

Submission on the
(Draft) WA Community Disaster Resilience Strategy Discussion Paper
12th January 2022

The Western Australian Council of Social Service (WACOSS) welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the WA Community Disaster Resilience Strategy Discussion Paper.

WACOSS is the peak body for the community services sector in Western Australia and works to create an inclusive, just and equitable society. We advocate for social and economic change to improve the wellbeing of Western Australians, and to strengthen the community services sector that supports them. WACOSS is part of a network consisting of National, State and Territory Councils of Social Service, who advance the interests of people on low incomes and those made vulnerable by the systems that have been put in place.

WACOSS welcomes the development of a WA Community Disaster Resilience Strategy. In particular, WACOSS commends the State Government on the recognition within the discussion paper of the important place-based role of community services across the disaster continuum.

As noted by the fourth report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, “hardships from extreme events disproportionately affect those who are socially and economically disadvantaged”.¹ As such, ensuring the resilience of our communities necessitates that people who are overly exposed to the risks and impacts of disasters are directly engaged to coproduce and contribute to the initiatives needed to achieve the Strategy’s outcomes.

The following recommendations seek to support the sustainable and integrated implementation of the transformational shifts and change initiatives identified in the discussion paper. These issues require commitment to change across funding, systems integration and workforce development.

Broadening the emergency and disaster response system

The discussion paper makes explicit note of the need to broaden the emergency system to include peak bodies and key community sector partners. WACOSS understands the importance of this via our work with the state government throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the government’s response to both the Wooroloo Bushfires and Tropical Cyclone Seroja. WACOSS was able to leverage our broad community services network and strategic committees to provide government with advice across planning for, responding to, and coordinating across emergency events. Additionally, WACOSS sits on the State Welfare Emergency Management Committee, the newly established State Welfare Emergency Management Operations Committee, and the Recovery and Community

¹ IPCC (2007) *Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*, Working Group II Contribution to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

Engagement Sub-committee providing intelligence, strategic advice and contribution to mapping and coordination. This resource mapping is equally important to the discussion paper's recommendation of broadening Local & District Emergency Management Committees. Though we have demonstrated the importance of broad community resilience planning, the reality is that for many organisations planning for disasters and emergencies will take additional capacity and resources that may be a challenge to locate, particularly as they encounter increased demand for their services.

Without direct funding to provide these functions, it is not possible to guarantee the ability of peak bodies and community service organisations to fulfil these roles in a sustainable manner. Additional resourcing will be required to ensure our state system can make the changes outlined in the discussion paper and the proposed newly established State Welfare Emergency Committee – operations subcommittee.

Research undertaken by the ACOSS and Climate Risk Pty. Ltd in 2013, found that community service organisations in WA and NSW were less likely to have engaged in risk management, mitigation and transfer practices and were therefore less resilient to climate change and extreme weather impacts than organisations in other states.²

Community service organisations surveyed as part of the research reported high levels of vulnerability to the loss of buildings and service centres, with 50 per cent of respondents predicting their organisation would still be out of operation after a week and 25 per cent indicating they would be at risk of permanent closure.

Half of the organisations surveyed predicted that an extreme weather event would cause a short-term increase in the demand for services, with 30 per cent predicting that the increased demand would be maintained long-term. Importantly, those organisations that predicted that the demand would be maintained long-term were most likely to be providing services relating to housing and homelessness, emergency relief and advocacy services.

With most services around Western Australia already at or over capacity, the impact of increased demand or being unable to operate places people already experiencing significant hardship at even greater risk. Some survey respondents predicted that there would be groups at an increased risk of death if services were to fail, such as those experiencing homelessness, as well as people with high levels of reliance on services providers to meet their daily personal and health care needs.

From 2017 to 2018, the WACOSS Natural Disaster Resilience Program provided training for organisations to use the Resilient Community Organisations Toolkit developed by ACOSS. This training reached 157 participants from 79 community organisations and 15 local governments. As part of this training, 96 organisations from WA utilised the Benchmarking Tool on the ACOSS Resilient Community Organisations website, an online self-assessment tool that provides

² Karl Mallon, Emily Hamilton, Manu Black, Betsi Beem and Julius Abs (2013) [*Adapting the community sector for climate extremes: Extreme weather, climate change & the community sector –Risks and adaptations*](#), National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility

organisations with a resilience score and information to help them identify how to strengthen their organisation.³

44 per cent of those WA organisations that used the Benchmarking Tool reported that they knew well how to contact their vulnerable clients in disasters and emergencies, with a further 38 per cent reporting that they partially knew. The results showed that 35 per cent of organisations believed that the relevant staff in their organisation knew the formal structures that allow community organisations in their community to connect with local emergency services, with 39 per cent stating that their staff partially knew.

However, 45 per cent of those organisations reported that their organisation's board and management were either not aware or not very aware of the likely consequences of climate change on the frequency and severity of natural disasters in the future. 36 per cent reported that their board and management were not aware or not very aware of the phases and roles in managing risks to communities in disasters and emergencies.

Only 16 per cent reported that they had thorough plans in place for preparing for recovery, while 38 per cent stated they had no recovery plans in place. 48 per cent reported that they had some, but not all of the relevant policies and procedures for disasters and emergencies they potentially face, with 19 per cent reporting that they had significant gaps.

It is important to note that these local and regional community-based services are often called upon to play a critical role in disaster response, particularly during the recovery phase. For this response to be effective, it is crucial that they have the necessary knowledge, capacity and networks, and are connected with the formal disaster response plans and authorities. Changes in funding arrangements can mean that local authorities may not know who to contact, particularly as services are often not included in local disaster planning. Similarly, reductions in funding in real terms and changes in program arrangements can mean that services may not still have the capability to contribute as expected in disaster response and recovery.

WACOSS proposes that the relevant departments undertake a cost analysis in partnership with the community sector to identify the additional funding required to ensure our state system can broaden the agenda and membership of emergency management committees and associated activities.

The current state and national grant systems, such as Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements, National Disaster Risk Reduction funding and Preparing Australia, provide significant opportunities for communities to fund emergency and disaster continuum activities. However, these grants are both poorly understood by the community sector, while funders across these streams appear to also have limited capacity to understand, value and prioritise welfare and wellbeing outcomes. WACOSS believes additional capacity will be required to support broader community stakeholders such as community services to make appropriate funding applications. Likewise, funding bodies too, need to build their capacity to evaluate and measure projects which target welfare and wellbeing outcomes.

WACOSS proposes that formal arrangements be made for cross sector capacity building to ensure both community service applicants and grant funding bodies are in the best

³ ACOSS (2015) *Resilient Community Organisations*, <https://resilience.acoss.org.au/benchmark>

position to apply for and evaluate and measure projects which target welfare and wellbeing outcomes.

Integrating WA's approach to disaster and climate management

In addition to planning for natural disasters and emergencies, it is important to reduce the underlying drivers of risk, which are particularly related to poor economic and urban development policies and practice, degradation of the environment, land and natural resource management, poverty and inequality and climate change, as well as compounding factors such as demographic change, infrastructure and technology limitations, and unsustainable natural resource use. Together, these drivers and factors create and exacerbate conditions of hazard, exposure and vulnerability. Building community resilience and reducing exposure and vulnerability requires identifying and reducing the underlying drivers of risk within local contexts, thus creating a culture of both prevention and resilience. WACOSS would like to see the WA Community Resilience Strategy recognise and integrate across broad policy issues that exacerbate environmental, social, geographical, health, economic and urban development risks. Departments such as planning, finance, health, environment, transport, energy, local government, housing and others must also be involved. It is critical that all policy development be done in an equitable and inclusive manner, where the most vulnerable people are supported to reduce risk and build resilience, including those on low-incomes. These key policy areas include, but are not limited to:

- Climate and energy policies, including equitable emissions reduction mechanisms
- Transport policies, including electric vehicles and new low emissions transport
- Housing sector considerations, including the criteria for design, approval, and implementation of building projects, including public housing
- Concessions for low-income earners that meets people's needs, including for household bills and appliances, public and personal transport, and health and disability
- Environmental planning and natural resource management that recognises and includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's environmental stewardship and culture

WACOSS commends the State Government emergency management systems adaptation to the COVID-19 pandemic. The creation of the State Incident Coordination Committee has enabled a flexible mechanism to support WA to respond to the rapidly changing circumstances brought on by concurrent public health and natural disasters in 2020-21. Critically, the State Emergency Management Committee has reflected on the need to expand its operational functions and broaden representation to peak bodies and key community services. The proposed State Welfare Emergency Committee operations will be an opportunity for government to draw on community services peak bodies and organisations for intelligence and coordination.

The State Government must ensure that the WA Disaster Resilience Strategy is integrated across the state emergency management system, as well as other key policy areas. Through integrating the resilience, response and recovery systems, we will be preparing for disaster risk while simultaneously reducing the underlying risks and costs associated with recovery.

Workforce development and recruitment strategy

Traditional disaster management has largely been the domain of departments of fire and emergency services, Australian Defence Force and other frontline emergency services, while much of the welfare response outside of evacuation centres is undertaken by ad hoc volunteers and local community groups.

Climate-driven natural hazards are becoming more frequent, intense and compounding. Direct and indirect disaster costs in Australia are projected to increase from an average of \$18.2 billion per year to \$39 billion per year by 2050, even without accounting for climate change⁴. Natural disasters can incur significant and often long-term costs, including death, physical and psychological injury, damage to property, infrastructure, heritage and cultural sites, and adverse impacts on employment, education, community networks and public health. The capacity of communities and systems to be resilient diminishes as disaster risk increases.

It is now timely that we shift risk mitigation from a focus purely on property and lives to include risks associated with personal welfare and wellbeing. Recognising that a disaster resilience strategy is key to supporting communities to mitigate the risks and costs associated with responding to and recovering from disasters alone will not be enough. We will need integrated and coordinated approaches across the government and not for profit sector. This integrated approach will take new ways of working and capacity building across all systems and workforces involved in policy, climate, emergency and disaster. To build the required capacity, WACOSS recommends investing in a workforce development strategy that identifies the current workforce gaps across all relative systems, and seeks to fill those workforce gaps at every level, from strategy and policy through to operations and coordination, with a skilled cross-sector workforce.

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Integrating the WA Community Disaster Resilience Strategy with State Government emergency disaster response and management systems will be an important mechanism to ensuring that the discussion paper's outcomes are not left to be the achievement or responsibility of any one agency or community. Instead, it may serve as a mechanism for government to take a strategic approach that ensures these outcomes are mapped across to broader emergency and policy systems.

If you would like to discuss this submission further, please contact the WACOSS Community Relief and Resilience Coordinator Leela James at leela@wacoss.org.au or 6381 5300.

Yours sincerely,

⁴Commonwealth of Australia (2020) *Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements Report*. Accessed <https://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/royal-commission-national-natural-disaster-arrangements-report>

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