

PERSONAL SERVICES ASSISTANCE AFTER THE SYDNEY FLOODS OF AUGUST 1986

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

During the Sydney Floods of August, 1986, Allison co-ordinated and supervised the team of Personal Services Workers, who were to offer support, advice and information to the Flood Relief Assessment Officers and to the disaster-affected community. She has had direct experience as a Personal Services Worker in the Blue Mountains bushfires (1977) and the Windsor Floods (1978), and was Chairperson of the Personal Services Sub-Committee, Sydney Inner Division Disaster Welfare Co-ordinating Committee. (1980-81)

Introduction

In New South Wales, the State Disaster Welfare Plan provides the structure for disaster relief and the co-ordination of both government and non-government bodies. The plan provides for a Personal Services and Welfare Information sub-committee in each regional or local area, responsible for assistance to individuals, groups and communities. This can be of a personal (e.g. counselling, referral) and information (e.g. dissemination, publicity, meetings) nature. Separate sub-committees are responsible for accommodation, clothing, catering and registration in the immediate post-disaster phase.

The New South Wales Government also provides assistance to families who have suffered material losses in bushfires or floods, through a Relief Scheme, administered by the Department of Youth and Community Services and the Bushfire/Flood Relief Committee. The department is divided into ten regions throughout the state.

This report details the "Personal Services" response following the Sydney Floods in August, 1986. It highlights the diversity of staff used, given that the regional Personal Services and Welfare Information sub-committees were not in a position to organise this response themselves.

There was a total of 1,334 applicants for Flood Relief Assistance, representing a total of 3,563 individuals affected. \$5,261,646.00 was paid out to victims as grants, and \$254,602.00 as emergency assistance. The average grant was \$4,440.00 (Departmental figures).

Background

On 5th-6th August, 1986, Sydney, New South Wales, was lashed by heavy rainstorms and severe flooding ensued. There was extensive damage to property and five people were killed (one in Lithgow, which was also affected).

The major affected areas in the greater Sydney area were: Richmond/Windsor, Penrith, Blacktown, Toongabbie, Fairfield, Canley Vale and Chipping Norton/Moorebank.

The New South Wales Department of Youth & Community Services commenced

providing immediate assistance by the provision of emergency cash, material help, counselling/advice and information/co-ordination services.

In order to assess the huge volume of Flood Relief Assessment Officers (F.R.A.O's). The staff were largely drawn from the pool of applicants for Relief District Officer position, and came from a variety of Departmental positions and backgrounds, including Youth Work, Young Offender Services, Adoptions and Clerical/office positions. Hence their experience in interviewing distressed people was fairly limited, as were their





counselling, assessment and advocacy skills, and knowledge of the complex social welfare system, especially non-Departmental. Not all FRAO's were deployed to their usual working area, hence they were unfamiliar with local resources.

By 14th August, it was evident that staff resources were inadequate to efficiently assess the growing number of claims and possibly also it was recognised that some of the staff were overwhelmed by the range and severity of the problems they encountered and were taking a lot of time to complete assessments.

Negotiations between the Department and the Commonwealth Department of Social Security and the N.S.W. Department of Health, resulted in 16 workers being made available to this Department (Youth and Community Services) for Flood Relief duties. Their own departments continued to pay salary, with this Department meeting any additional expenses, e.g. overtime, hire cars etc.

The seconded workers, known as Personal Service Workers (PSW's), commenced duty on 19th August, when they attended a full day training program at the North West Metropolitan Regional Office of Youth & Community Services. The workers' usual occupations were social workers (10), community nurses (3, including 1 senior community nurse), clerk (1 qualified in the social services), psychologist (1), and welfare officer (1). One worker, (the clerk) from Bathurst, worked in that area and related directly to Bathurst Community Welfare Centre of Youth & Community Services. This report deals only with the Sydney workers.

Not all workers were available full-time until 12th September, when this arrangement concluded. Two workers elected to job-share.

Supervision and co-ordination of the team was provided by the author, a Departmental social worker, with direct experience as a personal services worker, in the Blue Mountains Bushfires (1977) and Windsor Floods (1978), and as Chairman of the Personal Services Sub-Committee, Sydney Inner Division Disaster Welfare Co-ordinating Committee, 1980-81.

Local Personal Services Groups

During the period when PSW's were concentrating totally on assessment work, they did not indicate that they were over qualified for the work, and as was expected, found that the assessment interview was a valuable tool for establishing a rapport whereby they were able to assist people with their grief/stress reactions. Several workers stated that it was valuable experience to have done the assessment work as it helped them in the referral work, and one commented that the assessment was stressful and was more comfortable in the usual counselling role.

Workload Management

The PSW's commenced field work on 20th August, from what became the Bass Hill Centre (temporarily located initially at Cabramatta Family Group Home). In order for them to gain experience immediately, they were all allocated assessments in the Fairfield area as at that time there was a backlog of work in that area.

Because of briefing and de-briefing meetings, the workers had only 1 1/2 effective days available to them for the rest of that week.

On 25th August, four workers from the Western Metropolitan area of Sydney were deployed to the Western Metropolitan Region administrative centre at Blacktown so that they could work in their own areas and be more effective. The remainder of the team continued to be based at Bass Hill.

It was planned that PSW's would relate to FRAO's who serviced specific CWC's ie. the four PSW's from the Liverpool area were teamed with the FRAO's servicing Liverpool Community Welfare Centre. Where PSW's were not local, they were deployed to the Fairfield and Cabramatta areas.

However due to the initial allocation of work in the Fairfield area and the fact that many assessments took more than one visit, there was a great deal of flexibility in the above arrangement, especially as PSW's followed up some people to the end of the secondment.

PSW's were also allocated to Interagency Meetings in their area, to provide information and feedback to local communities. All relevant interagencies were thus covered.

Supervision/Co-ordination

I was based at Bass Hill where the bulk of the team operated from. PSW's used the Bass Hill office for their clerical work, phone referrals etc and for work allocation and supervision. I was available at the centre almost full-time and it operated on a

drop-in model. As it was also the Centre for FRAO Co-ordination in the South West Metropolitan Region under Ms Margaret Holt, there was very close liaison between the two teams.

AS PSW's were constantly involved with the assessment process (ie. they continued to find people up to the fourth week of the secondment who were unaware they could claim), it was vital, for administrative purposes, that they were linked into the record-keeping administration.

I met with the PSW's at Blacktown each week except for the last week, to provide supervision, albeit infrequently. I attempted to maintain telephone contact with these workers at other times.

I held an initial briefing meeting of the whole team on 20th and 21st August; a meeting of the Southern PSW's on 25th August; and a planning/evaluation meeting of the whole team on 1st September, which also provided some debriefing to that point.

The two Personal Services Chairmen (Sydney Western and Sydney Southern division) as well as Ann East (Consultant) and Pam Brown (State Committee) were invited to PSW's team meetings, for information.

Debriefing of PSW's

This was handled via three avenues:

- (a) individual consultation - with fellow workers and supervisors;
- (b) PSW team meeting, an informal lunch at the end of the third week, and a final team meeting on 10th September;
- (c) participating in formal debriefing meetings for all field staff at Parramatta.

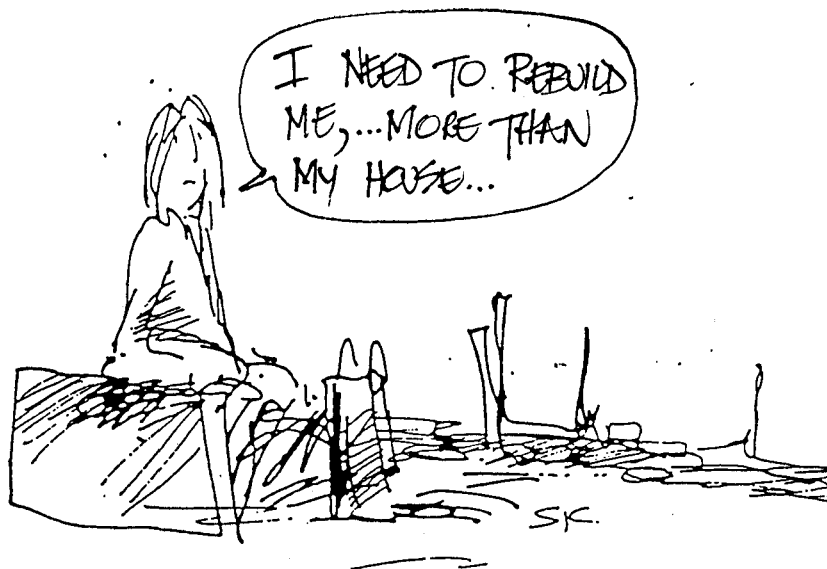
The team met again in October and November to provide information to members on continuing Flood Relief Assistance, allow further debriefing and obtain recommendations from members for future planning. It also provided a link for members to the Disaster Welfare Plan structure. They also were given certificates of appreciation from the Minister for Youth & Community Services.

Variance with role of PSW's in Disaster

Welfare Plan

This situation was the first that involved a large scale secondment of professional health and welfare staff from other government departments. It was also the first where the Department of Youth & Community Services has delegated the function of disaster relief assessments to non-departmental staff.

The role of PSW's envisaged in the Plan is one of counselling, advocacy, referral, community planning, information-giving and organising. Hence, the role in flood relief assessment was unique.



Some advantages were that information about needs and the assessment process was gained through direct access to affected families and could be fed back directly into the Department. Credibility with Departmental staff was also heightened. However there were some role confusion in this time consuming role and at times the provision of other help was impeded.

Overall, the opinion of PSW's was that it was valuable and worthwhile, and that to move on to selected referrals was an appropriate use of their skills and experience, once they had been linked into the FRAO system

Issues for Workers

The experience of the Sydney Floods highlighted the pressures placed on workers when roles are modified, extended or totally unfamiliar. There may be differences in tasks, routines, expectations, both from the community and organizationally, and in supervisory structures. The client group in particular will be quite different.

Given the difficulties faced by the disaster-affected people, the workers may feel helpless or guilty at not being affected, or may attempt to over-commit their time and personal resources. Regular supervision which recognizes the value of work done, and gives appropriate feedback and support will enhance the worker's capacity. Roles also need to be clearly defined with some involvement in decision-making processes. Particular issues can be planned for, such as dealing with the media, coming to terms with workers' own feelings and easing back into the usual work role.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

A number of recommendations emerged from this experience.

- (a) That Personal Services Workers should be in place early, preferably in a locality which is familiar, and be trained in disaster relief assessments although this is not a major task component.
- (b) Relief assessments should be completed by trained staff, experienced in handling crisis situations and in responding to unpredictable demands. Departmental psychologists, social workers and District Officers are seen as the most appropriate staff to make an assessment of people's emotional, social and financial states, and they would refer to locally activated Personal Services Workers for ongoing work.
- (c) Information systems need to be set up immediately so that disaster-affected people are aware of assistance and services available to them. Advice on particular issues e.g. the purpose of flood relief, how to dry out your home and how farmers and business people can liaise with the State Bank, needs to be widely distributed.
- (d) Guidelines of the Flood Relief Committee need to be reviewed to include items found to be essential, eg lawn mowers, fences for families of young children.
- (e) Personal Services Committees should be set up in each locality with the participation of government and voluntary health and welfare agencies to plan for post-disaster activities, and to set up a staff selection and training process.

- (f) Working conditions for all relief staff should be clarified and widely known.

TABLE 1

Analysis of Referrals

83 recorded referrals were analysed.

Family Structure

Married = 54%
 Single = 13%
 Widowed = 20% (nearly all elderly women)
 With Children = 46%

Assessment already completed by FRAO = 55% (possibly not all recorded)

Income

Age Pension	25%*
Invalid Pension	4%*
Unemployment Benefit	5%*
Supporting Parent Benefit	8%*
Special Benefit	1%*
Nil, i.e. lost due to flood	5%**

* Possibly not all recorded

** all self-employed

- (i) Nearly half of families seen were in employment, and were not the usual clients of welfare agencies.
- (ii) 25 people from 15 different ethnic backgrounds were seen, and the assistance of 5 interpreters were needed.

TABLE 2

Reason for Referral

(broadly defined categories)

- emotional upset, needing counselling, incl. stress, grief, loss	63%
- possible psychiatric disturbance (present or induced)	4%
- health problems	31%
- social isolation	13%
- material issues/needs	13%
- legal issues/needs	2%
- housing issues/needs	14%
- financial issues/needs (e.g. incl. Dept. Social Security)	20%
- marital problems	4%
- family problems (incl. child-at-risk)	2%
- drug/alcohol problems (present or induced)	4%
- insurance issues/needs/problems	2%
- small business loans	5%

Many referrals had more than 1 problem area.

TABLE 3

Referrals Out

(to other agencies, by PSW's)

Ethnic Health Workers	6%
YACS	5%
Community Health	33%
Dept. Social Security	7%
Legal Advice	1%
Drug & Alcohol Services	4%
Community Agencies (e.g. Home Care)	16%
Ethnic Community Groups	2%

Referred to PSW by FRAO = 67%

BOOK REVIEW

"WHEN DISASTER STRIKES"

by Beverley Raphael

A handbook for the Caring Professions.

Hutchinson 1986. Distributed by Heinemann Educational Australia.

Reviewer: Kerry Gartland

Disaster - For most people, this word conjures up images of destruction and devastation, ravaged bushland, the ruins of homes and farms, all depicted so vividly in the media.

Tangible losses can be easily tabulated, but what of the intangibles, the human cost.

It is the social and emotional realities of disaster to which Professor Beverley Raphael directs her attention in her latest book, "When Disaster Strikes". This is an excellent work, a powerful and impressive contribution to our understanding of what it is that happens to individuals and families within disaster-affected communities and to those who provide them with care and support. Professor Raphael sees disasters as events of high risk emotionally, with major implications in the provision of psychological and health services. Her suggestion that these services need to be linked in with locally-based networks and structures reflects a changing emphasis within disaster management that an affected community has a decisive role to play in managing its own recovery.

The nature of the disaster experience and the impact on those involved are clearly delineated. Numerous examples bring into sharp focus the pain, anguish and disruption that are the legacies of disaster.

"I dreamt of my home and my husband and all I had known and loved, and they were gone . . . some forever".

The *Canberra Times* (19th March 1971) gives an example of drought effects:

"Wool prices have crashed, graziers are deep in debt, and re-stocking is a financial impossibility for many of them. Outback towns are dotted with empty houses and shops; men who once worked on stations have gone to seek jobs in the cities. Even some of the station-owners have left their properties to seek work."

The resolution of problems in all these areas (i.e. post-disaster management) will demand great flexibility in a situation which is likely to be extremely dynamic.

"Report of Proceedings, Post Disaster Management Seminar", November 1981, Australian Counter Disaster College, P6.

"Will the wind come back again, Mommy? Will it? Will it?".

The importance of maintaining family and social cohesion is stressed, along with reinforcement of support and self-help networks. Also highlighted is the critical need to set up substantive support structures for emergency workers and for those involved in recovery activities in the following weeks and months.

Perhaps an area of interest for further studies could be an exploration of the link between individual and community recovery. This may well be outside Professor Raphael's focus of concern, but there are important implications to disaster planning and management within a community development framework.

Professor Raphael has drawn directly from her own considerable experience dating back to the Darwin cyclone and the Granville rail disaster. She has an impressive list of credentials, and is unique in her joint appointment as Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Queensland, and Director of Psychiatry at the Royal Brisbane Hospital.

"When Disaster Strikes" is a comprehensive and well-documented book which will undoubtedly be of assistance to both professional and voluntary disaster workers, and it is firmly based on the Australian experience.

It will broaden understanding of the effects of the disaster experience for those who have suffered loss, and will be of great interest to all who want to know how people and communities cope with such situations. As Professor Raphael notes in the preface, "this book is really written as a tribute to the courage, humanity, altruism and suffering that are so much a part of the disasters of human experience".

"We are thus led to conclude that the problems that decision makers must deal with are wicked and incorrigible ones, for they defy efforts to delineate their boundaries and to identify their causes, and thus to expose their problematic nature. The decision maker who works with open systems is caught up in the ambiguity of their casual webs.

Moreover, his/her would-be solutions are confounded by a still further set of dilemmas posed by the growing pluralism of the contemporary public, whose valuations of his/her proposals are judged against an array of different and contradicting scales".

(From: Rittel H.W. and Webber M.M. "Dilemmas in a Central Theory of Planning", June 1973 Pp 155-169).