

Minister Murray Watts  
Minister for Emergency Management  
Department of Home Affairs  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

20 September 2023

Dear Minister,

**Submission in response to Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper**

New England North West Health Ltd. (HealthWISE New England North West) is a 'for purpose' (not for profit), registered charity delivering primary care programs and clinical services across the New England and North West regions of New South Wales and the Darling Downs and West Moreton regions of Queensland; across the following federal electorates: Blair, Flynn, Groom, Maranoa, New England, Parkes, Wide Bay and Wright.

HealthWISE is a major regional/rural provider of mental health, Aboriginal health, allied health and primary health care nursing services. Our current programs include the Recover, Adapt and Connect (RAC) [program](#) to support 17 Local Government Areas in New South Wales and Queensland in recovering from the Black Summer bushfires. The RAC program aims to address known impacts and barriers to recovery following a natural disaster and work with communities to improve health and psychological preparedness.

The Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response discussion paper highlighted the crucial role 'not for profit' organisations like HealthWISE play in helping communities prepare for and respond to emergencies.

Specifically we can respond to your questions:

- How could the Commonwealth build community resilience and capability so they are better able to respond to and recover from national level crises?
- What changes in the current system are necessary to help Australia have the right capabilities and capacity to handle concurrent crises?
- What legislative, regulatory or policy changes could be undertaken to make it financially viable for other sectors to contribute to a Commonwealth crisis response capability

RAC stands alone as a strategy to increase community preparedness for future disasters and resilience in the face of past, current, and future natural disasters and the impact on health and social connectivity in community. The health effects of natural disaster are currently not adequately addressed.

With a staff of 17 people, this project has effectively engaged with large and small communities in rural and regional northern New South Wales and southern Queensland. We respond to community needs by delivering a wide range of activities with a local focus to build enduring community resilience.

To date, the project has seen considerable investment and momentum. Outcomes include:

- Improved psychological preparedness
- Establishment of a skilled workforce across the service area
- Reducing the health effects and cost of natural disasters in the future.

A strength of this program is the success of partnering with other agencies and community groups to reach a wide range of community members. The funding for this program ceases in March 2024. The Commonwealth could build community capability by continuing funding for this program. The threat of natural disaster remains present. Changes to policy that increase the length of contracts would contribute to continuous support for regional locations.

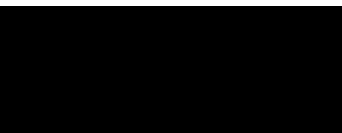
The RAC team have operated in LGAs which have been dealing with simultaneous crisis. The key to success of the program has been to curate resources for the specific towns and populations within LGAs. Commonwealth contracts that provide this flexibility should lead to continued success for local communities.

Our work has highlighted acting as interagency support for local volunteer groups, charities and other not for profit organisations as a valuable activity. When populations are being faced with wave after wave of pressure (natural disaster, pandemic, financial) the level of need in a community escalates and with that come interactions with (understandably) emotional community members. Offering skills and support for local service providers, who remain living and working in the community, after the ADF and other frontline responders address the immediate crisis would be a valuable contribution to response capacity.

The Second National Action Plan to implement the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework states '*Disaster resilience is a long-term outcome which will require long-term commitment across years and political cycles*'.

HealthWISE would be pleased to make further contributions to the important work of supporting our nation in times of crisis response.

Yours sincerely



Sally Urquhart  
Acting CEO