

REDUCING BUSHFIRE RISK TO VULNERABLE COMMUNITY MEMBERS THROUGH HEALTH AND COMMUNITY SERVICES AGENCIES – BUSINESS CONTINUITY APPROACH

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INTRODUCTION

The Department of Fire and Emergency Services' (DFES) At Risk Communities Program was developed as a result of findings from the 2009 Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission and the Keelty Inquiry into the 2011 Perth Hills Bushfires. Both the Royal Commission and Inquiry identified service gaps around people considered most vulnerable (being at risk) in a bushfire, and a need to address this gap. The At-Risk Communities program targets vulnerable members of the community who may be at greater risk of injury or death due to their inability to receive, understand or act on information during a bushfire emergency. It aims to address the gaps in service delivery by targeting the ageing population and those living with disabilities who live in their own homes that may be considered vulnerable due to the above. The program's purpose is to help at risk people to be better prepared for bushfire emergencies, by working with the Health and Community Services Agencies (Agencies) that provide a critical link to these community members, who often live in isolation.

While DFES recognises that Agencies and their staff are a trusted conduit for bushfire preparedness information, there are also significant challenges that limit an Agency's involvement in a client's bushfire preparedness. To achieve a greater buy-in from Agencies, DFES has worked with the Chamber of Commerce and Industry WA (CCIWA) to develop Guidance and Program Resources that suit industry needs.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

CHALLENGES

When first piloted in 2014 and subsequently implemented in 2015, the At-Risk Communities Program consisted of Agency training that was available in two formats:

- A face-to-face workshop that was 3 hours in duration and had a geographic focus on high bushfire risk areas and;
- An online training module that took approximately 30 minutes to complete.

The objective of the training was to ensure that Agencies were:

- Familiar with DFES' advice, concepts and terminology
- Knew how to access and use DFES resources
- Aware of the questions they may be asked by clients on bushfire preparedness, and where to get assistance
- Aware of their role in providing assistance to clients and the limitations to their assistance in a bushfire emergency.

Through regular monitoring and evaluation of the program, a number of recommendations for improvement were identified including the need to consider changes to the sector in relation to the introduction of new funding models for Agencies and clients.

INDUSTRY CHALLENGES

There have been a number of significant challenges for organisations to participate in the At-Risk Communities program. It was paramount for DFES to understand the care industry from the perspective of both upper, Occupational Health and Safety and risk managers who manage staff training priorities and budgets, as well as on-the-ground staff who are driving and providing care for clients in high bushfire risk areas.

The main challenges as communicated by industry included:

- The introduction of Consumer Direct Care (CDC) in July 2015 and a shift from state government funding to commonwealth government funding in 2016 (National Disability Insurance Scheme - NDIS) has greatly impacted the program's level of buy-in.

The introduction of CDC and NDIS has seen dramatic changes to the industry which have led to huge pressures on organisations to compete for their funding and clients – further limiting their capacity/interest to undertake training.

- Care organisations have limited funding and resources to pay staff to attend training

While DFES do not charge an organisation to participate in the training, organisations do need to pay their direct carers (who are generally paid by the hour) to attend. With so many changes and uncertainty in the care industry, many organisations have held off committing to the training until their organisations “general business” changes are complete.

In 2016, top-up funding that the government provided (which seems to be a standard for all HACC providers) was not distributed. This was an amount that was not guaranteed, but often relied upon by organisations. Many organisations did not have the extra funding available to pay staff overtime to participate in training, in particular coming to the end of the financial year.

- Time poor service providers
Service providers who completed the 3 hour training often felt they needed to pass on all information to their clients (not just the client specific information) and believed they did not have the time to do this. Developing tailored resources for both service providers and clients would address this.
- DFES' At-Risk Training often raised more questions for staff about their own organisation's policies and procedures for creating a safe working

environment for both staff and clients. Often, smaller organisations in particular did want to adopt processes for staff to follow, but weren't sure where to start.

Staff were asked at the training which policies and procedures their organisation followed in the event of a bushfire emergency. Most staff were generally unclear about their own organisation's processes. It was identified that this would work best if it was communicated and discussed prior to the training, and gaps identified before staff attended training.

- Face to face workshops ran for three hours. This was a barrier for both staff and organisations to participate

The training covered information that wasn't always relevant for all participants. This created a long training session for all instead of breaking relevant information down for different participants (such as OHS/Upper Level, Client Managers, and Direct Carers).

Through Industry consultation, a review recommended a business continuity approach in emergency management to ensure a greater buy-in by Agencies, to at-risk bushfire preparedness.

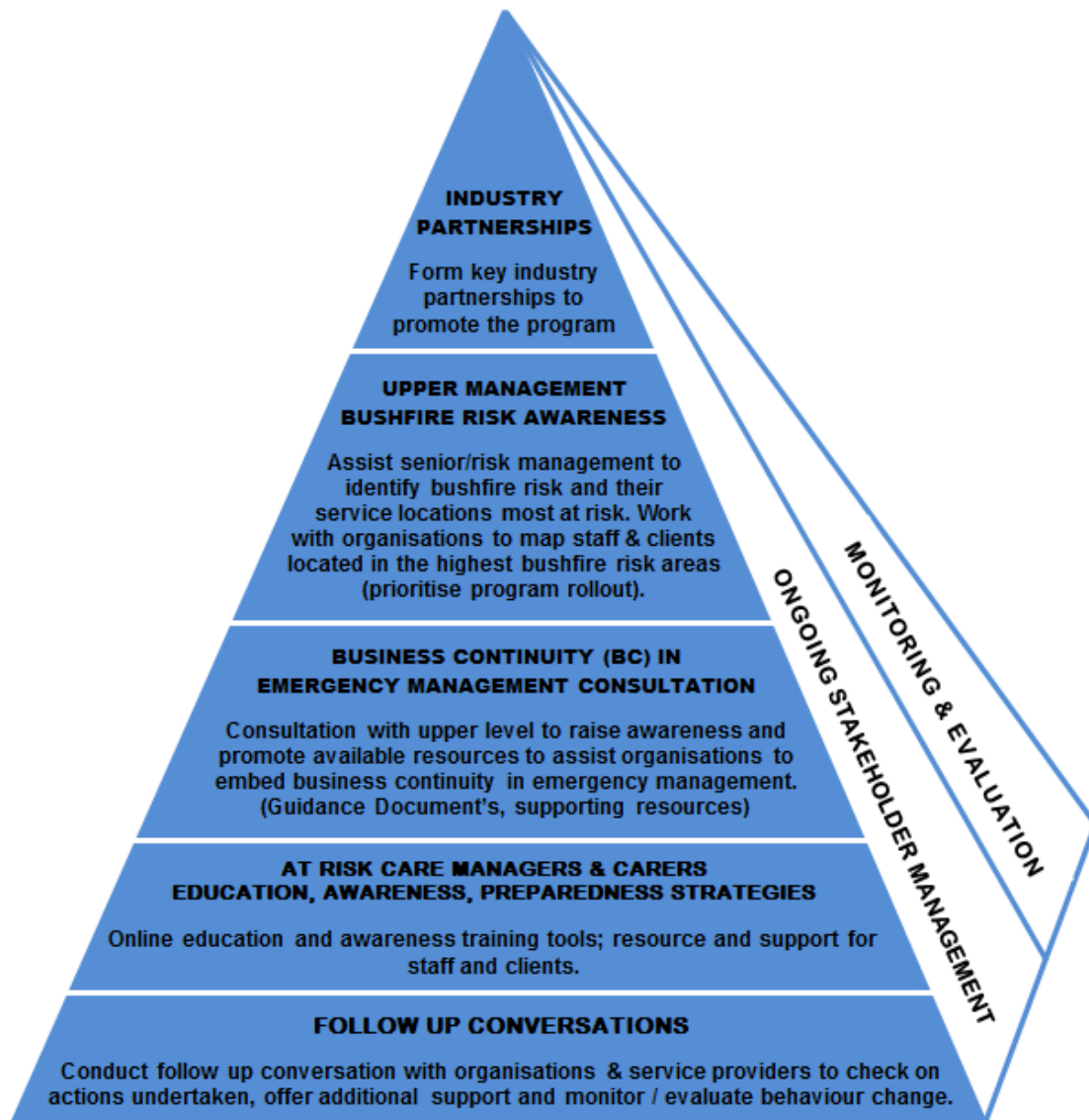
PROGRAM DIRECTION

Based on recommendations from reviews and evaluations of the At-Risk Program, it was revised to focus on assisting organisation to ensure business continuity in a bushfire emergency.

It was determined that developing workplace guidelines and supporting educational resources that promote business continuity processes and greater staff awareness would increase the uptake by organisations – many of whom don't understand the bushfire risk to their direct care workers and clients located in bushfire risk areas.

The revised program focuses on firstly increasing the bushfire risk knowledge of upper level, OHS and client managers, and includes access to training resources that they can use to educate and train their staff.

The business continuity framework (in emergency management) will look at the following process:



WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?" – CARE INDUSTRY

At a time when organisations are competing for funding, clients and retention of staff, simply offering a program that can “better educate and enable their clients and staff to be better prepared for an emergency” isn't enough.

As a result, DFES worked with the Western Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCIWA) to link the program's resources and information back to relevant WA's Occupational Safety and Health laws (OSH) and care industry policies and procedures – this encourages greater buy-in from organisations who are trying to keep and/or gain accreditation from their overarching funding bodies.

It is expected that the uptake by organisations in the revised program will be greater due to the development and extensive promotion of simple and user friendly processes and templates for organisations to embed into their own policies and procedures. In addition, a range of role specific, self-paced training and resources for staff, and tailored resources for clients and their families will contribute to the uptake of the program.

The revised program:

- Works with organisations to ensure they understand relevant OSH laws and care industry policies and procedures relating to both staff and clients living and working in high bushfire risk areas
- Ensures organisations have a clear understanding of their own organisation's current policies and procedures (in this space) and provides advice to those with any gaps
- Includes a range of self-paced education and awareness tools/resources to suit the needs of the different audiences (i.e. upper management, client managers and direct carers)
- Includes tailored tools, templates and information around workplace processes for organisations to
 - easily capture their client's bushfire plan information
 - communicate with staff, clients and client families
 - communicate with staff around bushfire risk areas and what to do in the event of a bushfire emergency.

PARTNERSHIP WITH CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY WA

Having developed a *Business Continuity and Disaster Recovery Workbook*, CCIWA were identified as a valuable partner in developing guidance documents that would be suitable for Agencies from a business continuity perspective. Having the existing knowledge of business continuity best practice, CCIWA provided advice on employer legislative obligations in an emergency, responsibilities under OSH Laws and existing guidance in place on assisting businesses with how to identify high-risk hazards to their business. In collaboration with CCIWA, DFES produced an Agency Guide to assist Agencies in preventing injury or illness to their Direct Care Workers and clients from the effects of a bushfire when working in a client's homes. It will also assist Agencies to prepare for and respond to bushfire emergencies affecting their in-home clients. Implementing the processes of the Agency Guide forms part of business continuity planning that helps Agencies prepare for a disruptive event.

The success of the At-Risk Communities Program relies heavily on Agencies' participating. It requires their commitment to sharing the responsibility to assist in-home clients to be better prepared for bushfires, in turn, reducing the risk from exposure to bushfire emergencies to Direct Care Workers assisting clients in their homes. If an Agency is aware that the client's home is in a bushfire risk area, they must then have systems in place for their Direct Care Worker to understand the risks attributed to them when working in or travelling to that home. This result must then be recorded and managed by the Agency/Client Manager, and be available to all Direct Care Workers attending to the client in their home. Collecting this information should be considered as part of a client's initial OSH assessment.

To ensure that the At-Risk Communities Program and its resources are used and valued by Agencies, DFES will be implementing an extensive marketing and communications strategy. This will raise the awareness amongst Agencies of their responsibilities from an OSH perspective, but also highlight the critical link that they provide to some of the most at-risk members of our community. The

benefits to Agencies is not only the assistance they provide to their in-home clients, but also the health and safety of their workers and the continuity of their core business during an emergency. DFES will continue to monitor and evaluate the At-Risk Communities program to ensure that it is meeting the needs of Agencies and evolves to be reflective of industry requirements.