

2009 BUSHFIRE COMMUNITY SUPPORT PROJECT

BACKGROUND

February 2019 marked the 10-year anniversary of the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires. The bushfires devastated communities across the five local government areas of Murrindindi, Mitchell, Yarra Ranges, Whittlesea and Nillumbik. One-hundred and seventy-three people died in the fires, many more were injured and lost their homes, and there was extensive damage to public and private property.

Recognising that significant anniversary dates can trigger feelings of distress from the disaster period, a joint funding application was submitted to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) in October 2018 for the 2009 Bushfire Community Support Project. This outlined a partnership approach to respond to the anticipated increase in mental health needs in the lead up to and during the 10-year Black Saturday anniversary. The project's objectives were to ensure appropriate and trauma-informed mental and community health supports were accessible to communities across the bushfire-affected regions, and that service providers were adequately supported during a time of heightened need.

PARTNERS (include logos)

- Australian Primary Mental Health Alliance
- Murray PHN
- Eastern Melbourne PHN
- Murrindindi Shire Council
- Goulburn Valley Health
- The Kilmore & District Hospital
- Department of Health & Human Services
- Nexus Primary Health
- Alexandra District Health
- Mitchell Shire Council
- Lower Hume Primary Care Partnership
- Hume Whittlesea PCP
- Outer East PCP
- North East Healthy Communities

METHOD

A working group was established to develop and implement a collaborative plan that provided a unified response to the 10th anniversary of the 2009 bushfires. Existing mental health services were provided with additional resources to respond to potential heightened needs, and access to these services was heavily promoted during the lead up and over the time of the anniversary. Available supports for the community were promoted locally through flyers, social media, and local events, and mental health clinicians were available to support the community at commemorative events.

Each partner organisation played a key role in providing support to bushfire-affected communities in a respectful and discrete manner that was responsive to the individual community's needs. Lower Hume PCP coordinated the dissemination of information and resources within Murrindindi and Mitchell shires, as well as to the other 3 PCPs within the affected areas – Hume Whittlesea PCP, Outer East PCP and North East Healthy Communities. The PCPs provided a vital link to the broader community and stakeholders within their local area to embed communication throughout communities using existing networks, contacts and local information.

OUTCOMES

The following outcomes have been achieved as a result of the 2009 Bushfire Community Support Project:

- Extensive, consistent distribution of information and key messages across communities, which increased knowledge of how to access services.
- Partners coordinated to attend a total of 28 local events, including 18 commemorative events, to promote referral pathways and offer support to over 2,000 people.
- 3 mental health first aid training sessions were provided and online training distributed across extensive health professional networks.
- 18 people were referred into mental health services. Referrals were predominantly from Murrindindi Shire.
- 56% (n=10) were via self-referral
- 28% (n=5) chose to access telephone support
- the remaining 13 people accessed local providers.
- 11% (n=2) were stepped up into PHN funded services for ongoing support following their 4 initial sessions.
- The referral process for the 2009 Bushfire Community Support initiative has been built into Health Pathways to support ongoing access to mental health services.

An extensive evaluation of the project is currently being conducted.