



Australian Red Cross Submission to the inquiry into the National Emergency (2022 New South Wales Floods) Declaration 2022

Australian Red Cross welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee review of the *National Emergency (2022 New South Wales Floods Declaration 2022)* (the declaration).

We are proud to have supported people in Australia in recent years through major disasters. This includes nearly 50,000 people in evacuation centres and over the phone across 46 local government areas during the 2019–20 Bushfires, providing over 40,000 people with immediate relief grants, and during the NSW floods, we supported more than 19,000 people face to face. We reach 9 million people each year with our Emergency Ready Week Campaigns in September and have established wide ranging and long-term recovery programs across states after the Black Summer bushfires, building on our experiences from the Black Saturday Bushfires in 2009, and floods in New South Wales over the past 15 years, including 2022.

With a changing climate, disasters are becoming more severe and more frequent, with intensifying consequences for lives, wellbeing and livelihoods. This will be amplified by increasing urbanisation and inequality in Australian society. Resilience-building is particularly critical in Australia, where we are now facing more frequent and more extreme natural hazards, including heat, drought, fire and flooding. Red Cross' century-long experience points to the success of putting in place measures to boost individual, organisational and community resilience at the earliest opportunity to reduce the impact of oncoming adversity. **The more resilient a person or community is, the better able they are to cope with and recover from adversity and trauma.**

During the 2022 floods, there were a range of challenges. There was an opportunity – already identified – for better coordination among and between governments and response agencies, particularly in consultation with impacted communities. There were communication breakdowns following damage to key infrastructure, and a sense of overwhelm among many communities who were highly affected, had low personal wellbeing reserves, and were experiencing the long-term, chronic impacts of cumulative disasters, compounded by this flood event.

In this submission, Red Cross has prepared a range of recommendations on how agencies and governments can partner more effectively, respond to the needs of local communities and continue to learn and improve practice in preparation for intensifying disasters ahead. Several of these recommendations, as requested, identify opportunities to build capacity and strengthen disaster response with a focus on humanitarian need. In our role as auxiliary and with more than 100 years of experience in standing with communities before, during and after disaster, Red Cross is well positioned to support this work, to ensure emerging humanitarian concerns are addressed.

Recommendations:

Overall, that all levels of government, in partnership with Australian Red Cross and partners:

1. **Support coordination and clarity in an emergency response** through a review of the standing arrangements for New South Wales emergency response and recovery policies, systems and processes.
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2. **Prioritise opportunities for coordination and community engagement** mechanisms as part of the preparation and response itself.
3. **Prioritise pre-disaster preparedness and resilience building** in partnership with community and partner organisations.
4. **Support a nationwide workforce ready to stand up in times of disasters** (currently including approx. 4000 volunteers) to ensure humanitarian impacts are mitigated and wellbeing prioritised. Red Cross currently undertakes this role, but costs are rising given increasingly frequent and severe disasters. Red Cross estimates approx. \$13.5 million is required per year to provide this support before, during and after disasters at a nationwide level. This would enable a ready workforce in communities across Australia immediately able to respond to disasters and support the preparedness planning.
5. **Improve coordination in evacuation centres:** Training and cross-agency practice exercises for evacuation centres would improve how they are run, support for wellbeing, and how they prevent compound trauma for those impacted by disaster. Federal funding and coordination support to run evacuation and recovery centre exercises is recommended.
6. Support **meaningful participation of First Nations communities in resilience, response and recovery** contexts through specific local planning, inclusion and funding of local capability and specialist teams. Red Cross can provide a number of examples with significant outcomes and learnings as required.
7. Support **meaningful participation of CALD communities in resilience, response and recovery** through a diversification of the staff and volunteer workforce, and build cross cultural and language/communication capability in key languages.
8. Support **timely and coordinated resolution and access to communications for family and loved ones separated by disaster** through support for the Red Cross platform Register.Find.Reunite, which is activated in large scale disasters.
9. **Shift investment into building community resilience prior to a disaster, supporting communities to withstand greater and more frequent shocks.** For example, partner with Red Cross to roll out and support the Community Disaster Resilience Program in 137 local government areas most likely to experience a disaster. This will prevent significant damage (to lives, wellbeing and livelihoods) among the most vulnerable to a disaster, including droughts, heatwaves, floods, cyclones, earthquakes and bushfires.
10. Given numerous communities across NSW and the country are situated in remote locations and could **face isolation in a disaster**, support a wider roll out of local initiatives such as the Community Managed Evacuation Centre model (detailed below) to communities that face the prospect of protracted isolation.



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Introduction

Australian Red Cross (“Red Cross”) welcomes the review of the declaration and looks forward to working with the committee to highlight areas of improvement for future emergencies.

In February 2022 a major storm cell moved south across the Queensland border into Northern New South Wales. Impact assessments conducted between 2 March and 13 April indicate that 5,303 residential properties were uninhabitable, and more than 14,637 experienced slight to moderate damage. Seven lives were lost, and hundreds of rescues were carried out by local communities and emergency services.

This submission will provide an outline of Red Cross’ response to the 2022 New South Wales Floods (the floods) and highlight opportunities for improvement in future responses, particularly in relation to the need for a ready-to-deploy workforce of volunteers and staff who are able to: support communities in their resilience and preparedness in the face of increasing emergencies, scale-up, and immediately respond in a disaster, and support long term recovery.

Australian Red Cross response the 2022 NSW Floods

Red Cross volunteers and staff provided critical support in evacuation centres and recovery hubs (listed below) providing psychological first aid (PFA), registration and reunification support to evacuees as well as information assistance. Some, such as the Northern Rivers Red Cross Emergency Services at Tweed Heads were activated at 3AM to staff evacuation centres.

Evacuation Centre locations:

- Alstonville
- Ballina
- Banora
- Blacktown
- Bomaderry
- Byron
- Casino
- Castle Hill
- Coraki
- Dungog
- East Ballina
- Freshwater
- Grafton
- Kempsey
- Kingscliff
- Kurrajong
- Kyogle
- Lennox Head
- Lismore
- Long Jetty
- Maclean
- Mittagong

Recovery Hub locations:

- Ballina
- Bonalbo
- Camden
- Casino
- Chinderah
- Coraki
- Dorrigo
- Evans Head
- Grafton
- Kangaroo Valley
- Kyogle
- Lismore
- Londonderry
- Maclean
- Mullumbimby
- Murwillumbah
- Riverstone
- South Windsor
- Spencer
- Sussex Inlet



- Mullumbimby
- Murwillumbah
- Nambucca Heads
- Ocean Shores
- Penrith
- Richmond
- Southwest Rocks
- Sussex Inlet
- Urunga
- Woolgoolga
- Taree (Disaster Welfare Assistance Point)
- The Entrance
- Wiseman's Ferry
- Woodburn

Red Cross teams also provided PFA in the community and over the phone at the Public Information Inquiry Centre. Volunteers from across the state entered data from the field, completed reporting and undertook rostering to support our operations. All response personnel were supported by two Incident Management Teams within NSW and a National Coordination Centre out of Victoria.

By the time they were stood down on 10 June 2022, 384 volunteers and staff had worked 15,810 hours, assisted more than 19,000 people face to face, and registered 6471 people on the Register.Find.Reunite. system.

Cross-sector challenges in the flood response

Throughout the flood response, major structural disruptions affected Red Cross' ability to respond. Telecommunication services were disrupted and roads into the Northern Rivers and Richmond areas were closed. As a small response team, our ability to use alternative ways of accessing heavily damaged areas, like helicopters, relied strongly on relationships with private enterprise. For example, with support from the NRMA, Red Cross was able to fly staff members into Lismore to support the local team, despite the cancellation of all regional domestic flights.

As with all emergencies where Red Cross is embedded in local communities, a key challenge for this response was that many of our volunteers and staff were dealing with the impacts of the flood on their own properties and supporting their own families. This disaster closely followed other major disasters including the 2017 flood, ongoing drought, Black Summer bushfires, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The cumulative effects of these disasters mean that not only were many of our staff and volunteer workforce personally affected by the 2022 floods, but they are also extremely fatigued due to the protracted and unrelenting efforts of responding to these compounding events.

This flood highlighted system-wide challenges that will need to be addressed to ensure preparedness for the increasing disasters expected as a result of climate change. Currently, there is limited community engagement, a need for stronger coordination, and a lack of investment in individual and household preparedness and resilience building at the community level, which create significant challenges in response for Red Cross and the wider sector.



Recommendation:

1. **Support coordination and clarity in an emergency response** through a review of the standing arrangements for New South Wales emergency response and recovery policies, systems and processes.
2. **Prioritise opportunities for coordination and community engagement** mechanisms as part of the preparation and response itself.
3. **Prioritise pre-disaster preparedness and resilience building** in partnership with community and partner organisations.

Partnership between Australian Red Cross and the Australian Government

A standing workforce for disaster preparedness and recovery

We recognise that because of climate change, people in Australia are in greater danger than ever from disasters. This is not simply from the direct impact of a bushfire, cyclone or flood, but from the ongoing devastation these events wreak on mental health, family life, small business, and local and state economies. The impacts on individuals and communities can be long-term, and complicated involving loss of life and injury, changes in health and wellbeing, housing, financial and material losses, shifts in relationships, education and employment prospects, changes in community dynamics, and the environment. Disasters not only cost people their lives, but for those who survive, the lasting impacts of the experience can be deeply damaging to mental health and psychological wellbeing. For example, 21% of people affected by the 2009 Black Saturday fires are still experiencing PTSD, stress, or depression, more than a decade later.ⁱ

Most Australians are familiar with, and expect to see the face of a Red Cross person staffing evacuation centres after a disaster, and take comfort in knowing Red Cross people are present across the country, bringing humanitarian principles to life for millions of people experiencing vulnerability. Increasingly, evidence shows that investment in disaster resilience, or preparedness prior to disaster, results in less damage, fewer impacts and quicker, more equitable recovery after the disaster.ⁱⁱ

Prior to COVID-19, the not-for-profit sector was already experiencing a decline volunteerism. The pandemic has amplified the challenges of recruiting and maintaining a volunteer workforce in traditional, standing volunteer roles without significant investment of organisational funds to attract and train new volunteers. While we are actively looking for ways to integrate the goodwill of spontaneous volunteers, the critical support we provide to communities is skilled, and requires vetting, ongoing training and psychosocial support to ensure our volunteers and staff are able to cope with the challenges of standing with communities in the face of disaster.

As an auxiliary to government, the Government can look to Red Cross to play a major role in helping communities build resilience, support people to become better prepared for disasters, respond immediately to disasters such as bushfires and floods, and walk alongside them on their journey to recovery.

Red Cross currently does this by ensuring our trained, ready-to-deploy workforce of volunteers and staff are able to scale-up, immediately respond, support long-term recovery, and help with preparedness planning. However, this work requires investment to ensure we are ready to respond



and able to maintain capacity and capability. In the US, Canada and UK, governments rely on Red Cross for this role and consequently fund a minimum base workforce so Red Cross can provide an effective humanitarian response. We recommend that the Australian government review these models and work with Red Cross to understand how authorities can best support this significant contribution to how Australia prepares for, responds to and recovers from emergencies and disasters. This is particularly relevant as we respond to the increasing frequency, number and scale of disasters as a result of climate change.

Climate change projections show that this trend will continue and escalate over the next decade. For example, our current volunteer workforce consists of 1,250 within NSW. Estimates based on Red Cross' response to the past several significant events determine that we need a minimum of 2,500 trained and resourced volunteers to maintain a state of operational readiness to respond to future disasters.

Adequate and sustainable funding would enable Red Cross to recruit, train, engage and maintain a volunteer workforce which represents the diversity communities and ensure that we are able to confidently provide critical psychosocial services across the country as disasters occur.

During the NSW floods response, service delivery was sometimes disrupted for people who were already stressed and traumatised due to some government agencies and staff having to "learn on the job". Training and practicing with other agencies using mock evacuation and recovery centre exercises would address this issue.

Recommendations:

- 4. Support a nationwide workforce ready to stand up in times of disasters** (currently including approx. 4000 volunteers) to ensure humanitarian impacts are mitigated and wellbeing prioritised. Red Cross currently undertakes this role, but costs are rising given increasingly frequent and severe disasters. Red Cross estimates approx. \$13.5 million is required per year to provide this support before, during and after disasters at a nationwide level. This would enable a ready workforce in communities across Australia immediately able to respond to disasters and support the preparedness planning.
- 5. Improve coordination in evacuation centres:** Training and cross-agency practice exercises for evacuation centres would improve how they are run, support for wellbeing, and how they prevent compound trauma for those impacted by disaster. Federal funding and coordination support to run evacuation and recovery centre exercises is recommended.

Meaningful Inclusion and Diversity

People facing systemic barriers and marginalisation are likely to experience the impacts of disasters more severely than those who have greater access to resources and strong social capital. Red Cross sees this through long-term research with the University of Melbourne into the aftermath of the Black Saturday Bushfires, our work with the Australian Business Roundtable for Disaster Resilience, our own research into Emergency Resilience in CALD Communities, our international experience and working in and with Australian communities affected by disasters for the past 108 years.

Prior to this flood, there was a concerning lack of First Nations identified support services and staff in vital agencies, legal services, health, and government sectors. Our assessments indicated that



evacuation centres were not resourced – or teams trained appropriately – to adequately assist First Nations peoples. Red Cross understands from the First Nations leaders within our organisation, that historically the presence of the Department of Communities and Justice as the central lead in evacuation and recovery centres can act as a deterrent for First Nations people. Some First Nations people do not feel safe engaging with government officials due to the historical intergenerational trauma, which can hinder response and recovery and the ability to ensure First Nations communities have access to the right help at the right time.

While this is a challenge across the sector, Red Cross has taken measures to ensure the diversity of the communities we work in, is reflected in our volunteer and workforce in a meaningful way. In line with our commitment to ensuring First Nations inclusion and understanding is applied to our Emergency Services practice, the NSW/ACT team now benefits from the experience of a dedicated First Nations Emergency Services Team. This team is comprised of five First Nations Recovery and Resilience Officers within New South Wales.

Throughout the floods our First Nations team worked in collaboration with our incident management teams, undertaking community engagement and assisting directly within the affected areas throughout the Northern Rivers region. The First Nations team was instrumental in creating a culturally safe approach to the NSW Red Cross response. The team provided vital information and feedback to Emergency Services agencies at a regional, state and federal level, on behalf of Red Cross and First Nations communities, amplifying the voice of the community where often this inclusion is not present. Our ability to provide this critical service with First Nations people driving the strategy and operations is dependent on sustainable funding to enable us to embed this function in our work moving forward.

The NSW First Nations Emergency Services team's ability to work together with community, assisted the response, identifying gaps and barriers and provided a better understanding and real time information on the impact of the disaster on First Nations communities. Feedback and information were provided to key government agencies throughout the response, in a space that may not be culturally safe for community to have a voice.

Recommendation:

6. Support **meaningful participation of First Nations communities in resilience, response and recovery** contexts through specific local planning, inclusion and funding of local capability and specialist teams. Red Cross can provide a number of examples with significant outcomes and learnings as required.
7. Support **meaningful participation of CALD communities in resilience, response and recovery** through a diversification of the staff and volunteer workforce, and build cross cultural and language/communication capability in key languages.

Register.Find.Reunite.

Research supports the need for a national capability to reunite families separated by disaster.ⁱⁱⁱ A study undertaken as part of the University of Melbourne's Beyond Bushfires research found that during Black Saturday, more than 50% of people were separated for more than 12 hours. 45% of those that reported being separated from their family members reported the highest level of stress. (10 out of 10). Being separated from family with long periods of uncertainty (i.e. no contact) has



been linked with people experiencing poorer mental health outcomes, including PTSD three to four years after the fires.

Register.Find.Reunite. (R.F.R.) is a national service managed by Australian Red Cross on behalf of commissioning agencies in States and Territories. The system is a critical part of emergency evacuations across Australia and provides a nationally consistent way for people who are in disaster impacted areas to register their location. It also allows for family and friends who may have lost contact with a loved one during and after an emergency to register their concern.

Our teams use this service to register people in evacuation centres, online or via telephone and can help find and reunify those separated in an emergency. Disaster-impacted people can also self-register with their location, which helps response agencies gain a better understanding of the situation on the ground. This can help with targeting and directing door knock efforts when emergency evacuations take place. Having real time information on high-risk areas and the likely human impact among evacuees provides critical information to assist response agencies in planning where to deploy limited resources. R.F.R is currently a digital system that requires online capability (as well as useable devices) for its real-time function, however could be adapted for offline use to facilitate easy access by people using an app on their phone.

Red Cross receives welcome support from Resilience NSW for R.F.R.. Nationwide investment would reduce the impacts of disaster for many.

Recommendation:

8. Support **timely and coordinated resolution and access to communications for family and loved ones separated by disaster** through support for the Red Cross platform Register.Find.Reunite, which is activated in all large scale disasters.

Building Community Preparedness and Disaster Resilience

While the flooding in Northern NSW in 2022 was unprecedented and caused many hundreds of households and communities to become isolated – some for weeks or months – there were also many examples of communities working together in community-led preparedness, response and recovery to reduce the physical and psychosocial impacts of the flooding.

Since Tropical Cyclone Debbie in 2017, communities have been able to apply for funding to develop a Community-Led Resilience Team (CRT), with Red Cross mentoring and support based on their particular strengths and capacities. Other agencies have also supported the development of these teams, for example, the Red Cross First Nations Team has linked with Aboriginal Affairs NSW, Resilience NSW, NSW RFS, NSW SES, NSW DPI and Clarence Valley Council to support community leaders and Elders in developing a CRT for the communities of Baryulgil and Malabugilmah in Clarence Valley LGA.

Following the 2022 flood, Red Cross interviewed a number of community members and representatives from Councils and emergency services agencies to check in on the implementation of CRTs, and their effectiveness during recent events. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. Community members consistently report standout benefits from a trained, prepared and



supported local community network linked via a CRT during both the emergency event and early recovery.

Disaster resilience is a strategic priority for Australian Red Cross, building on our long-term community development experience in both disaster recovery and drought contexts.

Building on the success of CRTs and other resilience building projects, Red Cross has developed a national program called Community Disaster Resilience, which takes a community-led, all-hazard, strength-based approach to 137 targeted communities, to support them as they develop their own resilience strategies and activities. We have deliberately built flexibility into our approach to ensure communities drive decision-making and have developed a consistent monitoring and evaluation process to ensure continuous improvement in our practice. The evidence on the benefits of investing in disaster resilience is clear:

- More than nine million people in Australia have been directly impacted by a disaster or extreme weather event in the past 30 years.^{iv} This will undoubtedly grow.
- \$250M spent annually in disaster resilience (currently only \$52M) would generate savings of \$11 billion, and reduce federal government spending on disasters by 50%.^v
- The financial costs of the social damage caused by disasters (health and wellbeing, employment, education and safety issues) may be as much as double the physical costs of restoration of assets.^{vi}
- For every \$1 invested in scaled-up treatment for common mental disorders such as depression and anxiety, there is a return of \$5 in improved health and productivity.^{viii}

Red Cross has an important role to play in sharing knowledge, insights and expertise, facilitating and brokering relationships, and driving collaboration to prevent duplication and ensure communities are at the centre. Our strategic plan is to engage and work with targeted communities that are geographically at risk and experience high levels of vulnerability across Australia. Therefore, ongoing, meaningful investment into the important work of Australian Red Cross will save lives and dollars and help people live more fulfilling and prosperous lives.

Recommendations:

- 9. Shift investment into building community resilience prior to a disaster, supporting communities to withstand greater and more frequent shocks.** For example, partner with Red Cross to roll out and support the Community Disaster Resilience Program in 137 local government areas most likely to experience a disaster. This will prevent significant damage (to lives, wellbeing and livelihoods) among the most vulnerable to a disaster, including droughts, heatwaves, floods, cyclones, earthquakes and bushfires.

Communities at risk of becoming isolated

Numerous communities across NSW and the country are situated in remote locations. Many are at risk of being cut-off during disasters, when infrastructure, transport and communications systems are compromised. In these instances, standard Emergency Services responses including Red Cross, governments and other agencies cannot access disaster-impacted areas, which means community members may not have access to the services, support and care they need. This was the case in Kyogle, NSW, where Red Cross



worked with the local council to develop a new model, to be activated if the community were isolated by disaster.

The Community Managed Evacuation Centre (CMEC) model is activated when an evacuation centre is needed by a community in instances where regular combat and welfare agencies cannot access the region. This model was developed jointly by Red Cross and Kyogle Council with the collaboration of emergency services and community organisations. Red Cross has funded the development and limited delivery of a training package. Staff from Department of Community and Justice have undertaken and benefited from this training.

The Kyogle CMEC model was activated during the 2022 floods, with communities reporting better outcomes based on this community-led approach. Communities including Bonalbo, Kyogle, Mallanganee, Tabulam, Wiangaree and Woodenbong had participated in Red Cross evacuation centre training and had also been supported by Kyogle Council with practical resources such as PPE, generators, community hall upgrades and radios. The result was a core of community volunteers, ready to be activated in response, and ready to support other community members in the event that disaster welfare agencies could not arrive. In the 2022 floods, the CMEC model in Kyogle was supported through the early deployment of a Department of Communities and Justice Staff member who worked with the CMEC model for the duration until its transition to recovery.

Red Cross and Kyogle Council are strongly supportive of the CMEC initiative and its potential for expansion in communities across the Northern Rivers. Some lessons have also been learned from the first three years of the model. To strengthen the CEMCs, considerable effort is required within each community to maintain and build on the current volunteer base. Like any program relying on volunteers, it needs regular maintenance and support to ensure that the volunteer pool remains active and engaged. Annual training and recruitment are fundamental to the model's ongoing success.

Recommendations:

10. Given numerous communities across NSW and the country are situated in remote locations and could **face isolation in a disaster**, support a wider roll out of local initiatives such as the Community Managed Evacuation Centre model (detailed below) to communities that face the prospect of protracted isolation.

Conclusion

Red Cross' century-long experience points to the success of putting in place measures to boost individual, organisational and community resilience at the earliest opportunity, to reduce the impact of oncoming adversity. The more resilient a person or community is, the better able they are to cope with and recover from adversity and trauma. Meaningful investment into the areas outlined here will save lives, address key areas of humanitarian concern, and invest in well-being and long term resilience and connection within communities, helping them withstand the shocks of the future.



Red Cross looks forward to working with the Government on these issues and solutions.

For more information:

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ⁱ Gibbs L, Molyneaux R, Harms L, Gallagher HC, Block K, Richardson J, et al. 10 Years Beyond Bushfires Report Melbourne University of Melbourne, 2020.

ⁱⁱ Aldrich DP, Meyer MA., Social Capital and Community Resilience, *American Behavioral Scientist*, 59(2) ,254–269. 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ Richardson JF, Snowdon E, Gallagher HC, Gibbs L, Block K, Lusher D, Kellett C, MacDougall C, Smith M. [Separation and reunification in disasters: the importance of understanding the psycho-social consequences](#). In Adenrele Awotona (Ed). *Planning for Community-based Disaster Resilience Worldwide: Learning from Case Studies in Six Continents*. Ashgate Publishing Limited. 2016: 357–372.

^{iv} Deloitte Access Economics & Australian Business Roundtable (ABR) for Disaster Resilience & Safer Communities, 2017.

^v *ibid*.

^{vi} Australian Business Roundtable (ABR) for Disaster Resilience & Safer Communities, Special Report: Update to the economic costs of natural disasters in Australia, 2021.

^{vii} World Health Organization, [World Mental Health Day: An opportunity to kick-start a massive scale-up in investment in mental health](#), 2020.

^{viii} Deloitte Access Economics & Australian Business Roundtable (ABR) for Disaster Resilience & Safer Communities (2017).