



**A submission by The Australian Centre for  
Posttraumatic Mental Health to the Productivity  
Commission inquiry into the efficacy of natural disaster  
funding arrangements**

13 June 2014



The Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health (ACPMH) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Productivity Commission's public inquiry into the efficacy of current national natural disaster funding arrangements.

## **The Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health (ACPMH)**

ACPMH is a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to reducing the impact of disaster and trauma by building the capability of individuals, organisations and the community to understand, prevent and recover from posttraumatic mental health problems. We undertake world class research, policy and service development, and education and training. Our innovative services help organisations and health professionals who work with people affected by traumatic events and posttraumatic mental health problems.

We have achieved national and international recognition for our work in the fields of military, veteran and community posttraumatic mental health. Our website provides more details about ACPMH <http://www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au/>.

### **Disaster response in Australia**

As stated in the terms of reference of the inquiry, disaster management is the responsibility of the state, territory and local governments. The Commonwealth also provides financial and other assistance to support the provision of disaster relief and recovery measures to disaster-affected communities. In addition, local government, non-government organisations such as the Australian Red Cross and the Salvation Army, and related organisations such as *beyondblue*, also play a vital role.

### **Scope of inquiry**

ACPMH acknowledges the scope of the inquiry to "analyse the full scope (incorporating the quantum, coherence, effectiveness and sustainability) of current Commonwealth, state and territory expenditure on natural disaster mitigation, resilience and recovery". In addition, "to take into account the roles and responsibilities of Commonwealth, state, territory and local governments, communities, insurers, business (including private providers of essential infrastructure), non-government organisations and private individuals. The Commission should consider funding for disaster response only where directly relevant to mitigation, relief and recovery and existing Commonwealth/state joint funding arrangements".



## Current submission

ACPMH makes this submission with a focus on the psychosocial impact of natural disaster on communities and individuals. Natural disaster is an increasingly common event in Australia and across the globe. Although humans are remarkably resilient, the psychosocial costs of natural disaster are considerable. Prevalence estimates of diagnosable mental health disorders tend to be around 20% of those exposed to natural disaster, while the adverse impacts on quality of life and psychosocial functioning are much more widespread. International attention is focused on how best to respond to disasters in a way that promotes resilience, community support, and normal recovery, while minimising adverse mental health impacts.

With a focus on the psychosocial impact of natural disaster, this submission seeks to inform the inquiry on the following:

- The sustainability and effectiveness of current arrangements for funding natural disaster mitigation, resilience and recovery initiatives, including – where directly relevant to an improved funding model – the management of disaster relief and recovery
- Projected medium and long-term impacts of identified options on the Australian economy and costs for governments as compared to impacts of the current funding arrangements.

## Current challenges

Key challenges in providing an effective psychosocial response to natural disaster and related events in Australia are:

1. Developing a consistent and coherent response framework upon which all key stakeholders can agree.

A national consistent framework does not preclude individual variations based on geographical or disaster-specific needs; it simply ensures that the response is based upon agreed principles and evidence-based practice. Given the diversity of stakeholders and agencies involved, it is not uncommon for there to be a plethora of policies, manuals, fact sheets, and other resources developed and disseminated. Many contain similar information, but the range provides a confusing picture for policy makers, and particularly, providers and consumers. They also vary in their attention to the latest research evidence and international consensus.

2. Ensuring the seamless integration of psychosocial aspects of recovery with other components of the disaster response.



Experience has shown that attempts to provide psychosocial support in isolation of attention to physical, financial, and other needs are unlikely to succeed. There is a risk that government departments and NGOs may focus disproportionately on their particular area of expertise or responsibility, without adequately considering the need to integrate with other elements of the disaster response.

### 3. Coordinating the many agencies involved in the disaster response

In the aftermath of disaster, many agencies (that may well have not worked together before) are involved in various aspects of recovery. The difficulty is one of ensuring that they are not working at odds with each other and that the unique contributions of each are used to maximum advantage.

### 4. Integration of learnings from previous disaster experiences

Given the diversity of services and agencies involved in responding to disasters within and across states depending on the nature and area of disaster, there are considerable limitations to the capacity to integrate and refine learnings from one disaster to the next. The result is loss of efficiencies, requiring the re-development or re-discovery of previous learnings and materials and delays in the delivery of optimised support for those affected, potentially adding to the emotional and financial consequences.

## What's needed?

The view of ACPMH is that a national centre is needed to build Australia's preparedness and capacity for timely and effective psychosocial response to natural disaster. The centre will engage and partner with key national leaders from state and territory governments, the Commonwealth, NGOs, community and professional organisations, and peak bodies of emergency services and related organisations, to develop an agreed framework and implementation program to ensure consistent delivery of evidence-based psychosocial responses to disaster in regions across Australia. This approach is consistent with the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience released by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in 2009 which outlined a recommendation for *"a whole-of-nation resilience-based approach to disaster management, which recognises that a national, coordinated and cooperative effort is needed to enhance Australia's capacity to withstand and recover from emergencies and disasters"*.

ACPMH believes that this proposed centre would act as the focus for the development of an integrated, consistent and cohesive psychosocial response to disasters across Australia. The level of national agreement would be unprecedented, and carries with it enormous potential to improve outcomes for those affected by natural disaster.



Through engagement with its partners, the centre's key deliverables would include:

- Development of policy and procedural guidelines for psychosocial response to disaster
- Development of a framework to guide awareness, education and training needs: this would identify the competencies required/expected at each level
- Development and implementation of specific awareness, education and training initiatives targeted at:
  - Community leaders / the general community (Level 1)
  - Primary care and allied health service providers (Level 2)
  - Specialist mental health practitioners (Level 3)
- Development and production of an integrated set of clinical practice tools and training materials to underpin all the centre's initiatives
- The development of modules for use in postgraduate and, where appropriate, undergraduate medical and allied health programs (e.g., psychology, social work, community development)
- Development and production of an agreed set of fact sheets and brochures targeted at specific groups (e.g., general community, schools, workplaces, primary care, welfare agencies, etc.) for use in the aftermath of disasters
- Development and implementation of ongoing support (including peer support), supervision, and review structures for responders at each level in order to ensure continued development and consolidation of skills
- Development of a Psychosocial Disaster Research Strategy designed to facilitate and guide a coherent and considered approach to disaster research across Australia
- Organisation of an annual Australian Psychosocial Disaster Recovery Conference at which all the key stakeholder groups would attend, providing an opportunity for sharing experiences and mutual learning, as well as knowledge enhancement from within Australia and overseas
- Formation of strong links with similar centres and relevant bodies overseas to ensure that Australia remains at the forefront of best practice psychosocial response to disaster.

## **Benefit statement**

Although psychosocial response to disaster in Australia is good by world standards, there is ample scope for improvement in the quality and consistency of response. The proposed centre has the potential to increase use of evidence-based approaches to



psychosocial recovery, with improved outcomes for individuals, groups, and communities affected by natural disaster. Improved outcomes include earlier identification of mental health needs, better service design, reduced distress, improved social functioning, and enhanced return to normal vocational activities. The proposed centre would require funding, although there is a high likelihood that the centre would be a cost-effective option compared to current arrangements. Formal evaluation of the centre would need to be undertaken from the outset, with mechanisms in place at every stage to objectively measure the impact.

## **Recommendations**

ACPMH makes the following recommendation:

1. That the inquiry give due consideration to the development of a national centre for psychosocial recovery from disaster to provide a more sustainable and effective means to support timely and evidence-based care and assistance to individuals, families and communities affected by natural disasters across Australia.