



## **Submission to the Australian Government Productivity Commission in relation to the Issues Paper on Natural Disaster Funding Arrangements, from the Uniting Church in Australia Assembly**

### ***1. Summary of Recommendations***

**Recommendation One** – Ensuring all funding places an emphasis on the wellbeing of disaster affected communities.

**Recommendation Two** - Continue funding to local social agencies beyond the early stages of recovery.

**Recommendation Three** – a range of measures in relation to funding non-government agencies

### ***2. Introduction***

The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) maintains a strong commitment to care for individuals and working for the common good of all in society. From this basis the Uniting Church interfaces with disaster-affected people and communities in a number of ways through:

- Individual churches across Australia with individual members and ministers both affected by disaster and involved in the processes and reality of local disaster recovery.
- National and state-based appeals to its members to release funds for special need and the alleviation of suffering.
- Bringing assistance via the church's caring agencies including Wesley Mission, Lifeline and UnitingCare.

- Particular involvement in state-based disaster welfare arrangements: As a supporting agency in the NSW disaster welfare plan responsible for coordinating ecumenical chaplaincy services for evacuation and recovery centres through the Disaster Recovery Chaplaincy Network (DRCN); and in South Australia as the coordinating agency for ecumenical pastoral support in similar circumstances.

The Uniting Church has committed resources to the employment of a full-time National Disaster Recovery Officer who works with all the above for the best possible outcome. The church has committed itself to supporting the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) in setting high national standards in training and practice for chaplaincy, and solid integration with state welfare arrangements.

### ***3. Background***

The following observations and recommendations in response to the Productivity Commission Issues Paper are aimed, not at macro funding issues but at the 'on the ground' realities around policy and funding for non-government not for profits. These spring largely from the operation of the Disaster Recovery Chaplaincy Network in NSW and observations from ministers and other community leaders in disaster-affected communities. Some of these recommendations are overarching, others are very particular.

### ***4. Recommendations***

**Recommendation One** – Ensuring that all funding allocations place an emphasis on the holistic wellbeing of disaster-affected communities.

The Productivity Commission's paper emphasises the scale and costs of disaster recovery which involve billions of dollars and an almost overwhelming level of demand on a limited budget. As a great deal of energy and thinking, necessarily, goes into assessing needs related to infrastructure and economics, it is easy to overlook the reality that, essentially, disaster recovery is the process of making the lives of individual and their communities as whole and healthy as possible. Beyond the restoration of infrastructure following disaster, the threads which give people's life meaning and value are often relational rather than economic. For many people, a greater recovery 'value' is found in good spiritual and psychological health and healthy relationships than in good roads. In reality, both are important, but the former is less easily quantified and therefore more easily overlooked.

This type of 'wellbeing' can be fostered at comparatively miniscule financial cost by being mindful of personal, interpersonal and communal needs and targeting these through funding local and regional initiatives. It is here that funding not-for profit volunteer-based organisations and locally-based recovery initiatives represents excellent value. Often these programs run 'on a shoe-string' budget; a factor which adds stress to highly-dedicated staff and volunteers.

The Uniting Church urges the Commission to ensure that all allocations begin with an overriding consideration of ensuring the personal and social wellbeing of people within disaster-affected areas.

**Recommendation Two** - Continued funding to local social agencies beyond the early stages of recovery.

When disaster strikes there is often a marked response early on, when the excitement of the event draws media attention, funds are released for the immediate relief of those affected and social and physical infrastructure is noticeably damaged.

As vital as this response is, there is usually a second wave of need which becomes present around the three-week to three month mark after a disaster event and may extend beyond a year. This is the period commonly described as the "disillusionment phase" in disaster recovery.<sup>1</sup> It is at this time the reality of

need (including failed insurance, need to consider relocation, loss of lifestyle or neighbours) hits home. This also coincides with short term assistance winding

up and funding of special programs ceasing. It also coincides with a level of compassion fatigue emerging amongst volunteers who find it too difficult to continue to assist.

It is at this stage that funding for programs such as personal support, community activities, professional counselling and group help is particularly important as communities and individuals move towards the 'recovery' phase.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Ray Scurfield's Six Common Stages of Disaster Recovery - <http://www.usm.edu/sites/default/files/groups/school-social-work/pdf/six-common-stages-disaster-recovery-rev-april-2007.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> By way of example. Following the devastating bushfires in Springwood/ Winmalee a number of local initiatives emerged from the Neighbourhood Centre which received some government funding for a time. The 'step by step' program personalised the care

## **Further Recommendations in relation to funding of non-government agencies.**

Disaster welfare in Australia has evolved over many years to incorporate a number of non-government, not-for-profit organisations providing tens of thousands of volunteers. This is a rich resource which needs to be both valued and fostered, and saves the government many millions of dollars in expenditure. The provision of funds to these organisations for training and equipment is an important acknowledgement of their importance and a very cost-effective use of money in disaster recovery. The following are recommendations in regards to the funding of these organisations:

### **a) Funding integrated volunteer agencies**

The disaster welfare space is attractive to many new organisations which have varied value and could, potentially, represent a growing demand for grants and funds from a limited pool of funding. Funding priorities should be given to groups who are formally integrated in welfare arrangements or

can demonstrate how they fit, not just in terms of the functions of disaster welfare response, but in the longer term recovery process.

This is already acknowledged in the structure of some government grant applications, and should be continued.

### **b) Continued emphasis on funding research and training**

Recent grant programs such as the Community Resilience Innovation Program (CRIP) which seek to understand and improve community resilience have already proven valuable. Research projects funded under such schemes are particularly helpful in that they inform, and give added value to, practical projects that flow into the future.

Funding grants which support the training of volunteers are a very cost-effective means of harnessing and improving the work of agencies which contribute to

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given to the needs of fire-affected individuals. When government funding for this initiative ceased, the needs were still present and funding was sought and allocated from other agencies, including the Uniting Church, to extend this work. This loss of funds so relatively early in the process causes stress to the workers and volunteers and a level of uncertainty to the participants. It is far better that a longer-term view is adopted to such inter-personal community funding.

disaster recovery. Further to this, many agencies have a number of other demands and constraints on their finances, and cannot maintain a viable presence without these funds. It is important to sustain and, if possible, increase the size and availability of these funds through initiatives such as the Emergency Volunteer Support Scheme.

### **c) Funding Practical needs of volunteer agencies**

Despite the value of these programs, one of the limitations is their lack of breadth in relation to the needs of the agencies involved. Grants should be based on the underlying question, “What does this organisation need to be equipped to do its role in disaster recovery?” This may cover a range of things.

For example: A grant to an agency such as Anglicare or the Uniting Church to train volunteers may be necessary - even essential for their work, but if the grant specifies *only* training it may fall short of having those volunteers actually being able to work in evacuation or recovery centres. Last year DRCN chaplains were trained under an EVSS grant, but there was a three month lag in readying them to be ready to do the work through the provision of tabards until funds for this were found. This was due to the lack of provision of a ‘small’ amount of \$1200. The current practice of breaking grants into areas of ‘training’, ‘equipment’ and ‘research’ is unhelpful in the practical readying of volunteers to do their job.

### **d) Allowing for extra funds for regional and country-based volunteers**

Funding needs to account for the realities of people travelling large distances. This is not just in disaster response (which does account for this under emergency funding arrangements) but travel to regional or district welfare area meetings – which may mean 200km each way for some volunteers. There is a cost associated with well-integrated disaster response which should be accounted for, and which volunteer agencies struggle to meet.

### **e) More predictable timetables for grants**

Recognising the how vital funding from grants are to volunteer organisations, it is important that they are 'predictable' in terms of timing. There have been problems in relation to the allocation of joint federal / state grants in recent years which have put real stress on organisations and state department due to bureaucratic delays.

An example of this is pending round of applications for State/Federal EVSS grants. Applications for funding made in 2013 were supposed to receive a response by January or February 2014. Due to bureaucratic problems with state and federal departmental agreements, the success or otherwise of these grants have still not been released (as at June 2014). As a result, some agencies such as the DRCN, have had to hold off their training programs until further notice. Some agencies have staff levels being dependent on funding through means such as these.

The issue here is not that funding should be automatic (or even depended on), but - in relation to funds, planning and training – uncertainties in the timing of grant announcements make it very difficult for stakeholders to run programs dependent on such grants.

### ***Conclusion***

The increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters in Australia has caused unprecedented budgetary stress on our governments in regards to infrastructure and personal and communal recovery. We recognise that the reality of limited resources in the light of this highlights the importance of keeping the needs of people and their communities at the forefront of all funding decisions. Beyond this, one of the greatest assets this country has is its volunteer-based agencies which provide personal, heart-felt, and economically efficient care in the context of disaster recovery. In funding these groups it remains important to consider supporting those who are integrated in the processes of disaster recovery, allowing for their needs in terms of training, and equipping and giving some stability in allowing for unique factors for their volunteers to ensure their ongoing effectiveness in disaster recovery.