



Victorian Bushfire Response Report

February 2010





Victorian Bushfire Response Report One Year On

When reflecting on the year that has passed since Black Saturday it is so hard to find the words that accurately describe the tragedy and devastation that the worst bushfires in Australian history brought to so many Victorian communities. Like most Australians, the images of the fires, the magnitude of the loss and the sense of sadness as a nation are still with me. We will not forget the people, towns and communities that were affected by the blaze; our collective national memory will forever carry the distress and heartbreak of Black Saturday.

Being amongst the people in communities affected by the fires gave me an insight into the enormity of the tragic events as they unfolded. But being amongst the people also helped me to feel and witness the true strength of the Australian community spirit. People from far and wide came together to aid those who had lost so much.

We understand that the depth of pain and grief of loss is impossible to measure or describe. Those who lost loved ones will never be the same.

The response to the bushfires was enormous; thousands of emergency service teams worked around the clock. Brave individuals and groups risked their own lives to save others and to limit property loss.

It was a privilege to be able to offer these people chaplaincy support as they gave their vital service to the community. Taking a personal approach and coming alongside people and providing emotional, spiritual and practical support is at the core of the work of The Salvation Army. Being there for people when they are in need is what we do, and I am proud we were able to be there during this critical time.

Our work also extended to assisting the people who lost so much. Our chaplains were on hand at all the relief sites, ensuring that people who needed someone to talk to found the support they needed.

During the last 12 months we have continued to stand beside communities affected by the bushfires. Please understand our depth of commitment to the people of Victoria. We are in this for the long-term. We understand a long-term and ongoing commitment is essential to help rebuild communities and lives.

The Salvation Army will remain connected with other service providers, governments, the business community and all whose desire is to work together over the months and years to come to restore life and vitality to these communities.

With the generous support of the Australian public, business community and people overseas we are able to stand beside people affected by the Victorian bushfires for the long term.

Commissioner James Knaggs
Territorial Commander
The Salvation Army - Australia Southern Territory

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7 February 2009

Thank God for the Salvos



On 7 February 2009, Australia's worst natural disaster unfurled across Victoria. On the day now known as Black Saturday, a series of fires ripped through towns, farmland and forest with an intensity perhaps not even matched by the Ash Wednesday events of 1983 or Black Friday in 1939.

In the lead-up to Black Saturday, a combination of consistently hot weather and low rainfall caused the state to be tinder-dry, even by Australian standards. A heatwave hit Melbourne in the last week of January, smashing weather records from the past 150 years, with three consecutive days reaching above 43° C.

Throughout the week prior, weather forecasts identified Saturday, 7 February 2009, as a day of scorching temperatures and extreme fire danger. Warnings from the State Government, Country Fire Authority (CFA) and other emergency services implored all Victorians to be on high alert. Several fires already burning across the state only heightened the levels of anxiety in many communities.

On Black Saturday Victoria experienced heat like never before, with much of the state posting the highest temperatures on record. Melbourne's temperature peaked at 46.4° C, eclipsing the previous mark set on Black Friday in 1939. Strong northerly winds battered the state for most of the day, until a cool change brought with it gale-force southwesterly winds.

Due to a range of catalysts, fires ignited over the day, putting further strain on firefighting resources already in action. As the cool change swept across the state, the long flanks of the fires suddenly became fronts and raced through containment lines. It was weeks before all fires were finally contained.

According to the CFA, 592 grass and bushfires and 263 structure fires were reported on Black Saturday. The major fires in terms of lives lost or significant damage were at Kilmore East, Murrindindi, Churchill, Delburn, Bunyip, Narre Warren, Beechworth-Mudgegonga, Bendigo, Redesdale, Coleraine, Horsham, and Pomborneit-Weerite.

In all, the fires destroyed or severely damaged 3400 Victorian homes and burnt out about 430,000 hectares of land. Most tragically, 173 people lost their lives. Many more were injured, and many psychologically scarred by the experience.

If there was one positive to come out of this disaster, it was the resolve of Australians to band together to support communities in need. Even with many donors themselves affected by the widespread flooding in Queensland, Australians opened their hearts to those affected by the bushfires. More than \$400 million, mountains of material aid and many volunteer hours were donated to various appeals.

Following the first signs of the magnitude of Black Saturday, The Salvation Army swung into action across Victoria, providing material aid, supporting emergency services, and providing emotional and spiritual support.

One year on, The Salvation Army is still hard at work helping individuals and communities recover and rebuild. While the needs of people have changed, the dedication to the mission by Salvation Army representatives has not. The future may not be clear for many people, but one thing is - The Salvation Army will be there for the long haul.





Melbourne Central Division

Melbourne Central Division responded to an initial call for chaplains at Whittlesea on 7 February 2009, and has been heavily involved in providing bushfire assistance since.

With Whittlesea becoming a staging area for emergency services fighting fires in the higher hills, support services quickly established themselves in the town, and the staging area and Whittlesea Tennis Club became service hubs in the weeks immediately following Black Saturday.

Melbourne Central Division initially provided 15 chaplains in response to the Black Saturday call, assisting fire survivors and emergency services personnel being evacuated or on rotation.

Numbers quickly swelled, with Salvation Army representatives available 24 hours a day at both the staging ground and Whittlesea Tennis Club for the first two weeks following Black Saturday. For the next month, Melbourne Central Division had more than 30 people operating out of the two Whittlesea sites.

Initially, Salvos assisted in the triage area, providing emotional support for the families of people being treated. Practical assistance in the form of food and water was also provided, with The Salvation Army's Emergency Services unit serving more than 21,000 meals to emergency services and bushfire survivors.

At the Whittlesea Tennis Club, Salvos and community volunteers sorted through the truckloads of material aid donated and prepared it for distribution. With great demand for material aid and the unprecedented generosity

of Australian communities meaning a constant flow of incoming donations, the ability to quickly sort these donations and have them ready for distribution was vital.

The Salvation Army promised bushfire communities it would provide ongoing recovery support, and in late February it took a major step in delivering this promise when local representatives opened the Whittlesea Bushfire Recovery Centre. The Centre became the focal point for recovery activities in the region, with volunteers supporting several full-time representatives.

Material and financial aid, financial counselling, networking and pastoral support are all coordinated from the Whittlesea Bushfire Recovery Centre. As well as providing services at the centre, Salvos representatives head to other towns and communities twice a week, providing support to residents of Kinglake and other nearby towns.

The Whittlesea Bushfire Recovery Centre will continue to evolve with the changing needs of the community and the Centre is expected to remain in operation at least to the end of 2010.

To assist local businesses get back on their feet, The Salvation Army has supported the establishment of the Kinglake Business Hub, a facility providing access to essential equipment such as phone, fax and computers. There is also capacity for local businesses to hold client meetings, plus access to business, legal, financial and employment advice. A community network of about 100 businesses who worked to establish the Hub now uses these facilities.

Initiatives like the Kinglake Business Hub help small communities once again become self-sufficient, and promote local economic growth.

Centre provides support for the long term

Whittlesea has been the epicentre of the bushfire response since it became an emergency services staging ground on 7 February 2009. However, the activities coordinated from the town have changed as the needs of people affected by the fires evolves.

Captain Simon Smith, a chaplain with The Salvation Army, has been based at the Whittlesea Bushfire Recovery Centre since August 2009. During his time there, he has witnessed the community's recovery continue on its long and winding road. He says the constant pressure from the recovery process is taking its toll on bushfire survivors. "We are now seeing people starting to hit the wall," said Simon.

Maintaining a constant presence has been imperative to building strong relationships with members of the community. Simon says being a familiar face has

encouraged affected residents to open up to him and other Salvation Army representatives. Simon and Libby Matkin, also based at the Whittlesea Bushfire Recovery Centre, both spend several days each week in other affected towns, as well as their work in Whittlesea. Libby provides financial counselling to residents who have requested support or have been referred to her.

The Whittlesea Bushfire Recovery Centre will continue to adapt to meet the current and future needs of the region. As well as continuing to provide material aid such as clothing, the focus has been switching towards further psychological and other expert support. The existing building will also continue to be refurbished to support a drop-in centre area, where people can come in to discuss their situation and needs, or just to chat over a cuppa.



Peter Sebbage, Doug Morgan, Libby Matkin, Lorraine Buckton and Captain Simon Smith taking a well-earned break at the Whittlesea Bushfire Recovery Centre

Northern Victoria Division

Covering more bushfire-affected land than any other Victorian division, The Salvation Army's Northern Victoria Division has relied on sustained input from representatives across its jurisdiction to ensure the Black Saturday recovery process has stayed on-track.

Northern Victoria Division responded to several major fires, including Kilmore East, Murrindindi, Beechworth-Mudgegonga and Bendigo. The fires in this region affected a mixture of farmers, retirees, townspeople and holiday homeowners, meaning the demands of The Salvation Army there were extremely varied.

The Salvation Army Overdale Rural Rehabilitation Centre near Kilmore was lost to the fires. For six years, it provided rehabilitation services to hundreds of young adults in a unique and picturesque setting. Fortunately, all residents were evacuated prior to the fire coming through.

The immediate fire response was to assist with relief and recovery centres, from major recovery centres in the region to smaller community facilities such as those at Wandong and Wallan. An emergency trailer was also provided to help support those fighting the Redesdale fires.

A Bushfire Recovery Centre was established at Seymour and immediately became the epicentre for Salvos work, particularly material aid. The large warehouse has been the distribution point for deliveries to residents in the Division.

Delivering material aid to bushfire-affected communities has also provided Salvos with another avenue through which to connect with people in need.

Outreach workers from the Seymour Bushfire Recovery Centre, assisted by representatives from Shepparton, operated across Hume, Mitchell and Nillumbik Shires. They continue to do so, providing support and advice. An important facet of their work is keeping communities up-to-date with information about the financial and material aid available to them, and the changes in laws and regulations that may affect their recovery.

Facilities were also acquired in Shepparton and Bendigo to handle material aid donations from across Victoria and around the country. Donations were sorted and prepared for transport to Melbourne receiving centres once they had the capacity, expanding the quantity of aid able to be stored and distributed by The Salvation Army.

To assist with the rebuilding of the 8000 kilometres of fencing destroyed, The Salvation Army joined the second stage of Samaritan's Purse's 'Project Recovery'. Nine fencing trailers packed with fencing tools and materials were funded by The Salvation Army and have been operating in the greater Bendigo and Marysville communities, as well as regions in other divisions such as Kinglake and Gippsland.

Seymour team keeps on truckin'

Since opening in the week following the February bushfires, The Salvation Army's Seymour warehouse has been the coordination point for much material and psychological aid in the Murrindindi and Mitchell Shires.

The site's operations, run by the region's Pathways Bushfire Recovery Program, support communities from Wallan to Alexandra, and as far south as Flowerdale.

Central to the work run out of this office is the material aid delivered twice weekly from the warehouse. Michael Doyle, warehouse supervisor at Seymour, said items in demand included fridges, kitchen appliances and beds. While demand fluctuates, around 30 requests for material aid are received each week. In the months following the fires, more than 100 requests were being received weekly.

The truck deliveries not only provide material support, but also an opportunity for residents getting their lives back on track to chat and receive further support. For this reason, Jodie Harris, a community development and outreach worker with Pathways, and other support staff often accompany Michael on the delivery rounds to provide emotional support and to connect survivors with additional services.

Visits to affected residents not only assist those people in their recovery journey, but also provide The Salvation Army's Pathways staff and volunteers with important information about the most pressing issues and needs. This information can then be used to determine future programs and activities to coordinate, as well as people to visit in future.

Despite the constant flow of material aid from Seymour since almost immediately following the fires, it is expected to continue to be coordinated from the Seymour warehouse until the end of 2010, depending on demand.



Michael Doyle delivers another order of material aid to a resident near Clonbinane

Eastern Victoria Division

From February to November 2009, Eastern Victoria Division helped more than 1500 people affected by the bushfires with material aid, emotional and spiritual support and financial advice in the Yarra Ranges, Warragul, Leongatha and Traralgon regions. Many of these people are still in regular contact with The Salvation Army and are receiving some form of assistance.

Covering burnt regions from Healesville to Gippsland, Eastern Victoria Division was quickly mobilised across several sites following Black Saturday.

The Salvation Army immediately began distributing material aid and offering emotional support in Healesville, even though the town was still under direct threat from fires to the north. As well as assisting people who had already been directly affected, the Salvos worked with many local residents under the immense stress of their homes being at risk.

The Salvos also immediately tended to fire-affected communities in Gippsland, with manpower and aid being coordinated from Traralgon. Many Gippsland survivors felt overlooked and alone following the fires. Salvation Army teams worked to establish and maintain a constant presence, ensuring these communities felt supported.

Distribution centres for material aid were quickly established in Healesville and Traralgon, providing increased capacity for their respective regions. Working from the distribution centres were outreach workers and volunteers, providing advice and support to communities.

To support existing Salvos and volunteers, extra full-time and part-time staff were employed, joining the teams at Healesville and Traralgon. They complemented new volunteers and others with specialist skills, such as financial management, providing people with practical assistance to enable them to continue their recovery.

One year on, outreach workers continue to service the Yarra Ranges and Gippsland. The assistance required has continued to evolve as the recovery process has progressed. Material aid continues to be provided. Many survivors who lost their houses are now in the rebuilding process, meaning greater demand for more expensive items, such as washing machines and fridges.

Emotional support continues as people work to find their feet. Relationships with The Salvation Army have been built on mutual trust, meaning that support is being provided on an individual basis. This personal approach to care is the most effective and comprehensive way of assisting recovery.



Western Victoria Division

Although its region escaped widespread damage from the Black Saturday bushfires, Western Victoria Division took an active role in assisting with the response.

The Division provided financial and accommodation assistance to residents affected by the Horsham fire, but fortunately the fire's magnitude when compared to other fires burning on the day was small, allowing it to respond to all cases immediately.

About 80 members of the Western Victoria Division assisted their colleagues in other regions in the period immediately following Black Saturday. Services ranged from coordinating and delivering material aid, to emotional support and chaplaincy.



The rapid mobilisation and supply of resources by Western Victoria greatly assisted other divisions, particularly in the early recovery phase. Not only did it increase the number of cases The Salvation Army was able to attend to, but also improved the response time for each case.

The Salvation Army Victorian Bushfire Appeal



The Honourable John Brumby, Premier of Victoria, with The Salvation Army's David Barker, Bushfire Recovery Manager

The Salvation Army launched its Victorian Bushfire Appeal immediately following Black Saturday and Australians responded immediately with generous donations to the appeal. Almost \$23 million was received nationally in general donations to the appeal. Additionally, further project-based donations were also received.

By 30 November 2009, expenditure of donated funds was almost \$10 million. With the requirement of immediate emergency aid having passed, donated funds are now being directed at medium-to-long-term projects.

The Salvation Army thanks all individuals and organisations who donated to the appeal.



Expenditure

Response: (February-May 2009)

- Material Aid Centres
- Financial Aid
- Catering for Emergency Personnel
- Chaplaincy & Pastoral Care

\$6,195,560

Recovery: (June-December 2009)

- Individual & Family Assistance
- Youth Projects
- Community Recovery Projects
- Small Business Care
- Fencing & Property Clean Up
- Advocacy
- Material Aid Management

\$3,656,683

Total Expenditure

\$9,852,243

Committed Expenditure (Future recovery activities)

\$14,147,757

* Figures current as at 31 December 2009

The road ahead

The Salvation Army has touched so many people and communities affected by the Black Saturday fires in the past 12 months, but there is still much to do.

In early 2009, the response was structured around providing immediate care and support. The needs of Black Saturday survivors since this time have evolved and with it, so has The Salvation Army's response. As 2010 progresses, Salvos will continue to meet the ever-changing needs of their respective communities.

The focus of The Salvation Army's projects has now taken a more long-term approach, designed to unify and rebuild communities still fractured by the fires. In conjunction with governments and other community groups, The Salvation Army is working hard to continue delivering on its promise to be there for the long run.



Support from the Sony Foundation has enabled implementation of the Salvos Youth & Music Project. Across 15 bushfire-affected sites, young people will be supported in the development of their musical knowledge and ability, with public performances providing participants with opportunities to unveil their talents to family and community. This will give youth a voice in the recovery process and a means of working through the emotions of this disaster.

Bushfire recovery centres at Seymour, Whittlesea, Healesville and Traralgon will continue to operate throughout 2010. From these centres, emotional and financial counselling, material aid and other services will be coordinated. Community Outreach workers, youth workers, financial and material aid workers and finance experts have been employed on 12-month, 24-month and 36-month contracts. Many of these people will be based at the bushfire recovery centres.

The Salvation Army has received requests for the funding of a number of projects identified by Community Recovery Committees and submitted to the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction & Recovery Authority (VBRRA). These community projects cover themes such as youth, CFA storage, small business recovery, counselling, community gatherings, arts projects, temporary playgrounds, and suicide prevention. The Salvation Army had already approved 35 of the 58 projects requested by December 2009. At that time, \$847,545 had been directed towards these projects. Further rounds of community-based project funding are under consideration in 2010.

The implementation of some localised and broader short-term projects will continue in special cases where deemed appropriate. In December 2009, The Salvation Army delivered a Christmas Gift initiative to people whose homes were lost or severely damaged in the Black Saturday fires. Around \$1.5 million was assigned to the initiative, which provided some respite at a difficult time for many families. Short-term projects such as the Christmas Gift initiative will be used to complement longer projects throughout the recovery stage.

From Territorial Headquarters in Blackburn, corporate volunteer groups will continue to be coordinated and allocated to communities who require them. In the period of September-December 2009 alone 357 days of volunteer labour were coordinated. The enthusiasm and willingness of corporate partners to provide staff to assist has been consistent, and volunteer groups will continue to contribute an important aspect of the recovery work in 2010.

In 2009, The Salvation Army provided funds to Samaritan's Purse to purchase nine fencing trailers, each containing all the equipment and materials needed to replace destroyed fencing. These trailers have been allocated across all affected areas, including Gippsland, Kinglake, Marysville, Bendigo and Kilmore. The trailers will continue to be in service for as long as there is demand.

Black Saturday has provided many lessons for all services involved, including The Salvation Army. Territorial Headquarters and the Victorian divisions will continue to review the response to the fires and use this information to fine-tune current strategies. Working in conjunction with other organisations to ensure synergy when responding to future incidents will also be an important step in ensuring efficient and effective responses.

The Salvation Army will work with bushfire survivors for the long haul. The road to recovery is still long, but the Salvos will continue to work with communities and individuals to assist them on their journey.





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