

Dear Anna,

Thankyou for your email. I took the following question on notice: "Are you on the local emergency management committee?" The answer to the question is - No, we are not.

I will respond to the supplementary questions asked in another email before Thursday.

Kind regards,

Elizabeth Lehmann

Senior Outreach Solicitor | Disaster Response Legal Service
(ph) [REDACTED]



I acknowledge and pay my respects to the traditional owners and custodians on whose land I walk, work, live and play.

Dear Committee,

Please see below my answers to the supplementary questions.

1. Did the outages impact existing Legal Aid clients in the affected regions?

Yes, the outages impacted existing clients of Legal Aid NSW. There were disruptions to court sittings and clients with criminal matters listed had their matters adjourned. The Broken Hill Legal Aid office was closed for several days, and the phone line was inoperative.

Many existing Legal Aid clients were in financial hardship (including having debt or unpaid fines) and this was exacerbated by the power outage. They suffered loss with food & medicine spoilage, loss of wages, damage to electrical and other household items. Solicitors from the Legal Aid NSW Disaster Response Legal Service provided legal help with these issues and referred clients to the CatholicCare Wilcannia-Forbes financial counselling service who were at the RAP.

As is common in the context of disasters, some clients reported an increase in the incidence of domestic and family violence. We were able to work with the Domestic Violence Unit at Legal Aid NSW to offer further support.

Many clients who sought assistance at the RAP were not previously clients of Legal Aid NSW. The Disaster Response Legal Service is a specialist team within Legal Aid NSW that provides free legal help to anyone affected by disaster in NSW. People impacted by disasters often experience dislocation, sudden and unexpected homelessness and hardship and are therefore considered priority clients.

2. How did Legal Aid NSW work with the NSW Reconstruction Authority to provide support in response to the outages affecting Far West NSW last year?

Background

When disasters occur, the NSW Reconstruction Authority (RA) leads the recovery efforts, in collaboration with community leaders and other recovery partners. Legal Aid NSW is the lead government agency providing disaster legal assistance across NSW and is an important recovery partner of the RA.

When RA establishes recovery centres or recovery assistance points, they contact Legal Aid NSW to request attendance of specialist staff from the Disaster Response Legal Service. Recovery centres bring together essential services in one location, enabling community members to quickly access the support they need for recovery. These hubs include government agencies such as: Service NSW, Legal Aid NSW, NSW Health and Services Australia, local councils, Financial Counsellors, Red Cross, Salvation Army, Anglicare, Chaplaincy support and the Insurance Council of Australia.

The Disaster Response Legal Service has worked closely with RA, and its predecessor Resilience NSW, for many years. People impacted by disasters often don't recognise that they have a legal problem. We rely on frontline workers to be the legal problem spotters. We provide targeted training and legal education to RA and other community workers in the emergency sector to build their capacity to

identify and refer legal problems.

Through this training, and years of working alongside RA in multiple disasters across the state since the 2019/2020 bushfires, we have built strong relationships and can rely on RA to refer clients with legal need to us for help.

Far West Power Outage

Following the power outage in October 2024, RA contacted the Disaster Response Legal Service to request our presence at the Recovery Assistance Point (RAP) in Broken Hill. Other key services that attended were Service NSW, Catholic Care Financial Counselling Service, Vinnies, Salvos, Royal Flying Doctors Service, Rural Adversity Mental Health Program, Services Australia and the Red Cross.

The Disaster Response Legal Service was in Broken Hill for 2 weeks. I attended the RAP from its opening day on 29 October 2024 until 8 November 2024. In the first week, she was supported by a civil law solicitor from the Legal Aid NSW Broken Hill office. In the second week, she was joined by a Community Engagement Officer from the Disaster Response Legal Service. On 5 November, I attended the Mobile Service Centre at Wilcannia established by RA while the Community Engagement Officer attended the Broken Hill RAP.

At the RAP, RA facilitated a morning briefing with all service providers before the centre opened. This is an opportunity for service providers to share information about the help they provide. I informed our partners of the specific legal issues that we could help with arising from this event, including help claiming food and medicine spoilage or compensation for damaged goods through insurance, financial hardship, domestic violence and employment law issues.

On 29 October 2024 Legal Aid NSW attended the Regional Delivery Managers Meeting facilitated by RA to discuss community need while the response was active. On 28 November 2024 Legal Aid NSW attended the Broken Hill Recovery Partner After Action Review initiated by RA to debrief the response and discuss ongoing need in the community.

In the early stages, the Disaster Response Legal Service met with RA and Service NSW to discuss the roll out of the power surge grant and practical ways to meet the needs of our vulnerable clients in terms of access and proof requirements. We advocated for the proof requirements to not be too stringent as this would act as a barrier to access for many of our vulnerable community members, for example those without a driver licence, birth certificate or passport.

I also was interviewed twice on ABC to raise awareness of services available at the RAP and Mobile Service Centres.

From 7 November 2024, RA implemented a scaled down model of service delivery because the focus shifted to ensuring clients could access the Service NSW grant which had just become available. At this point, Legal Aid NSW and other key services stood down from the RAP which then operated more like a "grants hub." We continued to accept warm referrals from key stakeholders and also assisted disaster clients through our telephone advice clinic.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry

Yours sincerely,
Elizabeth Lehmann
Senior Solicitor, Disaster Response Legal Service
Legal Aid NSW