



## TITLE

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### **2009 Bushfire Community Support Project**

## BACKGROUND

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February 2019 marked the 10 year anniversary of the 2009 bushfires, also known as Black Saturday, one of Victoria's worst disasters. The bushfires devastated communities across 5 local government areas including Murrindindi, Mitchell, Yarra Ranges, Whittlesea and Nillumbik. 173 people lost their lives in the fires, many more were injured and lost their homes, and there was significant damage to public and private property.

Recognising that significant anniversary dates can trigger feelings and emotions from the disaster period, a joint funding application was submitted to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) in October 2018 which outlined a partnership approach to responding to mental health needs in the lead up to and during the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

The objective of the Bushfires of 2009 Community Support Project was to ensure appropriate and trauma informed mental and community health supports were accessible to support communities and service providers across the bushfire affected regions in response to possible raised need during and following the tenth anniversary of the 2009 bushfires.

## **PARTNERS (include logos)**

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Australian Primary Mental Health Alliance

Nexus Primary Health

Alexandra District Health

Murray PHN

Eastern Melbourne PHN

Mitchell Shire Council

Murrindindi Shire Council

Lower Hume Primary Care Partnership

Hume Whittlesea PCP

Outer East PCP

North East Healthy Communities

Goulburn Valley Health

The Kilmore & District Hospital

Department of Health & Human Services

## METHOD

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A working group consisting of key stakeholders was in regular communication to develop and implement a collaborative plan to provide a unified response to the 10<sup>th</sup> 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. Communication of support available to the community was promoted locally through flyers, social media, attending local events, webinars for health professionals and having mental health clinicians available to attend commemorative events.

Each partner organisation played a key role in providing support to fire 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 area – 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

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All partners worked cooperatively to add value to the 2009 Bushfire Community Support Project, preparing the workforce and supporting the community throughout a period of heightened emotions. As a result information was distributed extensively across communities in the lead up to the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary and consistency of messaging appeared to increase 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 and 56% (n=10) were via self-referral. 28% (n=5) chose to access telephone support and 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 under development.