

"KILLING THE FIRE DRAGON". RECOVERY FROM BUSHFIRES IN A SEMI-RURAL ENVIRONMENT

HELEN HILL

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Helen worked in the community of Macedon as a Community Development Officer following the Ash Wednesday bushfires of February 1983.

Her experiences reveal the challenges and difficulties of this work, and highlight some of the processes which families and communities will encounter in the post-disaster setting.

INTRODUCTION

Following the Ash Wednesday bushfires of 1983 it became apparent that communities affected by the fires would require additional resources and support at a local level in the task of helping people recover from disaster. Since experience has shown that communities recover best when they are able to plan and manage their own recovery, the State Government accepted a recommendation of the Department of Community Services, to fund through Local Government the short-term appointment of Community Development Officers, who would be



responsible to the Area Co-ordinating Committee. These individuals would be members of the affected communities with particular skills in helping people, families and the community to gain access to the

information, resources, services and supports they would need.

Community Development Officers

The employment of Community Development Officers was an innovative step, and the newly employed officers were required to assess needs, formulate recovery plans and seek program funding from the Area Co-ordinating Committee. Role clarification was a difficult and time-consuming task, in attempting to integrate the expectations of this committee and those of community members.

There were eight Community Development Officers employed in differing areas following the 1983 fires, mostly appointed a few weeks post-disaster. They quickly recognised the enormous tasks ahead and the hidden expectations of such a position. This was complicated by the fact that the people of the community with whom they were to work and initiate longer term community programs were all at varying personal recovery levels. Often credibility was only established when assistance was given to sort out a practical or emotional issue.

* This paper was presented to a workshop in Boulder, Colorado, U.S.A. entitled "Creative Approaches to Hazard Mitigation and Disaster Recovery", in July 1987.



Area Co-ordinating Committee

This was the Committee to which the Community Development Officers were responsible. It was comprised of representatives from Local Government, community organisations and the community processes and programs. This committee was chaired by a Disaster Co-ordinator, who acted as a linkage mechanism between the disaster affected people, the community, Local and State Government. It was acceptable to the local community as a powerful force in initiating and funding community projects and reinforced the power and capacity of the community to help itself.

The Community Setting

I worked in my own fire-affected community of Macedon/Mt. Macedon. Seven people had died, 450 family homes were destroyed, and many community facilities were no longer standing. These included all the churches, a school, community meeting halls, and both post offices, which were an important meeting-point.

Following the fire, there was a strong feeling of "them", being the Local Government, five miles distant, and "us", the fire-affected community. The community appeared to close ranks and there was a wonderful feeling of camaraderie.

The disaster had been a great leveller of social status and resulted initially in strong community cohesion. This was the first step in the healing process of recovery but only on reflection did we know this.

The Community Development Officer's Role

I was one of four Officers who were employed at different stages – the only one who was not "burnt out" and living in the affected area. To be an effective Community Development Officer I had to be familiar with the local area geographically and with the formal and informal social, friendship/family networks. In the 4-6 weeks after the fire, workers from specialist agencies in the city had been working with the people of our community. They appeared to be junior and inexperienced staff and often met with opposition or anger. There was some feeling that they came more because of their own personal agenda e.g. to conduct a survey, to write a paper for publication, than to be of benefit to the affected people. More senior staff with professional and personal competence were less able to be spared.

Most fire-affected people had multiple needs, and emotional or personal needs were initially of less importance than the solving of practical problems.

Upon employment I attempt to identify key community members who could give an



objective assessment of the community's needs at different stages. Initially these people were committee office bearers of school groups, senior citizen groups, service clubs, shop owners. As I became more accepted, contact became less formal and frequently took place in the street, at the school and the supermarket and on the bus.

On reflection the most valuable contacts I established were with the pub owners, barmaids, shop assistants, the postmaster, the bus driver, and the local gossip. Information was always treated as confidential, with some allowance made for personal points of view. These grass root contacts usually gave an accurate informal assessment of how people were coping with their personal recovery and as Community Development Officers we are able to gain a more objective assessment of the community's recovery.

The Macedon Ranges Reconstruction Advisory Committee

It was discovered that our community was a multi-skilled, richly talented community with many residents stepping forward to offer their skills on a voluntary basis, thus increasing the sense of community self management. This was evident in the formation of the above Committee (M.R.R.A.C.).

It was formed two weeks after the fires at a large public meeting and volunteers were sought to assist with the Committee's various Task Force Groups. The idea was to seek from within the community people with expertise in a particular area. The Committee felt that it was vital that the wishes of the local people should be heard when planning and restoration of their environment was undertaken. To enable efficient consultation to take place, local areas of perhaps twenty households, each with a community of interest, were numbered and meetings called "street meetings" were called for each of these areas. The street meetings for each area were widely advertised and were chaired by one of the members of the Reconstruction Advisory Committee, usually with one member in attendance. Community Development Officers always helped plan, attended and were responsible for minute taking at these meetings.

The format of the meeting was that the people were asked a number of questions which might affect their particular area. For example, what should be done about replanting their particular street, road alignment or reconstruction. Also, at each of these meetings general questions relevant to the whole community were asked. For example, what were their feelings about the re-establishment of public halls, or how long people should be

permitted to reside in temporary accommodation on their blocks of land before rebuilding; what they thought of tree clearance and other fire prevention methods to be undertaken.

Some months later, the area meetings were recalled to review progress. By this time ninety-eight street meetings had been held.

The Committee met frequently over a period of eighteen months, and passed on to the Local Government recommendations both from its own meetings and from the area meetings. Most of these suggestions were implemented. This Committee and the street meetings provided an opportunity for each community member to voice an opinion – a valued community asset – and increased co-operation and cohesion.

Emergent Groups

The spontaneous formation of a Resident's Self-Help Action Group occurred as a response to perceived poor management and the setting of inappropriate priorities. This group had difficulty in obtaining recognition from Local Government as a legitimate group within the community.

The issues which were raised and dealt with through this forum were those many residents considered had been neglected by the Area Co-ordinating Committee. Meetings attracted hundreds of people and lasted for many months.

As a Community Development Officer, I liaised between this group and the Local Government, and attempted to open communication channels, and deflect some of the criticism levelled at the overloaded Shire Staff.

The Action Group did act as an advocate for the people of the fire-affected area, and became a conduit for information from Government and Insurance agencies, with details on grants and reconstruction materials available. This flow of accessible and relevant information allowed people to feel that they were in control of their lives, and enhanced feelings of self-worth and well-being.

The Community Newsletter

The newsletter was used as a way of spreading information through the community. The Area Co-ordinating Committee provided the funding, and a Community Development Officer undertook the challenging task of collecting, collating and preparing the information. It was distributed to all community members including those who had left the community, temporarily or permanently.

Practical information was published on Government grants, local and municipal programmes, resources and materials available, the whereabouts of families and friends, photos of new buildings, how to

contact service providers and what services were available. More personal items in the newsletter included information on personal recovery, the likely feelings of people following disaster? articles on grief and stress management, and children's reactions.

Service Provision

The Community Development Officers often provided a valuable service in linking individuals and families with supportive networks, both social and professional.

Placement – of services often presented problems and raised community anger. Local Government tended to put services within the Shire Offices so that they could be easily managed, but in reality the services were rarely used if not located within the fire affected community where the people were. "Efficiency is not effectiveness" was proved time and time again. Services to the people must be placed where the people are, otherwise it is a waste of time, energy and funding.

One example of inappropriate placement was the introduction of the stress van, 3 days post-fire. This caravan sat, outside the milk-bar, with a psychologist inside waiting for clients. The sign inside the local pub stated "if feeling stressed, go to the stress van". No-one wanted this service when they were still trying to waterproof a leaking caravan, their only accommodation, and neither were they inclined to visit such a public service.

Timing – of services was always difficult to ascertain, as the needs of the community were constantly changing. Trying to predict what service would be most needed next became a Community Development Officer's nightmare, and they relied heavily on their grass roots contacts. These people could often describe specific difficulties people were experiencing and the Community Development Officers would then set about introducing a service to meet the need.

Stress counselling was more successfully introduced and received much later when people had time to think about their personal needs, and had already dealt with day to day survival problems. The enormity of the recovery task ahead was overwhelming for some individuals. Mental health teams were busiest twelve months post-disaster with families and children. They worked closely with some clients over a period of years and still received referrals three to four years following the disaster.

Successful services – introduced included creche facilities, after school programs, elderly citizens programs and a free bus service from fire affected areas to the closest town five miles away. The "have a break" meal scheme provided one free meal per person in temporary accommodation per week for sixteen

weeks. These meals are provided at local pubs and funded by the Salvation Army. A Drop-in Centre operated where volunteers ran activities for women until 4.00 p.m., and a Youth Worker was employed to supervise young children. Later in the evening teenagers came looking for "space", as life in a caravan was for "midgets". A study program for students to maintain their study commitments was started, three secondary schools provided study time, a meal and transport home. This was also funded by the Area Co-ordinating Committee.

"Killing the Fire-Dragon"

Three months post-disaster, emotional problems in children were becoming evident. Some were not sleeping, afraid of fire, and reluctant to be separated from their families.

A Community Theatre group from the City of Melbourne asked to work with the fire affected people, families and children. After much preparation and rehearsal, a community theatre production called "Killing the Fire Dragon" was performed in the open air to hundreds of local residents, and with the participation of many community members. "Killing the Fire Dragon" was a cathartic experience and was a practical expression of the fears that both adults and children had as a result of their experiences. Many teachers and parents reported that there was significant allaying of the children's anxieties and that the experience had a calming effect.

Some community residents found they were able to pick up their creative skills again and felt a return to normality. Community Development Officers assisted with the production of "Killing the Fire Dragon" – a rewarding experience and some light relief.

Withdrawal of Services

A major decision for the Community Development Officer was when to withdraw their services, knowing that this would have some affect on local participation in decision-making.

Twelve months post-disaster, most of the community had coped well and were coping well. They considered the disaster as probably the most major milestone/life experience they would ever have. Whether these members of the community have recognised and addressed the emotional affect of the disaster on their lives will probably not be known until another crisis situation occurs. We found that many people had not dealt with previous loss, grief or wartime experiences and before attempting to understand this latest experience needed to talk about previous unresolved feelings.

Some families had poor coping skills pre-disaster and the disaster experience had only aggravated their situation. These people remain dependant upon the community support network years later.

Conclusion

It is nearly five years since those bushfires and on most days people can be reminded of the disaster.

A person who lost everything may still look for a precious or an everyday possession. The loss of a treasured garden is a constant reminder of loss, as are the blackened tree trunks and the deformed erratic re-growth on the trees. Favourite

picnic spots have gone from the mountain. Traditional activities like collecting pine cones from under exotic cedars for Christmas decorations have gone. The neighbour who lived next door pre-disaster and who was unable to return to the blackened area, has gone. Even today people still remember vividly the details of the night that changed their lives and the traumatic recovery they endured.

Anniversaries are remembered, sometimes assisted by the rarely welcome media, but often commemorated as a private occasion.

As a Community Development Officer living and working in my own community, I found the post-disaster phase a rewarding and unique working experience which provided me with a rich life experience.

"THE OUTREACH PROGRAM"

As described in other articles, recovery activities following disaster are many and varied. One system developed in Victoria as a way of making contact with community members in a disaster area is called *The Outreach Program*. This model was developed initially in the Warrnambool area and was put into practice just seven days following the fires. It involved immediate community contact, acquired vital information on who was affected and in what ways, practical requirements, how people were coping, immediate plans, and provided a basis for the management of incoming resources and support services.

The basic objectives were to:

- (a) offer personal support and practical assistance to all those in the disaster affected area
- (b) ensure that people were aware of and had access to the services provided, and to assist with applications
- (c) arrange appropriate referrals for those who seemed in need of specialist services
- (d) establish a link between the people and the more formal recovery structures e.g. the Area Co-ordinating Committee
- (e) provide a data-base of information to

assist with the planning of appropriate services.

Outreach programs were established in all areas affected by the Ash Wednesday fires. Within six weeks 3,500 families had been visited, and follow-up programs were conducted over the next 6 months. The program was most effective when it was integrated with other community activities, and contributed significantly to the successful recovery of the community.

The Rev John Hill
Uniting Church Minister,
formerly resident in the
Warrnambool Fire-Affected
Area 1983.

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