Victorian Bushfires Remembered

10 years on from the 2009 Victorian Bushfires
In the five months following the Victorian bushfires of 2009, I, along with many Red Cross people, met hundreds of people and organisations rocked by this event. We talked to everyone we could, be it standing in a petrol station while they filled up their car, over a cup of tea in an evacuation centre or at a community meeting - whatever suited them. We spent day after day driving to anywhere we were welcome.

Our aim was to understand what affected communities needed and where people were falling through the gaps. We found there were many things missing that could help people recover and, where Red Cross was the best placed organisation to do so, we set about filling those gaps. We designed recovery resources specifically for teenagers, and others for parents, and we created guides for agencies to help them effectively communicate with those affected.

These tools and resources are now a crucial part of Red Cross’ ongoing long-term recovery program, which we continue to use in supporting other disaster-affected communities all over the country.

I thank everyone who, in those early days, spoke to us and shared their story. To be given the opportunity to help was humbling and it has been an honour to see firsthand the results of this important work.

Kate Brady
Australian Red Cross
National Recovery Adviser for Emergency Services

As the Black Saturday fires raged, I was one of many Red Cross volunteers sent to a relief centre set up at the Traralgon Cultural Centre.

Our role was to help people who had fled the fires to register their whereabouts and let their families know they were safe. We worked flat out for three days, sleeping on the floor, as everyone did. Some of those who came to the centre had lost people they loved, some knew that their homes were burning, others were desperately worried for the animals they had to leave behind.

Just months before, I and a group of my fellow volunteers had received special training in how to support people affected by trauma. All that vital training came back to us, and it was of such assistance. To know how to be supportive and – most of all – what not to say to people in this situation. I am grateful Red Cross recognised and cared for the emotional well-being of us as volunteers in the midst of such a traumatic time.

Red Cross teams have used this training many times in the years afterwards: in fires and floods and traumatic events. These are difficult times that test us all, but I hope we can always be a support for people when they need it most.

Anne Macarthur
Australian Red Cross
Victorian Advisory Board Chair
The Victorian Bushfires of February 2009 were among Australia’s worst known natural disasters.

During the fires 173 people lost their lives, 414 people were injured, 2,000 homes were damaged or destroyed, more than 7,500 people were left homeless and about 450,000ha of land burned. A further 374 people died as a result of the related heatwave.

The fires damaged infrastructure and burned through agricultural land, cultural and historic sites and national parks, killing or injuring countless livestock and other animals.

People were unable to return home for nearly two weeks, waiting while searches went on for the missing.

In the immediate aftermath and years following this tragedy, people across Australia and the world came together to support those affected and help survivors rebuild their lives, homes and communities.

Australian Red Cross people from Tasmania to the Northern Territory, many of them volunteers, rallied to help the people of Victoria with more than 1,000 involved in our response.

These teams worked around-the-clock providing first aid to firefighters and people fleeing the fires; feeding evacuees and emergency services workers; registering the names of survivors; and, answering more than 20,000 phone calls from people looking for families and friends. Red Cross also provided expert advice to local and state government agencies when the complexity and scale of the impact became apparent. At the heart of the work were those who were suffering and needed immediate relief, care and support through a personal journey to recovery.

People donated $380 million in support of those affected. Red Cross and the Victorian Government established the independent Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund Panel to distribute funds. Every single cent and accrued interest went to helping affected individuals and families, whether it was support for orphaned children, helping rebuild homes, or community determined recovery initiatives.

In the days, months and years since this tragic event Red Cross has continued to provide psychosocial support, help people connect with practical and tangible services and assist in rebuilding the social fabric of communities. Again, in marking the 10th anniversary of the Victorian Bushfires, Red Cross will be available to those who need someone to talk to about the feelings that have arisen from remembering this time.

How you can help in 2019

It’s important to remember everyone’s recovery journey is different. Even 10 years later, people may still be struggling, and for others, new emotions may surface. These are all normal. Look out for Australian Red Cross volunteers, wearing red, at anniversary events to share how you’re feeling.
On Black Saturday, in early February of 2009, Roula set out to drive the 60km, or so, from Melbourne to Kinglake. She was to meet friends for a community picnic the next day but not long into the journey Roula turned back after seeing and smelling the smoke ahead.

Roula, who was living in Melbourne and caring for her elderly mum, believes if she had gone through with her plans to visit Kinglake she would never have survived. “Everybody around me, well, not everybody, but most of the people didn’t come out of it,” she says.

It has taken years for Roula to recover from what happened on that fateful day: a day etched into our country’s collective conscious. “This was like something – just like a death – that was taken from you. The dream we all work so hard for, that you put everything into and then, one sweep, it’s gone.”

Prior to the fires, Roula and her family had spent eight years building her dream house at Kinglake. The dream was to one day live there fulltime, among nature.

“Physically, we did it all ourselves. It was a beautiful home and it fitted in with the environment. My father, it reminded him of Europe, where we’d come from - he was a woodcutter.”

Her most vivid memory of visiting that dream home just a few days after the fires was of blackness.

“Everything stripped, just black sticks sticking up. The house, so stark. Oh, I just couldn’t stop crying. It took a few months for me to stop crying.”

In the immediate aftermath Roula was comforted by a Red Cross emergency services team member. “I don’t remember her name but she was wonderful, talking to me and reassuring me and arranging for me to go back to the house with friends, and organising the safety clothing.”

In trying to cope with the emergency and what she’d lost, Roula says she suffered from depression but a strong network of family and friends helped her through.

Roula, who still lives in Melbourne where she cares for her brother and sister-in-law, hasn’t rebuilt her house. Maybe one day she will build something small, but nothing like it used to be. She says it’s just not important to her anymore.

“Now I live day by day, I don’t plan too far ahead. I look after people; people are my thing. Material things are not important.”

Roula’s experience in an emergency inspired her to become a Red Cross emergency services volunteers, and sometimes she helps console others who have also been through bushfires. Roula is proof there can be life after a disaster. She says if she could speak now to her 2009 self she would tell her: “There is hope, there is a future, things will be better.”
How the Victorian Bushfires changed Red Cross

What’s changed in the past 5 years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of disasters</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>responded to:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of people helped:</td>
<td>12,624</td>
<td>15,161</td>
<td>13,228</td>
<td>2,408</td>
<td>35,974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of volunteers</td>
<td>1,758</td>
<td>1,345</td>
<td>1,597</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>1,383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>involved:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*based on financial years

In an emergency, the role of Australian Red Cross is to provide psychosocial support and advocate for people who have been affected by an emergency.

It can take people years to recover and rebuild their lives after a disaster. Research shows that while disasters impact people in many different ways it is how well they are supported afterwards that can make the difference between a good recovery and a prolonged period of stress.

The significant loss of life and property during the Victorian Bushfires of 2009 led to a huge public outpouring of empathy. Organisations all over the country offered financial support to aid Red Cross and others in their recovery work. At Red Cross, this supported the organisation’s first major long-term recovery program.

In the 10 years since the Victorian Bushfires Red Cross has moved from providing immediate on-the-ground disaster welfare services such as catering and first aid to specialising in long-term relief, recovery and the provision of psychosocial support.

What is long-term recovery

Recovering from an emergency is made easier when communities are driving the decisions that affect them and where there’s a long-term commitment of time and resources.

Red Cross specialises in long-term relief and recovery programs that are adapted to the specific circumstances of each disaster. These programs are designed in consultation with an affected community. It might include regular home visits to affected individuals, support for local health centres to carry out their work or help in organising events to rebuild community spirit.

What is psychosocial support

Disasters can impact every part of a person’s life: from their physical, mental health and relationships, to their ability to stay employed, to parent and to maintain sustainable, long-term income.

Red Cross volunteers and staff are trained to provide psychosocial support, delivered as practical guidance to help people move on with their lives after an emergency. This support isn’t about telling a person what they should do, but about providing them with the assistance and tools they need to make their own decisions.

Sharing our emergency knowledge

Among other things, Red Cross emergency expertise is sought after to:
- deliver one-on-one humanitarian support for those affected
- consult with and advocate on behalf of communities so they get the help they need
- provide advice to state and local governments and other agencies
- support local governments that have not been through an emergency before
- operate the country’s only national tracing program, Register.Find.Reunite. helping people locate friends and family in a crisis

10 years of Red Cross response

3,208 incidents
22,523 volunteers activated
534,285 people helped

How you can help in 2019

Red Cross knows positive support from community helps people recover better. The FREE Get Prepared app, co-created with general insurer IAG, helps users identify who can help them in an emergency. redcross.org.au/getprepared
The changing nature of emergencies will impact more and more people.
Credit: Australian Red Cross/Rodney Dekker

The future of emergency response

Around the world, natural disasters affect more than 200 million people a year and the numbers are expected to climb. Australia and the Asia-Pacific was the world’s most disaster prone region in 2017 and bore two of every five disasters in that year.

Combine the growing impact of climate change and shifting vulnerabilities and the reality is natural disasters are happening more often, are more severe, impact greater numbers of people and have a significant and growing long-term impact.

No one sees themselves as being vulnerable in a disaster, but the fact is everyone is vulnerable in some way.

Impact of disasters...

- 200 million people affected
- 2 of every 5 disasters occur in our region
- Will cost Australia $39 billion by 2050

Trends to consider

Climate change

Climate change ranks among the greatest global problems of the 21st Century. Along with global warming it will bring a rise in sea levels, an increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, a decrease in crop yields and water shortages.

In Australia, Red Cross has developed Climate-Ready Communities: A Guide to Getting Started. This resource helps communities identify how they will be impacted by climate change and what they can do to continue to thrive.

Internationally, we are part of the global Red Cross, with access to expertise in science, advocacy, policy and response.

Terror and trauma

In Australia and around the world we’ve seen a rise in traumatic and violent events in public places. These events draw a lot of media attention, challenge public norms, undermine feelings of safety and cause significant public grieving. They can have a major impact on communities and affect large numbers of people.

Red Cross is one of the key agencies called upon to provide psychosocial support to crowds gathering at the site of these events. We recruit specially-trained teams to support these people who can have very different needs from those affected by a natural disaster. We’ve also developed guidelines drawing on international research and expertise for the people and organisations who support communities in these types of emergencies.

---

With the marking of the 10-year anniversary of the Victorian Bushfires and Black Saturday, people may experience different emotional, physical and psychological reactions. These responses are normal and on most occasions will subside again within a few weeks as part of the body’s natural healing and recovery process.

It’s important to remember everyone’s recovery journey is different. Even 10 years later, people may still be struggling, and for others, new emotions may surface.

Red Cross has a range of resources to help people at this time. Visit redcross.org.au and navigate to “Get Help”.

People are encouraged to look out for each other and to check in on loved ones who may have been impacted by the fires, letting them know they are not alone and people are thinking of them.

The following telephone services are also available

- Lifeline 13 11 14
- GriefLine 1300 845 745
- BeyondBlue 1300 224 636

Confidential counselling and advice about abuse is available at the national sexual assault, domestic family violence counselling service on 1800 737 732 (1800 RESPECT).

The power of humanity

The Victorian Bushfires, particularly that first Saturday of February 2009 will be a time Australian Red Cross will never forget. The oppressive heat, the colour of the sky and the feel and sound of the deadly wind. A decade on, on behalf of my colleagues, I would like to pay respect to those who lost their lives and the impact that has had on those left behind, those who survived, but were hurt, physical and emotionally, to those, for whom the journey of recovery continues, and to those who helped on the day and days, weeks, months and years that followed.

I will personally never forget how, in the wake of this tragedy, almost every Red Cross staff member and volunteer across every state and territory, stopped what they were doing to help with our response. At one stage we had teams working in 26 different locations including the five 24-hour call centres we operated to help those searching for loved ones and the evacuation centres set up for people who had fled their burning homes. Everyone pitched in.

To every one of those people, thank you for your empathy and support and for all you did in the service of humanity.

Andrew Coghlan
Australian Red Cross
National Manager of the Emergency Services Program