

SACOSS

*South Australian Council
of Social Service*

Responding to Bushfire Risk

*a disability service
provider case study*



Responding to bushfire risk – a disability service provider example

Community Living Australia delivers flexible personalised services for people of all ages living with disability across South Australia. With office locations in Adelaide Metro, Southern Metro, Fleurieu, Kangaroo Island, Riverland, Adelaide Hills, Murraylands, Strathalbyn and the South East they have clients in areas that experience fires, floods, storms, drought and heatwaves.

Taking a planned and coordinated response to emergencies, disasters and extreme weather events seems to be built into the DNA of Community Living Australia. Their commitment comes from being a mission-based organisation with values that prioritise the wellbeing of clients and families as well as staff. They recognise the impact that disasters can have physical and psychological wellbeing in the short and long term.

Bushfires are a significant risk in many of the regions they work in. Here are some of the strategies Community Living Australia implement to keep both their staff and clients safe from bushfires.

Community Living Australia is a well established organisation and their approach reflects their size, location and resources. Organisations can take inspiration from their approach and develop responses that reflect their own circumstances

Before a fire

- Business continuity plans are in place
- Have a dedicated emergency management team
- Emergency management is integrated into their process of onboarding new clients or new staff. They all have bushfire plans.
- Client intake forms include consent to share information with emergency services
- Where clients live in very high bushfire risk areas the service advocates that they move to live in a safer location
- Staff and management participate in CFS bushfire planning workshops for care services
- Staff and management are signed up for CFS alerts and warnings
- CLA have tools for tracking staff
- High levels of communication across staff about potential risks ensures a coordinated response
- The Emergency Management team assesses risks and plans any response
- Identify the most at-risk clients and offer evacuate them early
- If clients cannot be evacuated to a family member residence, they are accommodated in a hotel at CLA's expense
- Emergency management kit contains hard copy document in case power and communications are down

During a fire

- Management and staff monitor cfs.gov.au and Alert SA
- Staff are advised to adhere to CFS advice regarding travel
- Keep track of the location of all staff
- Welfare checks are made to staff who live in affected areas and may not have access to the workplace
- Local CFS Coordinator is notified if a vulnerable person is remaining in place
- Welfare check calls are made to clients
- Appropriate policy and technologies enable staff to work from home

After a fire

- Welfare checks on affected staff and clients
- Plans are made for staff to return to work recognising impacted staff may need further time off work
- Counselling is made available to staff through the employee assistance program
- Clients checked for any additional support needs
- Provide additional supports if available and safe to do so and refer clients to recovery centre for as required
- After an event, staff are gathered to review their response to inform future planning and responses
- Make respite housing available to accommodate displaced community members as needed

Key learnings

In regional areas there are many small towns that are not known to staff. When incidents occur in these small towns, staff are at risk of ignoring warnings because they are unaware they are in close proximity to that town. Community Living Australia have now adopted mapping tools that include the names of small towns to enhance the safety of their staff.

Community Living Australia are a South Australian based organisation and therefore monitor the CFS website and follow CFS alerts and warnings. Their services in the South East are adjacent to the Victorian border. Fires can cross state borders, so it is important to be aware of any impending risks from Victoria. Community Living Australia now monitor the Victorian Country Fire Authority (CFA) website to ensure they are aware of any risk to their staff or clients.

Factors enabling success

- Clear organisational values
- Business continuity expertise
- Dedicated Emergency Management Team
- Built in process for identifying and planning for risks
- Supportive technologies – cloud-based server, client relationship management system, client mapping systems



- Effective leadership and communication
- Culture and processes to enable continuous improvement
- Generalised policies and procedures, but separate documents that address particular issue

This project was funded under the Natural Disaster Resilience Program by the South Australian State Government and the Commonwealth Department of Home Affairs. Views and findings associated with this project are expressed independently and do not necessarily represent the views of State and Commonwealth funding bodies.

