more than 5000 families and individuals helped by case managers.

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The fourth learning is about the value of local planning. As we moved into the rebuilding phase, we have tried to involve local communities as much as possible in planning and local decision making. The Victorian Bushfire Relief and Recovery Authority has established a process for local communities to have direct input into decisions about the future of their communities.

As we rebuild, there are also some great opportunities to improve how services and facilities are provided to communities. For example, that could mean creating a new shed facility that brings a number of services or groups together under the one roof. Many of those ideas come out of local community planning processes.

I think it's also important for me to note at this point that in at least one of the key bushfire areas that was under attack, the Kinglake area, and others including Bellara, that we had already, as a government, funded community building initiative programs in each of those. They're basically about getting communities to determine for themselves what their priorities are, what their needs are and how to actually go about sourcing funds and identifying opportunities for sourcing funds to actually build those things that are most dear and needed to them.

So these are the four learnings from the Victorian Bushfires. I think many of them would also apply to the way that we respond to other crises. That could be events like drought or flood, of course, or it could also be events like the global financial crisis that present us with many other types of crises.

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Many of the learnings I've just discussed also have particular relevance to the community sector. For example, during the bushfires we found that we needed better systems to harness the desire of Victorians to help people affected by the bushfires.

But we also need new ways to support volunteering beyond the bushfires. In Victoria, more than one million people volunteer every year. That's a very sizeable number of people. Despite the media image of Generation Y, young people are still very keen to be volunteers. What is happening is that volunteering is changing. That is something that we need to appreciate and take hold of if we are to grow and facilitate the desire of many young people to take part in volunteering activities.

We know that people want to volunteer in different ways. Young people, for example, often see volunteering as a way of developing their work skills or experience, and that's a very legitimate thing. There is a growing group of older Australians who have left the workforce but who are still very interested in staying active in their community and have much experience and knowledge to offer.

What we need to do is help organisations that depend on volunteers to adjust to these new patterns of volunteering. And that means helping them to recruit new groups of volunteers. It also means helping them to develop or extend the work their volunteers do. It also means helping them to extend volunteer networks into new areas, particularly in the new suburbs on the edges of Melbourne. In this year's state budget we've committed to putting more than \$9 million into Victoria's new volunteering strategy.

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The response to the fires also showed the importance of cutting through the red tape, as I mentioned earlier, that often inhibits community actions. There has been a major effort by the Commonwealth and State Governments to reduce the cost of regulation and business. I'm pleased to say that Victoria has been very much at the forefront of doing that.

We know that regulation isn't only a cost on businesses but it also has a significant impact on community organisations. That's why we've asked our new Victorian Office for the Community Sector to look at how we could cut those costs in Victoria.

That means looking at how we can simplify the requirements of fundraising and incorporation. It also means simplifying the demands put on community organisations that receive funding from government. That means less time on the bureaucratic red tape and more time on what you actually want to achieve as an organisation.

The bushfires also showed how important it is to have good coordination between services and government agencies. That demand for better coordination is just as important as we respond to other major challenges, as I've mentioned, including the global financial crisis. That means that Government must continue to build good knowledge and understanding about the community sector. That, of course, is more easily derived when we talk about partnerships and we act like we are in partnership with community organisations.

This is another task that we've asked the Office for the Community Sector to work on. The Office for the Community Sector has started to assess the effect of the global financial crisis on

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community organisations. Coordinated responses by government and the sector will be needed to address this and other emerging issues.

The final learning I mentioned earlier was about the value of community planning. We know that community involvement in planning and decision making can be an incredibly powerful tool. I've seen that through my visits to the 19 Community Building Initiative projects around the state that I mentioned earlier.

And if I can just elaborate a little bit more on what the Community Building Initiatives Program is about, there are 19 projects that are working with 100 small communities right across Victoria. They are communities that are going through very rapid change – either rapid change in decreases in population, especially in rural areas, but also through economic disadvantage and the like.

One of those townships that I know that Daryl Taylor will elaborate on later is Kinglake. All of the projects are very different in what they aim to do. It's certainly the long way around, state governments working with communities. But I know from the evidence on the ground that it is the best way of identifying what the needs are at local levels and finding resources to match those needs.

One story I like to tell every now and then, and I suppose it's a bit of a lesson in community development that I learned very early on, even though I don't have official, proper training if you like in community development, but it's certainly a lesson that you will recognise very quickly, is a story of a migrant from Britain who came over from Manchester a number of

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years ago to settle in Australia. She told me a story of growing up in a particular area of Manchester where the government, it must have been the local council at the time there, decided it was a great idea to build a series of tennis courts for the local impoverished kids. There was a big fanfare about it. There was a wonderful opening of the tennis courts. But what was forgotten of course is where these kids were going to get tennis racquets and tennis balls.

It's something that can certainly bring about a little bit of humour in the telling of the story. But it's quite salutary in showing the way that we all need to operate and understand how communities function and identify their needs. When you identify the needs through local dialogue from the ground up, that's when you get the best matching of resources to needs in any community. And, for me, that is the best way to go in any community building projects.

All these projects, the community building initiatives, are very different in what they aim to do, and so they should be. But what they all share is bringing local community members together to develop a community plan, and then developing how resources can be marshalled to turn those plans into reality. These are critical outcomes that help communities rebuild after crises.

These are just some examples of a much larger picture. And in that bigger picture our community building initiatives projects have attracted more than \$8 million in extra funding as a result of partnerships with more than 500 organisations.

Now, those funding dollars aren't necessarily from state government. They're from state, they're from federal, they're from local and they're also from the private sector. That's a real demonstration of how valuable community planning can be.

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These are just some of the learnings that have come out of the terrible events that happened in February. A common theme that underpins all of them is the importance of partnerships between different levels of government and the community.

The cost of rebuilding communities is beyond one level of government alone. The complexity of rebuilding communities is also beyond one level of government. These types of crises require the skills and networks that the community sector has. We have seen those skills and networks on display in Victoria. And certainly I suspect that they will also have been on display during the Queensland floods around the same time of year.

That is why I want to thank you all for the work that you do in communities right across Australia. I certainly would like to thank you for the opportunity to be here today and sharing the learnings that you no doubt will bring to the rest of the forum.

I wish you well for the rest of the Communities in Control conference, and thank you very much again.

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