



13 October 2022

Senate Standing Committees on Finance and Public Administration
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Chair,

Background

The St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia (the Society) is a lay Catholic charitable organisation that comprises over 45,000 volunteers and members and 6,000 employees who provide on the ground assistance across Australia. Our members and volunteers work directly with those in need by giving them a hand up so they can achieve their full potential.

The Society's primary activities involve the provision of emergency relief, accommodation and support services. Most recently, the Society was funded by the Australian Government (Government) to provide national emergency assistance in response to the 2019-20 bushfires, drought and COVID-19.

The Society has a long history of providing assistance immediately after disasters. While not first responders, our members are often local community members who have existing connections and understand their community's needs. They assist at recovery centres, Vinnies outlets or by going door to door, to see what can be done.

For example, in the immediate aftermath of the 2022 Northern NSW Floods, the Society operated out of eight Recovery Centres through its strong local network of members and volunteers, distributing over \$2.5 million in direct cash grants to individuals and families across the region in just three weeks. The Society in NSW continues to support the community with floods recovery in the form of material assistance, vouchers and essential everyday items and expects to do so well into the coming calendar year. This assistance was possible due to the experience gained in the bushfires of recent years and our strong local footprint.

The Society has prepared two submissions to the parliamentary inquiry into the *Lessons to be learned in relation to the Australian Bushfire Season 2019-20* ([No. 47](#), [47.1](#)) and a [submission](#) to the *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements* (NND.001.01084). In these submission we outlined what worked well and what could be done to improve disaster responses.

Emergency Response Fund Amendment (Disaster Ready Fund) Bill 2022

Overall, the Society welcomes the name change (to Disaster Ready Fund) and the allocation of up to \$200 million per year to natural disaster resilience and risk reduction.

We support capacity for the Minister to review the legislated maximum annual disbursement amount at least every five years, and to adjust the amount via a disallowable legislative instrument. Streamlined administrative processes are also welcome.

However, we call for the funding purpose to be broad (not limited) and for administration to be flexible to enable effective implementation of the full range of community-led, local responses essential to disaster recovery.

Investment in preparedness and community resilience activities

Based on our experience, the purpose of the funds should be broad to support preparedness and community resilience activities, as well response, recovery and rebuilding measures. There is a tendency for funds to be directed to addressing immediate basic needs and then longer-term recovery and risk reduction, often at the expense of activities that build community resilience. Activities that support resilience increase community preparedness and improve responses to disasters as they strike.

They also help reduce the devastating, long term social impact that disasters have on individual and community health, wellbeing and social cohesion.

For example, in response to the 2020-21 bushfires in NSW, the Society established a community development program to strengthen the Bega Valley, Eurobodalla, and Snowy Valleys communities' ability to withstand future disasters. Five Community Development Officers were placed in these communities and to work with them to identify their needs, build community cohesion and hold wellbeing events (e.g., Build it Up South of Eden, Bemboka Movie Night, and Ladies Day Out). These initiatives are community-led, address community need and support local responses but do not attract government funding.

Community grant rounds were also conducted, with local community organisations funded to manage their own recovery projects. Regions were empowered by having local, experienced people at the helm of recovery, who facilitated and coordinated community-led responses. Again, these activities tend not to attract government funding but are an important way of helping communities to rebuild and recover. The need varied from community to community but included activities such as:

- funding events such as support groups to enable the community to reconnect, especially for people who have been displaced
- creating space and opportunities to hear the stories and strengths of the community
- connecting individuals, families and the wider community with each other and with key leaders
- creating and supporting online platforms to consult with isolated communities
- offering community training such as psychological first aid and managing complex behaviours, and
- facilitating or co-facilitating information sessions on relevant topics such as parenting, financial literacy.

NSW is also forming a partnership with TAFE NSW to offer community preparedness courses. Several courses are being considered for certification including Statement of Attainment Chainsaw Operations Trim and Cut, Statement of Attainment Farm Fencing and Statement of Attainment First Aid.

Investment in human capital to build the Society's (and other charities) capacity to respond

The Society in NSW has invested over \$100,000 of its own resources in an organisation-wide Disaster Preparedness and Response Project. The project aims to codify the Society's experiences from recent disaster responses and sets the organisation up to appropriately respond to future disasters. The result will be disaster preparedness and training modules for staff, members and volunteers across the state, as well as improved local coordination and readiness in a range of local areas. Again, this type of action does not currently attract government funding.

For the Society in NSW, this will be a high-resource endeavour. For smaller community and welfare-focused organisations, the reality is that they may not have the resources to even begin creating the time and space to improve their disaster readiness and create any frameworks around this. Yet when the time comes, we know from experience they will jump in and respond, supporting their communities as best they can. Administration of the funding pool needs to be flexible enough to support smaller local charities and organisations.

Investment in social and community wellbeing

It is essential that the purpose of funds is broad enough to support local responses that address the social impacts of a disaster, particularly health and wellbeing, as well as economic stressors.

From November 2019 to January 2021, the Society worked with The Salvation Army to deliver drought assistance payments and support to over 15,000 individuals through the Government's Drought Community Support Initiative (DCSI).

The [ANU](#) was commissioned to evaluate implementation of the DCSI and found:

- high levels of financial hardship.
- very high rates of significant mental health problems and of fair or poor self-assessed overall health status.
- the drought and pandemic combined worsened economic circumstances and the health of those working in drought-affected communities, and disrupted community gatherings, charities, events

- and sports. These disruptions exacerbated the isolation felt by many.
- a cash payment that could be used for any purpose provided people with flexible and valuable assistance
 - health services were the most commonly used services, with almost half (47.4%) of the respondents reported having used them in the past 12 months.

A flexible funding pool that ensures access to health and support services and that provides people with agency to determine what they need is essential to facilitating a community's recovery.

Investment in hard-to-reach groups

The Society frequently witnesses the devastating impact disasters have on the most vulnerable in our communities, such as those living with a chronic health condition or disability, or those who are socially isolated or whose first language is not English.

In NSW, the Society has partnered with the University of Sydney on a process called Disaster-inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction (DIDRR). The aim is to support more vulnerable people to develop a personalised and tailored emergency plan. A Person-Centred Emergency Preparedness (PCEP) tool is being used which guides a series of conversations about a person's readiness for a disaster, about the other people and things they rely on, about the risks in their lives, and then ideas on how to prepare for and manage the risks around them. Early results are very encouraging.

We refer the Committee to two recent reports: [Bushfire Appeal Report, 2022](#) and the [Queensland Disaster Relief Report 2021](#) (*Your generosity makes a difference*) for more information on the types of activities that require flexible and community-led funding responses to managing disasters.

Recommendations

Finally, the Society:

- welcomes the name change (to Disaster Ready Fund) and the allocation of up to \$200 million per year to natural disaster resilience and risk reduction.
- the Minister being able to review the legislated maximum annual disbursement amount at least every five years, and to adjust the amount via a disallowable legislative instrument.
- streamlined administrative processes.
- considers a broad funding purpose must be attributed to the Fund which
 - prioritises community-led solutions and favours local businesses and organisations that have a local presence in the first instance
 - enables appropriate health and social support services to be funded
 - supports the funding of activities that build community resilience
 - supports the funding of activities that ensure the most vulnerable in our communities are assisted
 - enables organisations large and small to skill up their volunteers and staff to respond in a timely, professional and quality-assured way in times of crises
- considers the Fund must be administered in a way that reduces red tape, is timely and is flexible in its approach.
 - For instance, this could include allocating funds to local councils and requiring them to establish consortiums or sub-contracting arrangements with local organisations. A tender process could also be conducted to create a standing panel of providers who should also be encouraged to subcontract or enter into other arrangements with local organisations.

Thank you for the opportunity to prepare this submission. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require further information.

Yours sincerely

Toby oConnor
Chief Executive Officer