

15 September 2023

Senator the Hon Murray Watt
Minister for Emergency Management
PO Box 6100
Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600Via email: NationalResilience.Consultation@homeaffairs.gov.au

Dear Minister,

APS response and offering to the Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) is pleased to provide services to support and feedback on the Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper. The impacts of climate change are a particular interest of the APS, as detailed in our [Position Statement: Psychology and Climate Change](#). Psychologists are experts in human behaviour and use evidence-based psychological interventions in many aspects relevant to the mitigation of and adaptation to the effects of climate change.

The APS has an established history of working collaboratively with Australian federal, state and territory, local, and non-governments agencies to help address important social, emotional and health issues of local communities affected by disasters, ensuring equitable access to mental healthcare. We would like to offer our expertise and extend our collaboration in supporting the development of Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response to ensure that its implementation is impactful and sustainable.

The link between climate change, disasters, and poor mental health outcomes

Evidence shows that mental ill-health affects not just those who directly experience a disaster, but also the frontline workers and first responders who care for and support them.^{1, 2} Psychologists have highlighted the importance of taking preventative action to minimise disaster-related risks and intervening early to support mental health, in addition to disaster response and recovery. Yet prevention and early intervention are not being funded appropriately in Australia, with the Productivity Commission finding that only 3% of taxpayer funds are allocated towards these activities.³

¹ Benedek, D. M., Fullerton, C., & Ursano, R. J. (2007). First responders: Mental health consequences of natural and human-made disasters for public health and public safety workers. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 28, 55–68. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.publhealth.28.021406.144037> 26.

² Hilbrink, D. (2022). The role of social connectedness in protecting first responder mental health and wellbeing. *Australian Disaster Resilience Knowledge Hub*, 37(4), 65–68.

³ Productivity Commission. (2015). Inquiry report—Natural Disaster Funding. <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/disaster-funding/report>

There is a growing need to scale up mental health supports to increase resilience building and preparedness in disaster-prone communities in response to the increasing number of severe climate-related events occurring in Australia. Additionally, intersectional issues make certain communities and groups of people more vulnerable to the effects of climate related emergencies and disasters. The long-term impacts on the well-being of First Nations people as disaster events increase are yet to be fully understood. Impacts on rural, regional and remote communities are heightened because they already experience a disproportionate lack of an appropriately qualified mental health workforce⁴. This is also associated with a lower capacity for disaster resilience⁵ exacerbating the need for psychologists to support response readiness and resilience in these areas.

While we acknowledge the primary role of states and territories in emergency response, the Commonwealth needs to build longer-term mental-health capacities and capabilities. We advocate for urgent action if we are to meet the unprecedented challenges we face and manage increasingly complex, cascading and concurrent national crises.

How can the APS support disaster readiness, preparedness and resilience?

The APS can support the Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response through providing assistance to the Commonwealth, National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), the states and territories, local government and volunteer organisations, charities and NGOs.

The APS can provide two streams of support:

- 1) Leveraging its membership of 27,000+ psychologists, the APS can deliver mental health resilience building, readiness and preparedness training and workshops for frontline and emergency workers and vulnerable communities across the country.
- 2) Utilising the Disaster Response Network (DRN) – a network of 700+ APS psychologists who volunteer their time and expertise – the APS can provide targeted and evidence-based psychological support to frontline and emergency workers.

Members of the DRN have been assisting Australians through a multitude of disasters since it was first set up following the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009. During the 2022 – 2023 financial year the DRN provided 506 disaster/emergency response deployments in New South Wales, Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria, and Western Australia.

ACIL Allen's analysis shows a return on investment of at least \$3.45 for every dollar spent on the APS's successful Disaster Response Network (DRN) supporting the mental health of frontline and emergency workers and the communities they support.

The APS can support the Commonwealth and the States and Territories in building community resilience and capability, so they are better able to respond to and recover from national-level crises. The APS program can provide Australians with the psychological tools and resources to be resilient to climate change with prevention and early intervention programs aimed at building mental health resilience, enhancing coping strategies, and providing a sense of optimism for the future.

The APS looks forward to working collaboratively with the Department of Home Affairs and NEMA in developing the Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response. If any further information is required from the APS, I would be happy to be contacted through my office on (03) 8662 3300 [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely

Dr Zena Burgess FAPS FAICD
Chief Executive Officer

⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2022). Mental Health: Workforce. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/mentalhealth/topic-areas/workforce>

⁵ Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements. (2020). Report. <https://naturaldisaster.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/royal-commission-national-natural-disasterarrangements-report>