



Australian Red Cross Submission: Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response

September 2023

About us

Established in 1914 and incorporated by [Royal Charter in 1941](#), Australian Red Cross is auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field. We have a unique humanitarian mandate to respond to disasters and emergencies. This means governments can benefit from a trusted, credible, independent and non-political partner with local-to-global networks, who will work to implement humanitarian goals in a way that maintains the trust of governments and Australian society as a whole.

Australian Red Cross is one of 192 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies that, together with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), make up the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) – the world’s largest and most experienced humanitarian network.

The Movement is guided at all times and in all places by seven [Fundamental Principles](#): Humanity, Impartiality, Neutrality, Independence, Voluntary Service, Unity and Universality. These principles sum up our ethics and approaches and are at the core of our mission to prevent and alleviate suffering.

We remain neutral, and don’t take sides, including in politics, enabling us to maintain the trust of all and to provide assistance in locations others are unable to go. Volunteering is in our DNA, and everything we do is supported by thousands of volunteers, helping respond to humanitarian needs and issues in their own communities. All our work is inspired by the principle of Humanity, seeking always to act where there is humanitarian need.

Here in Australia, our core areas of expertise include Emergency Services, Migration, International Humanitarian Law, International Programs and Community Programs.

Highlights:



20,000+
members and volunteers
acting for humanity



131,000+
Australians supported
during 42 emergency
activations

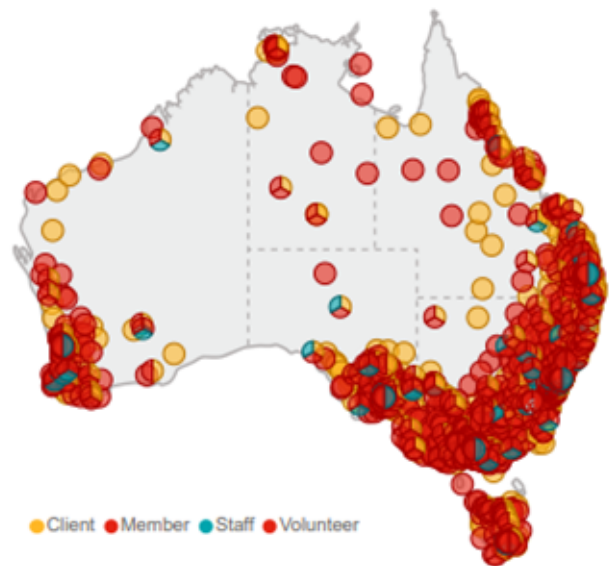


225,000+
social support hours
delivered



37,500+
people supported through
emergency relief payments

Location of Red Cross people and clients



Executive Summary:

As Australia's longest standing disaster agency and the only one working across all stages of the disaster management cycle across the country, Australian Red Cross has a strong interest in ensuring people and communities are resilient at all stages of all disasters. To further that interest, Australian Red Cross has responded to an open call for submissions on Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response.

In the pages that follow we outline the compelling need to focus not only on the infrastructure of response, but also on the psychosocial toll disasters take on people and communities. This toll is often forgotten and the cost is equivalent to the physical devastation of a disaster ([Australian Business Roundtable, 2021](#)). Ensuring people and communities are at the centre, before during and after disaster is a critical part of reducing Australia's impact to future disasters. This should include investment in a skilled workforce trained in psychosocial support and the development of social capital within communities to better prepare them for future disasters. Australian Red Cross is currently undertaking similar work and sees it as a strategic opportunity for Government to invest in, given the disasters the country is already facing, and the worsening disaster landscape expected due to climate change. Such a workforce should be able to address both the immediate and longer term needs of affected communities in a more sustainable way.

Australian Red Cross uses this opportunity to reiterate a number of recommendations made in recent publications and submissions that are relevant to this inquiry. These are drawn from our submission to the Independent Review of Disaster Funding, our submission to the Productivity Commission's review of the Future Drought Fund, and our submission to the Select Senate Inquiry on Disaster Resilience. The recommendations are summarised below and explored in greater detail throughout the document.

Summary of recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Australian Red Cross strongly recommends a commitment to acknowledging the existing evidence, practice, and expertise that exists within and across the emergency management sector, including community focused-organisations, and to exploring ways to adapt, streamline, invest in and scale up response, recovery and resilience building capabilities across the disaster sector.

Recommendation 2: Provide standing, core capability funding to the Australian Red Cross to deliver end-to-end psychosocial support across all phases of emergency planning and management, reliably supporting people and communities: before, during and after disasters.

Recommendation 3: In light of more frequent and severe disasters, and their significant and often cumulative impact on communities, increase the amount of funding available for communities to prepare, respond and recover at the local level, based on local strengths.

Recommendation 4: The psychosocial impacts of disasters are often misunderstood and underacknowledged, therefore we recommend that psychosocial wellbeing be prioritised and integrated into emergency management considerations through research, investment and campaigns that address this gap.

Recommendation 5: To ensure that humanitarian needs are met during disasters and to reduce trauma, support the enhancement and maintenance of Australian Red Cross' skills, capacity and leadership to enable rapid needs assessment and support cross-sector convening.

Recommendation 6: In order to ensure inclusive and meaningful engagement of all community members, ensure funding and programming is directed to a diverse range of communities and community-members, particularly for First Nations communities, people on temporary or insecure visas and other groups that have been marginalised or face barriers to access.

Recommendation 7: To empower a diverse range of people and promote self-efficacy, identify and leverage the strength of diverse communities, including First Nations communities in developing approaches to disaster risk reduction.

Recommendation 8: In recognition of the long-term nature of disaster recovery and the complexity of disaster impacts, provide funding that supports disaster affected communities that is guaranteed over three to ten years and maintained even after disaster conditions have eased to allow people to recover and build their resilience to future shocks and stresses.

Recommendation 9: Allow community voices to be central and to direct funding in order to maximise impact, acknowledging that resilience is often built through harnessing and acting on community ideas.

Recommendation 10: In light of the increase in compounding and cascading disasters, ensure funding is ongoing, long-term and multi-hazard in order to meet the psychosocial needs of people and communities.

Recommendation 11: To ensure access and equitable distribution of funding, ensure administrative processes are as streamlined and simple as possible and consider the needs and limitations of communities.

Recommendation 12: To facilitate self-determination and empower communities to implement localised solutions, allow fund recipients (in partnership with communities) to more strongly influence how funds are utilised locally.

Recommendation 13: To ensure all people in Australia have access to critical support, eliminate residency-based eligibility requirements.

Strengthening the disaster sector

1.0 As we prepare for a future of more severe, more frequent and compounding disasters because of climate change, it is critical to ensure that the disaster management sector, including the Australian civil and volunteer groups, and not-for-profit organisations that are critical contributors at a local, state and national level, are as coordinated and supported as possible across jurisdictions, centred on the needs of individuals and communities.

1.1 This sector is diverse and there are numerous agencies, organisations and community groups that work alongside Australian Red Cross in supporting communities to prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters. However due to the continued volume, scale and complexity of disasters, we are seeing increasing strain across the sector, from both a capacity and funding perspective.

Recommendation 1: Australian Red Cross strongly recommends a commitment to acknowledging the existing evidence, practice, and expertise that exists within and across the emergency management sector, including community-focused organisations, and to exploring ways to adapt, streamline, invest in and scale up response, recovery and resilience building capabilities across the disaster sector.

Augmenting the Expertise and Role of the Australian Red Cross

2.0 The Australian Defence Force (ADF) plays an important role in responding to domestic disasters, but this should only be used as a last resort. There are existing workforces such as the 25,000-strong volunteer, member and staff-based workforce of Australian Red Cross, positioned across the country. A proportion of these are poised to take on a greater role in supporting communities at all stages of disaster. With greater investment from the Commonwealth, a wellbeing workforce, operated by Australian Red Cross could be augmented and strengthened to support people in Australia through major shocks and hazards and complement the other agencies working across this space. An Australian Red Cross wellbeing workforce can provide end-to-end, specialised psychosocial support and psychological first aid to at-risk and disaster impacted communities that would complement the boots-on-the-ground, practical function provided by response organisations like Disaster Relief Australia.

2.1 The limitations that make the ADF a challenging workforce to deploy, make Australian Red Cross uniquely positioned for the psychosocial aspect of this work:

- **Cost:** As disasters increase in scale and complexity, it is critical there is an efficient and effective means to sustainably respond and resource these emergency events. Former ADF chief Chris Barrie was quoted as saying the ADF are “the most expensive people you can buy to do this kind of work” ([The Guardian, 2021](#)). According to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements report, “Assistance from the ADF has the potential to involve significant financial costs. Defence indicated that the cost incurred as part of Operation Bushfire Assist 2019–2020 was approximately \$68.6 million.” Redirecting that funding to resource civil, volunteer and not-for-profit organisations will be a far more efficient use of limited federal capital. Australian Red Cross is well positioned to play a significant role in responding to domestic disasters and addressing the psychosocial needs of people and communities – preventing damage to

people, livelihoods and communities.

- **Expertise:** Requisite expertise in psychosocial wellbeing, building social capital and cohesion and disaster resilience, response and recovery are critical. Preparing for, responding to, and recovering from a disaster impacts the whole of community. It is critical these activities are undertaken based on evidence and best practice, with a community-led approach. Australian Red Cross is the only disaster agency that works at all stages of disaster, across all states and territories and is uniquely positioned to play a lead role in scaling up the solution with our comprehensive set of programs that support individuals, households, and communities across Australia to prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies and disasters. Our best-practice programs are drawn from local and global evidence as well as more than 100 years' experience in emergencies and disasters in Australia.
- **Longevity:** Recovery is a long journey. People often need support for years after a disaster. Research shows that impacts are felt by individuals and communities affected by disasters for decades. For example, 21% of people affected by the 2009 Victorian bushfires are still experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety or depression, more than a decade later (University of Melbourne, 2021). Given that climate change is resulting in increased compounding and cascading disasters, Australia needs an organisation that will be there. Australian Red Cross is experienced in, and committed to, standing with communities throughout their recovery journey, being led by each community's unique and individual needs.

2.2 Australian Red Cross is a volunteer-led organisation, with volunteers delivering almost all services in Australia alongside professional staff. Teams are supported by thousands of highly trained and skilled volunteers who have a common motivation to help others, as they take humanitarian action in their local communities.

2.3 Because Australian Red Cross volunteers are embedded within their own communities, a voluntary service and community-led approach is foundational to the way we work. Australian Red Cross volunteers, located around the country, also live and volunteer in some of the hardest to reach places. Australian Red Cross is well known and recognised in the community and when our volunteers wear the Red Cross emblem, communities trust us to be that independent agency that does not take sides, supporting people in greatest need, without discrimination.

2.4 Australian Red Cross' evidence-based Emergency Services model and associated program ([IASC, 2022](#)) reduces the psychosocial impacts of disasters, emergencies and a changing climate on people and communities. Our work recognises the varied, complex, and long-term impacts that disasters and other crises have on people's lives, including their health and wellbeing, quality of life and social connections. Australian Red Cross' emergency services model before, during and after disasters is underpinned by six foundational concepts:

- **All-hazard:** Focussing on the consequences of all disasters and other crises on people, rather than on the cause.
- **People-centred:** Seeing people as a resource we can listen to and learn from.
- **Strength-based:** Recognising that people and communities have inherent resilience that can be developed and fostered.

- **Trauma-informed:** Being mindful of potential trauma histories of the people and communities we work with to provide an increased sense of safety and avoid re-traumatisation.
- **Culturally respectful, inclusive, and accessible:** Ensuring our programs and activities are culturally relevant, accessible and consider individual cultural strengths and needs.
- **Evidence-informed:** Australian Red Cross engages in evidence-informed practice that incorporates the best available research with practitioner expertise, reflective practice and lived experience.

2.5 Like other National Societies in the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, Australian Red Cross is auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field, meaning we have particular roles and responsibilities, in peacetime and during armed conflict, embedded in international and national instruments. In Australia this mandate is outlined in the Royal Charter, which includes supporting the government in the delivery of our shared obligations as well as activities relating to emergency management, international humanitarian law, restoring family links in situations of conflict and other emergencies, and health and social services. Through all this we are guided by our [Fundamental Principles](#). Australian Red Cross is already embedded in formal emergency management arrangements at all levels of government across Australia.

2.6 Our reach is stronger for having ongoing partnerships with key national organisations who support our work including the ABC and Australia Post, and we also have regular connection with key agencies such as Disaster Relief Australia and the ADF. We also contribute to key strategic disaster frameworks such as the Sendai Framework, the Disaster Risk Reduction Framework, the Strategy for Disaster Resilience and the Disaster Recovery Framework.

2.7 We agree that a whole-of-society effort is needed to build national capacity and resilience, as well as to enhance the Commonwealth's ability to support states and territories as primary first responders. As a humanitarian organisation, Australian Red Cross is a key player and could play a significant role in supporting this whole-of-society effort through our unique mandate, our embedded workforce of volunteers and staff and our national footprint, including regional, remote and high-risk communities.

2.8 Australian Red Cross stands ready to play a lead role in scaling up our model for psychosocial wellbeing across the disaster cycle.

Recommendation 2: Provide standing, core capability funding to the Australian Red Cross to deliver end-to-end psychosocial support across all phases of emergency planning and management, reliably supporting people and communities: before, during and after disasters

Considerations for the systematic changes that would strengthen Australia's response and recovery

There are some evidence-based considerations Government should consider before establishing new policy and building new capabilities:

3. Prioritisation of pre-disaster resilience: A fundamental element in effective response and recovery is proactive, pre-disaster preparedness undertaken by individuals and their communities. The current cost of disasters in Australia is approximately \$38 billion per year

([Australian Business Roundtable, 2021](#)), 97% of which is spent after a disaster occurs, only 3% is spent before disasters ([Australian Productivity Commission, 2015](#)). Australian Red Cross recommends making 10% available for building resilience before disasters (approx. \$3.8 billion). In 2020, using similar logic, Australian Prudential Regulation Authority recommended \$3.5 billion per year be spent on building resilience to climate driven disasters. Evidence and Australian Red Cross experience shows the current rate at which disaster resilience and recovery are funded is a fraction of what is needed ([United Nations, 2022](#)). While this has improved recently, additional investment in pre-disaster resilience measures is still required.

Recommendation 3: In light of more frequent and severe disasters, and their significant and often cumulative impact on communities, increase the amount of funding available for communities to prepare, respond and recover at the local level, based on local strengths.

4. Understanding the importance of psychosocial wellbeing: The internationally recognised psychosocial impacts of disaster are significant and often linger long beyond the time it takes to repair physical infrastructure. However, they are not well recognised within the emergency management sector or broader community, which means that mitigating or addressing psychosocial harms arising from disasters are not prioritised in policy or funding. It also means that the emergency management sector misses opportunities to minimise psychosocial impacts throughout activations. Equally there are many people in society who are marginalised as a result of their circumstances, their health and wellbeing status, their personal and financial security, their connection to community and Country, and their access to information and knowledge. There is a misconception that the ‘soft’ skills required for supporting psychosocial wellbeing (psychological first aid, referrals, support navigating a complex service eco system) are not a critically important part of disasters. But in the response phase, the work we do might be compared with an ambulance arriving on the scene of an accident. The acute care we provide in the early stages will result in measurably less damage. The same is true in disasters – when people feel supported, and part of a bigger whole, even while experiencing the worst trauma of their lives, they are more likely to recover faster and more wholly than without that support ([IFRC, 2019](#)).

Recommendation 4: The psychosocial impacts of disasters are often misunderstood and underacknowledged, therefore we recommend that psychosocial wellbeing be prioritised and integrated into emergency management considerations through research, investment and campaigns that address this gap.

5. Need for increased streamlining and coordination within emergency management sector: As we prepare for a future of more severe and more frequent disasters because of climate change, it is critical to ensure that emergency management systems are as coordinated as possible, centred on the needs of individuals and communities, informed by evidence, and ensuring no one is left behind. A number of the recommendations in the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements should be considered and implemented, particularly those on harmonisation of data governance, standards and sharing, as well as delivery of services and financial assistance – especially promoting recovery services that facilitate resilience.

Recommendation 5: To ensure that humanitarian needs are met during disasters and to reduce trauma, support the enhancement and maintenance of Australian Red Cross’ skills, capacity and

leadership to enable rapid needs assessment and support cross-sector convening.

6. Disasters do not affect everyone equally: Across Australia we need to prioritise an inclusive approach, so that marginalised people and those at risk can benefit in culturally safe, systematic and meaningful ways. Some individuals or communities face particular barriers to developing their own resilience. These may include barriers around their adaptive capacities: namely, knowledge, security, wellbeing and connection. The Sendai Framework highlights a number of groups including women, children and young people, people with disabilities, older people, Indigenous people and migrants who all may also be excluded from opportunities to strengthen their resilience. Many of these challenges are cross cutting. It is important that targeted approaches are developed in partnership with these groups to maximise opportunities to build resilience. This is particularly relevant, as we know that vulnerable groups are likely to experience the impacts of disasters more severely than those who have greater access to resources and strong social capital ([Australian Red Cross, 2021](#)).

6.0 Australian Red Cross recommends taking a risk and capacity-based approach. This helps determine who might be at risk and the capacities they have to deal with those risks, such as health status, connection to Country, community and place, financial and physical security and access to knowledge. For example, recent Australian Red Cross pilot programs included groups representing Culturally Linguistic and Diverse Communities (CALD) and youth and these helped to inform the [Emergency Resilience in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities report](#), published in 2021. It also notes how English-language proficiency and cultural differences can present significant obstacles to appropriate responses during emergencies, and how it is easier to cope with disasters when surrounded by people sharing the same culture and language.

6.1 However, while the specific circumstances of CALD communities can create heightened vulnerability to disaster impacts, many migrants and refugees display elevated levels of resilience, knowledge and coping capacities, often because they have overcome the significant challenges of migration and settlement in a new country.

6.2 Additionally, in the 2022 NSW floods, members of Australian Red Cross' First Nations Recovery Team supported Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in disaster-impacted locations. The culturally safe response they provided resulted in the emergence of a greater number of First Nations communities seeking our help.

Recommendation 6: In order to ensure inclusive and meaningful engagement of all community members, ensure funding and programming is directed to a diverse range of communities and community-members, particularly for First Nations communities, people on temporary or insecure visas and other groups that have been marginalised or face barriers to access.

Recommendation 7: To empower a diverse range of people and promote self-efficacy, identify and leverage the strength of diverse communities, including First Nations communities in developing approaches to disaster risk reduction.

8. Need for increased investment into long-term recovery: Exposure to the disruption, loss, and violence associated with disasters places significant psychological and social strain on children, adults, their families, and communities. The way in which people experience and respond to disasters varies greatly, yet with the right support the majority will be able to overcome these difficult experiences. The duration of emergency impacts will be different for

each person, but in severe instances, it is years to decades, rather than days to weeks ([University of Melbourne, 2021](#)). Following a disaster, Australian Red Cross helps people navigate the recovery process and equip communities to draw upon their individual and collective resources to drive their own community-led recovery. But as compounding events increase, long-term recovery and resilience will be interwoven and increasingly critical to the wellbeing of people and communities. It takes time to build rapport and trust, to connect with the right people and to establish an effective presence. Short-term programs therefore have limited effectiveness. It has been observed that despite the cyclical nature of disasters, funding and support is often reactive and available only during the 'response' or early phases. This continues to cause anxiety around the need for ongoing and long-term support.

Recommendation 8: In recognition of the long-term nature of disaster recovery and the complexity of disaster impacts, provide funding that supports disaster-affected communities that is guaranteed over three to ten years and maintained even after disaster conditions have eased to allow people to recover and build their resilience to future shocks and stresses.

9. Facilitating community led initiatives: One of the most important roles of the Commonwealth and state/territory governments is in embedding localisation: meeting locally identified needs, funding local activities, amplifying local stories, streamlining practices for communities and the organisations that support them, understanding and building on local strengths and overcoming local challenges.

9.0 Decision making seldom sits with community itself and a disconnect between community and government priorities can be evident. Communities have minimal influence but bear the consequences of decisions they did not get to make. Without national and state resources, local councils often lack the resources and capability to tackle disaster resilience building, response and recovery in a meaningful way. Where efforts are being made, they are often in isolation and communities miss the opportunity to realise the benefits of consistent approaches, innovation and shared learning across jurisdictions. This not only slows progress, but also likely means that communities experiencing the greatest vulnerability are left behind.

9.1 One way to address this is to strengthen links between funding bodies and local communities. Fund administrators and policymakers should undertake regular site visits to connect with what is happening on the ground before and after disasters. They need to be more strongly embedded, with a presence alongside communities, helping simplify funding arrangements and as a result, benefitting from the value of local insights and greater ability to support community driven approaches. Resourcing community resilience work will help guide decision-makers on local needs in a response, and in recovery. Australian Red Cross, as auxiliary to public authorities in the humanitarian field, operating nationwide and widely trusted among communities can support governments in this work.

Recommendation 9: Allow community voices to be central and to direct funding in order to maximise impact, acknowledging that resilience is often built through harnessing and acting on community ideas.

10. Consider the impacts of cumulative shocks: Many funding mechanisms are single-hazard specific and lack scope for cumulative or compounding disasters. The findings of the Australian Red Cross Drought Resilience Program showed that most people facing drought were experiencing at least one other type of significant hazard (flood, fire, heatwave, pandemic).

People found it challenging when support was only available for one of the disasters they faced. The cumulative and multi-hazard nature of disasters will only grow more complex as climate change intensifies Australia's disaster landscape. Sustainable, end-to-end disaster funding will help address these challenges.

10.1 A wider range of shocks also need to be considered, beyond the escalating natural hazards Australia faces including, conflicts such as those in Ukraine and Afghanistan – which were deeply impactful for the large populations living in Australia, or collective trauma events such as the Gold Coast SeaWorld helicopter crash or the COVID-19 pandemic. The complexity of the disaster landscape must be acknowledged so that we can work collaboratively to address it and minimise damage caused by all manner of shocks and hazards – including those of natural and human origin.

Recommendation 10: In light of the increase in compounding and cascading disasters, ensure funding is ongoing, long-term and multi-hazard in order to meet the psychosocial needs of people and communities.

11. Simplify administrative processes: Those seeking financial support face significant barriers in understanding what resources are available and accessing them. The application process, even for small grants, can be onerous, with different processes run by each body administering its own funding. Australian Red Cross regularly receives feedback from people impacted by disaster, that they would benefit from a streamlined process. Applications, reporting and tasks like invoicing can be unnecessarily complex. Sometimes small local government areas (LGA) and organisations do not apply for funding because of onerous requirements and limited capacity; as a result, some communities are missed altogether, despite significant levels of impact and need. Additionally, the need for co-contributions is a significant barrier to voluntary, non-profit and community sector organisations wanting to support communities with resilience building

Recommendation 11: To ensure access and equitable distribution of funding, ensure administrative processes are as streamlined and simple as possible and consider the needs and limitations of communities.

12. Allow flexibility in funding usage: There are fixed expectations for how funding is applied in communities. Funding should be made available in ways which support sound, community-driven approaches to meet localised needs, rather than being overly prescriptive. Effective recovery recognises community strengths and knowledge as the basis for decision making and action.

Recommendation 12: To facilitate self-determination and empower communities to implement localised solutions, allow fund recipients (in partnership with communities) to more strongly influence how funds are utilised locally.

13. Eligibility requirements: Eligibility criteria often includes requirements around residency which means that people who are not residents (such as people on temporary visas or insecure visas) but who are equally impacted by the disaster, are not eligible for support. During COVID-19, Australian Red Cross supported nearly 150,000 temporary visa holders and people who were not eligible for mainstream support or exceptional measures with a financial safety net ([Australian Red Cross, 2022](#)). This meant that people without access to any safety net were able to meet their basic humanitarian needs.

13.1 In another example, following recent floods in three states, only one state government ensured that state funding was available to everyone impacted, irrespective of visa type. By supporting *all* impacted people, rather than limited groups, governments ensure communities can work equitably together to overcome challenges.

Recommendation 13: To ensure the humanitarian wellbeing of all people in Australia, provide critical disaster support based on need rather than visa-status.

Summary

The Australian Red Cross is a key partner to governments in Australia's efforts to meet its obligations under the Sustainable Development Goals and the Sendai Framework.

We are proud to have supported people in Australia in recent years through major disasters. Over the last year we have provided long-term recovery services and psychosocial support to more than 382,000 people before, during and after disasters in evacuation and recovery centres as well as supporting people in community-led resilience activities. We reached more than 88,000 people with critical resources through community events and trained more than 20,000 in skill-building workshops like Communicating in Recovery, RediCommunities and school-based workshops. Our preparedness campaign reached more than 9 million people with vital messaging on how to build personal and community resilience before disasters strike.

However, in an environment where the need for the Australian Red Cross resilience, recovery and response work is increasing and with the onset of climate change, our ability to maintain our services remains constantly challenged. In addition to raising a number of recommendations with humanitarian implications, Australian Red Cross hopes this submission has clearly demonstrated the benefits of investing in a psychosocial wellbeing workforce in a time of unprecedented need.

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Contact Details

Marilee Campbell, Senior Advocacy Specialist, Emergency Services



Joel MacKay, Senior Manager, Government Engagement

