



**Red Cross Emergency Services  
Outreach Report  
November 2015**

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## Executive Summary

Between November 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> 2015 Red Cross conducted a fifth round of follow up outreach in areas of the Blue Mountains impacted by the October 2013 bushfires. This was the last round of outreach that Red Cross will run as part of its Blue Mountains Recovery Program.

Red Cross volunteers visited Yellow Rock, Winmalee and Mt Victoria. A total of **430** houses were visited; of these houses **207 (48.1%)** were at home.

The first round of Red Cross Recovery outreach occurred in February and March 2014, the second round in August 2014, third November 2014 and fourth March 2015.

The dominant themes recorded by volunteers were experiences of the bushfires, support, connection to community and changes in the neighbourhood, rebuilding, damage and relocation, anxiety and concern and preparedness for future events.

## Methodology

One of the key activities of the Australian Red Cross Emergency Services Recovery Program is to provide psychosocial support to individuals and communities in the aftermath of an emergency. Australian Red Cross uses outreach as a delivery method to provide this support to individuals and families in their homes, businesses and places of temporary residence.

Outreach is a way for Australian Red Cross to ensure affected people have access to information and to make referrals to other services when required. Volunteers also collect information from community members regarding the community's recovery that may be of relevance to local council, community services providers or other government authorities. This information is de-identified before it is shared.

Red Cross volunteers conducted outreach across the Blue Mountains City Council (BMCC) areas on November 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> 2015. The Wellbeing Working Group and BMCC Bushfire Recovery Team were consulted regarding priority areas and relevant information for distribution.

Volunteers spoke to residents about their experiences during and since the October bushfires. Volunteer conversations with residents were semi-structured and informal; notes were generally not taken during the conversation but recorded later by volunteers. Responses have been collated, analysed and grouped into the broad themed findings found in this report.

## **Limitations**

The provision of psychosocial support is the key objective of all Red Cross outreach activities and the collection of data is only undertaken when appropriate. This report is a summary of the responses of residents collected during outreach. It is not intended to provide a conclusive nor statistically relevant record of the views of residents.

The information included in this report is intended to highlight what residents of the area see as key positives and concerns regarding the recovery process and program and to assist agencies in future recovery planning.

## **Background**

Between 17 October and 29 November, bushfires affected communities in the Blue Mountains and Lithgow regions of western Sydney. These were made up of three separate fires comprising the State Mine in Lithgow, Mount York in Mount Victoria and Linksview in Springwood.

In the Blue Mountains, the Linksview Road Fire severely impacted parts of the Springwood, Winmalee and Yellow Rock areas with substantial property losses occurring. 204 homes were completely destroyed, and 99 sustained significant damage.

The Mount York Fire impacted the north-western part of Mount Victoria where 7 homes were destroyed and 1 damaged. The State Mine Fire impacted the village of Mount Irvine, where 2 homes were destroyed.

The communities of Bell, Clarence, Dargan, Mt Tomah, Mt Irvine, Mt Wilson, Berambing, Bilpin and Mountain Lagoon received calls to evacuate and were isolated for a number of days.

These fires were one of the most significant disasters experienced by the Blue Mountains community and as such there was a recognised need for a concerted coordinated recovery to support the community

## Findings

Findings from the outreach has been collated, analysed and grouped into themes. These are discussed in detail below.

### **Experiences of the fires**

People were still open and eager to tell their stories about what happened to them during the bushfires. A number described neighbours working together to save other neighbours properties.

One wasn't home at the time and was prohibited from accessing the affected area. She was told she had lost her house, and found out a few days later this wasn't true.

One house was used by members of the community as a "safer house" during the fires with 54 people relocating there. The property was known for being well-prepared. The owner now feels a strong obligation to ensure his property continues to be well prepared.

Many described leaving with their pets as soon as they saw smoke. Two older residents had sons or daughters call and tell them to evacuate.

At least fifteen people described themselves as 'not affected', even though the fires impacted surrounding streets. Two people added 'it was two years ago now'.

### **Support, connectedness and changing neighbourhoods**

Residents mentioned they had received support following the bushfires, the most common type of support was family, friends or neighbours; however agencies mentioned included schools, the Police, Coles, local Council and Red Cross.

A significant number expressed that they felt an increased connection to their neighbours since the bushfires. Some related this to fighting the fire alongside one another, and supporting one another during the immediate aftermath. After the fire one street had no power for 5 days and ran extension leads from another street to a neighbour who required power to access her oxygen.

One resident commented that initially neighbours were much closer, but things have now gone back to normal.

A number of residents expressed sadness that neighbours had chosen not to move back to the area, and in some cases, hadn't returned to the Blue Mountains since the bushfires occurred.

### **Rebuilding, damage and relocation**

Many people described struggling financially because of being under insured and the expense of meeting new building codes. One resident described the extensive costs associated with the removal of dangerous trees.

However a number did speak favourably of how quick and responsive their insurance companies were.

Many houses were in the process of being rebuilt. Comments describing garden and fence damage were very common.

### **Anxiety and concern**

Many residents described the anxiety experienced by their family members. Young people and children were frequently mentioned. One mentioned that all the family 'reacted' to the fire at different times, and in different ways. Two described that their partners had a pre-existing mental health condition that had been exasperated by the bushfires.

However most who mentioned spoke about their own distress. Many who described distress had also experienced personal difficulties such as death of a loved one, or a husband having dementia, and the fire was 'just another thing' to have to cope with.

Eight residents described both children and adults experiencing anxiety at the sound of sirens.

Some adults also mentioned they or members of the family (including children) had been receiving counselling. One stopped because of the expense. Another convinced her husband to attend a session, after which he decided 'it wasn't for him'.

Many also described their neighbour's anxiety and suggested volunteers talk to particular people in the street. This was sometimes accompanied by saying 'there are other people who need help more than I do' or 'I wasn't affected' even though the fire had gone through an adjacent street or they had been isolated during the event.

A common response (more than previous rounds of Outreach) was the perception that 'people in the Mountains are resilient'.

### **Preparedness for future events**

A number of people identified as long-term residents who accepted that bushfire was one of the risks associated with their lifestyle and manageable if you understood the risk and prepared your property. Some had experienced previous fires and described feeling less anxious about them as a result.

Others described preparedness action they had taken, or planned on taking, since the fire. These included buying a water pump, installing a water tank, repairing hoses, clearing gutters, preparing earlier in the season.

A number of residents on Linksvie Rd expressed concern about trees hanging over powerlines, and a number of residents more broadly were concerned about trees or vegetation on neighbours property.

Phone and internet reception were described as a problem in Yellow Rock, as was the condition of Singles Ridge Rd.

## Recommendations

Information about support services such as counselling should continue to be widely promoted. Consistent with agency reports and experience in other disasters, many people are only now identifying the desire to access counselling services, including men, who are traditionally more reluctant to do so. Information about available support services is particularly important for those with anxiety about the bushfire season.

Family and friends continue to be mentioned as sources of support and information about recovery. Many people also expressed concern about their neighbours, family and friends. Individuals should be equipped with greater skills, resources and confidence to support their friends and family throughout their longer-term recovery.

Communication should emphasise the long term nature of recovery, and the broad range of ways someone can be 'affected' by a disaster, with an emphasis on the impact of actual or perceived threat, and the ways a disaster can affect the fabric of a community.

## Red Cross Recovery Program

Red Cross share information gathered through outreach with other stakeholders working in recovery, supporting a community-led approach to support recovery, increase community capacity and build resilience.

Throughout the recovery, Red Cross has provided support within formalised recovery structures.

In the Blue Mountains Red Cross has been working in partnership with Blue Mountains City Council, community service providers and schools. Red Cross work in communities affected by emergencies is undertaken in consultation with communities, linked with local services and broader community planning. Red Cross programs link in and compliment existing service providers working directly with disaster impacted people.

To fulfil its objectives, over the past two years, Red Cross has appointed a Recovery Project Officer-Blue Mountains. The role provides training and capacity building support for Blue Mountains City Council staff, community services, emergency services and community members, including facilitating access to:

### Training

- Communicating in Recovery
- Community Recovery Information Series
- Psychological First Aid

### Red Cross recovery resources, including:

- Preparing to return home after a bushfire evacuation
- After the Emergency Children's activity book
- After the Emergency MP3 players
- Coping with a major personal crisis information book
- Helping children and young people cope with crisis: information for parents and caregivers
- Emergency Recovery lesson plans for schools (early childhood to Year 12)

### Ongoing Outreach:

- May have either a recovery or preparedness focus
- In partnership with other recovery agencies and emergency services agencies

Meet and greet and psychological first aid at community events

### Support preparedness activities

- Preparedness outreach with Emergency Service agencies
- Facilitating workshops with community services providers
- Provision of REDiPlan preparedness resources