

Legislative Assembly Committee on Environment and Planning - Inquiry into the electricity outages affecting Far West NSW in October 2024

Department of Communities and Justice

Advice:

- 1. *Did the Department get involved with the emergency response or delivering support to the electricity outages affecting the Far West region of NSW last October?***

Yes. A Disaster Welfare Liaison Officer assisted in both the Local and Region Emergency Operations Centres. As this was a power outage, emergency services did not request DCJ to open any evacuation centres.

- 2. *Does the Department maintain registers or details of vulnerable residents (e.g. those in child protection, supported by a caseworker, requiring housing assistance, domestic violence support or other social welfare support) in the Far West region?***

Emergency management plans do not include personal information of individuals. However, they do acknowledge the presence of aged care centers and other vulnerable populations within the affected regions.

The Far West District does not have a register of vulnerable residents in a particular area. The information comes from ChildStory / Corporate Information Warehouse or caseworker's local knowledge. Local Emergency Management Plans for disaster welfare related instances contain information on vulnerable facilities and critical infrastructure, but they do not record information at an individual level.

- a) *Did the Department assist those agencies coordinating emergency response and support services to the outages to identify relevant vulnerable residents in the region, particularly the towns outside of Broken Hill?***

Yes. The State Welfare Services Functional Area Coordinator chaired a meeting on 25 October with NGOs and other government agencies to work together to address food security issues and delivery of food hampers to the area by the NSW Reconstruction Authority. These included:

- DCJ
- NSW Reconstruction Authority
- Ministry of Health
- Department of Education
- Mission Australia
- Maari Ma
- Home In Place
- Salvation Army
- Catholic Diocese of Wilcannia-Forbes

- Aboriginal Affairs.

Homes NSW has no public housing properties in the Western NSW region, which were impacted by the power outages in October 2024. All properties affected by the power outages are held by Community Housing Providers (CHPs).

Disaster Welfare convened a meeting on behalf of NSW Reconstruction Authority to connect the Reconstruction Authority with Education, Health, and Housing providers, as well as charities such as Mission Australia and St Vincent de Paul, to discuss food security issues and delivery of food hampers. The Director Community Services and Executive District Director pre-approved for gift cards to be available for families and carers household, to relieve the pressure on replacing spoiled food. Families came to the office to collect these cards. The monetary value differed based on the number of people in the household.

b) How did the Department communicate with community members affected by the outages when attempting service delivery during the outages?

Emergency Services and the NSW Police lead public communications during a disaster.

Homes NSW has agreements with two Motels in Broken Hill, which provide Temporary Accommodation for Homes NSW clients experiencing homelessness. During the power outages Homes NSW proactively liaised with these Temporary Accommodation providers, to ensure the safety and well-being of our clients staying in these Motels.

Both Broken Hill and Wilcannia Community Services Centres (CSC) had to close during the power outage. Wilcannia CSC was closed on 17 and 18 October 2024, with all service delivery managed from Broken Hill CSC. Power was restored via Essential Energy generators in the late afternoon of 18 October 2024.

Both Broken Hill and Wilcannia CSC were closed on 22 October 2024 due to the generators failing. Phones from Broken Hill and Wilcannia CSCs were diverted to Dareton CSC and there was signage on the building which stated that the CSC was closed and provided the numbers for Dareton CSC, the Helpline and emergency services (000) should those be required. The Helpline was advised of the situation.

Broken Hill and Wilcannia staff who lost power were stood down on leave as they were unable to continue working (including working from home) due to the power outage. Mobile coverage and internet connections were patchy, although certain parts of Broken Hill were less impacted.