

Tuesday, 21 October 2014

Natural Disaster Funding Arrangements
Productivity Commission
LB2 Collins Street East
Melbourne Vic 8003



Response to the Productivity Commission's Natural Disaster Funding Arrangements Draft Report

Introduction

St John Ambulance Australia (St John) thanks the Productivity Commission (PC) for the opportunity to provide input into the *Natural Disaster Funding Arrangements, Productivity Commission Draft Report*.

With the projected increase of extreme weather events and population growth and corresponding settlement in locations prone to natural disasters in Australia (e.g. coastal areas and the urban fringe),¹ St John supports the proposed increased emphasis and increased funding for mitigation activities that improve safety and increase resilience in our communities. St John believes that much more can be done to support our communities in to prepare for and respond during an emergency and mitigate the non-market costs of disasters, such as injury and death.

As non-market costs of natural disasters, such as health outcomes, are difficult to quantify and monetise,¹ the PC report naturally appears somewhat skewed towards quantifiable, structural activities such as assets and land management and urban planning. St John submits that human capital is central to productivity and greater investment in non-structural mitigation activities (e.g. first aid education) that encourages preparedness and resilience is essential for the reduction of vulnerability in the community, and to reducing injury and fatalities resultant of natural disasters.

This submission details the importance of first aid education as one example of a practical mitigation opportunity that can potentially decrease morbidity and mortality and increase resilience.

About St John Ambulance Australia

St John is one of the world's oldest health charities. In Australia, St John aims to empower the community through our central goal of making first aid a part of everybody's life.

Active in Australia for over 130 years, St John is a self-funding, charitable organisation active in all states and territories, dedicated to helping people in sickness, distress, suffering or danger. St John provides first aid and related services to the community, including:

- first aid services at events and emergencies
- first aid training
- youth development opportunities
- various community care programs
- a national public access defibrillation program, and
- ophthalmic programs.

St John Ambulance Australia is the country's leading supplier of first aid services and training.

St John is largely self-funding, with government contracts limited to provision of ambulance services in Western Australia and Northern Territory, some community services programs and specific project grants.

St John in Australia consists of nine (9) separate organisations (Associations or Companies limited by guarantee). The eight (8) state/territory organisations are responsible for delivering the wide range of charitable services provided by St John. The ninth organisation, referred to as the National Office, is responsible for ensuring the St John name and reputation is protected as well as providing a wide range of services to the state/territory St John organisations. All nine (9) St John organisations are currently registered as charities.

St John Ambulance Australia is part of the worldwide St John family with St John establishments in more than 40 countries. All have some experience in training people to deal with emergencies. The St John establishments in the Caribbean have developed special training programs for community members because of the frequency of emergencies in the countries of the Caribbean.

Information communication

St John supports the communication of natural disaster and hazard information to community members, particularly to those most at risk. St John believes that a greater focus on 'soft-measures' aimed at behaviour modification, particularly for those in high risk areas or population groups, is required in order to decrease community vulnerability. We agree that information communication, such as hazard information appearing on household rates notices for example, is an essential part of mitigation, but that such activities do not replace the need for comprehensive education programs assisting individuals to prepare for and respond to hazards that may threaten their health and safety. Many assets can be replaced and re-built; human life is finite.

Information communication to households as a strategy for improving understanding of risks and risk management relies on the assumption that community members choose to actively engage with the information provided. As noted in the PC report, evidence exists to suggest that some individuals may not always have the capacity or willingness to properly assess, understand and treat natural disaster risks.¹ Research also demonstrates however, that vulnerable groups have the ability and willingness to engage in preparedness initiatives when given accessible and appropriate opportunities.²

St John believes one such risk reduction method is the provision of accessible first aid awareness training for vulnerable populations. If members of the public possess basic first aid awareness, St John believes they are more likely to treat themselves or others for minor complaints and potentially save lives, freeing up emergency services to attend to severe and life-threatening illness during large scale emergencies. First aid trained individuals are also more likely to be aware of the potential risk for injury and illness during an emergency, avoid hazardous situations and educate others around them. Such information cannot be conveyed through simple information communication measures described in the PC report.

It is therefore essential that mitigation strategies are developed for community members to actively engage with preparedness information if mitigation initiatives are to be successful. One such strategy is to increase education to the Australian community through target population groups, such as students.

First aid education as a mitigation opportunity

With disasters claiming more than 200 lives over the past few years,¹ and injury affecting many more, the importance and benefit of first aid education in the Australian community cannot be understated.

During a natural disaster, community members are often inadequately prepared in the face of rapidly changing emergency conditions and the risk of injury and illness to community members increases.¹ Further, a reality of natural disasters is that emergency services, including volunteer emergency services, often become inundated and overburdened. In many cases, the responsibility for injury and illness management then falls to individuals who may not have the skills or knowledge to render assistance. Individuals may also be placed in circumstances where they do not have access to emergency services during an emergency. This poses a significant risk to health outcomes, including to sustaining life.

The importance of increasing the number of members of the public who are trained and motivated to assist during an emergency cannot be underestimated in the prevention of an unnecessary loss of life.³ The immediate provision of CPR and direct intervention by bystanders at an emergency has been considered fundamental to survival and in ensuring reduced patient recovery times.^{3,5}

Research suggests however, that the public is disinclined to invest time and money in first aid training, resulting in a significant shortage in the number of bystanders ready and willing to assist during an emergency.⁴ St John has identified that only 13–14% of the Australian population has a current first aid qualification.

The PC report suggests (p. 201) that education programs in schools regarding specific natural hazards in a context of social planning could be one medium for communities engaging and understanding emergency management systems and being better equipped to respond to disasters.¹ St John agrees with this position. However, St John believes that preparedness education initiatives must go beyond specific hazard information to preparing students for scenarios where things have gone wrong, such as in the case of dealing with injury and illness. Put simply, first aid saves lives and may be the only option available to community members during a natural disaster, particularly when the emergency services are not available to respond. It is essential that community members are equipped with first aid knowledge and skills if more lives are to be saved.

With research showing children as young as 6 or 7 years being able to perform first aid, learn CPR, use a defibrillator and place an emergency call, it seems logical to St John that Australia's student population be trained.⁵ St John believes that ensuring basic first aid awareness programs are accessible to the community is an essential component of creating a resilient Australia.⁵ With basic first aid and Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) learning now only included in years 9 to 10 of the current Australian Health and Physical Education Curriculum,⁶ much more can be done to create a resilient Australia via student education.

An investment by government in first aid education of students is an investment in the resilience in the community. **Where included in the Australian curriculum, school aged children are guaranteed exposure to first aid and other training that may increase resilience to natural disasters.**

An example of a program already in place is the St John First Aid in Schools Program:

In 2013 across Australia, St John Ambulance Australia trained 200,000 students from K– Year 12 in first aid skills under our First Aid in Schools Program. This training has been provided free to school students with trainers and resources supplied by St John. The Program is open to all schools and St John Ambulance professional first aid trainers visit at a time and date that suits the teacher, making it convenient and flexible.

The Program aims to:

- *equip children with the knowledge of what to do in an emergency*
- *provide an early introduction to first aid*
- *develop confidence and new skills*
- *increase the total number of first aid trained people in the Australian community.*

This program has the capacity to reach thousands of students over time and could grow exponentially with sustainable government support and by receiving priority in the Australian Curriculum.

The responsibility for mitigation opportunities of an educational nature must be shared and lie with governments, organisations, communities and individuals. Targeted mitigation programs delivered by organisations, imbedded into education frameworks such as the Australian Curriculum and coupled with sustainable funding by governments, is a sustainable and achievable model for increasing resilience in the Australian population. Training students will, over time, create a culture of first aid preparedness that will only serve to improve the health outcomes of Australians experiencing or at risk of natural disasters.

Relief and recovery funding

St John agrees there is a need for increased funding for mitigation and resilience initiatives. The PC recommends that annual mitigation expenditure should be distributed by the states and territories, such as through the National Partnership Agreement for Natural Disaster Resilience (NPANDR). St John supports the distribution of funding via the cost sharing model, but also argues that funding for resilience projects that mitigate the adverse effects of natural disasters of national significance is insufficient. Boosting funding to the National Emergency Management Projects (NEMP) (for which only \$3.8m is allocated per annum) could assist in the implementation of many activities that can have far reaching effects in the community, such as in the case of education initiatives like the St John First Aid in Schools Program.

Projects that can be delivered nationally can also reduce administrative burden and costs in a number of ways:

- for the organisations applying for funding as application, acquittal and general administration occurs once
- burden for state and territory and local government entities who are assessing applications and managing contracts between government and organisations is reduced
- a reduction in overall project costs (e.g. resource development occurs once).

Conclusion

St John Ambulance Australia supports an increased emphasis and funding of mitigation strategies that assist the Australian community to prepare for and respond to natural disasters. It is essential that governments also invest however, in strategies that actively engage communities in preparedness activities that increase resilience and aim to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the Australian population. A readily accessible population group is students, who could be guaranteed exposure to such resilience initiatives via the Australian Curriculum and with appropriate government support. First aid learning is one such initiative that increases resilience and prepares the community to act during adverse circumstances. Finally, St John supports increased funding of mitigation activities, such as through the NPANSR, however believes that funding for projects of national significance must also be increased, such as through the NEMP.

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References

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