

**Submission
No 12**

REVIEW OF THE NSW RECONSTRUCTION AUTHORITY ACT 2022

Organisation: Lifeline Australia

Date Received: 13 May 2024



NSW Reconstruction Authority Act 2022 Review

Submission from Lifeline Australia

May 2024

Contents

Executive Summary	2
Summary of Recommendations.....	2
Background Research	4
About Lifeline: a national charity with a local footprint.....	6

Executive Summary

Lifeline Australia welcomes the opportunity to comment on the [NSW Reconstruction Authority Act 2022 Review](#), and whether the policy objectives and terms remain valid and appropriate.

As a national suicide prevention and crisis support organisation with 43 local centres, supported by volunteers in communities around Australia, including across New South Wales, Lifeline can attest to the impacts of disasters on suicide and mental health.

Lifeline acknowledges the physical, financial, social, and environmental impacts of disasters are wide-ranging and often interrelated. However, in our role as Australia’s largest crisis helpline, we can provide unique insights into the impacts of disasters on the country’s emotional and psychological wellbeing. Data from help seekers using Lifeline’s services shows pronounced increases in requests for assistance related to all types of disaster events from floods and fires to the pandemic.

This, combined with increasing evidence of the long-term psychological impacts of disasters, underscores how critical it is for the *NSW Reconstruction Authority Act* to safeguard and support the psychological health and wellbeing of communities experiencing greater prevalence of climate disasters.

While the causes of suicide are complex, protecting psychological health and wellbeing is especially important considering the known increases in suicidality in relation to triggers such as extreme weather events.

This submission makes specific recommendations for the Joint Select Committee to consider in continuing to protect the mental health and wellbeing of disaster impacted communities in New South Wales. Relevant evidence and research on the associations between disaster exposure, mental health and suicidality are also included for consideration.

Summary of Recommendations

Lifeline recommends the Act reflect the critical importance of protecting the psychological wellbeing of communities in the aftermath of disasters, given evidence that disasters have long-term psychological impacts, including the phenomenon of increased suicidality in some cases.

This focus on mental health and wellbeing should be prioritised in terms of whole of government policy approaches and included in disaster mitigation and adaption plans. It should be considered part of NSW Reconstruction Authority’s role in leading disaster prevention, preparedness and adaptation.

The following amendments are examples intended to achieve the aim of prioritising community psychological wellbeing.

- 1) Consider amending *Part 1 Preliminary, Division 1 Introduction, 4 'How primary object is to be achieved', b) providing for the functions and powers of the NSW Reconstruction Authority, including functions and powers to—*

Add an additional clause:

[(iv) support the psychological wellbeing of communities before, during and after disasters.]

- 2) Consider amending *Part 2 NSW Reconstruction Authority, Division 2 Functions of Authority, 10 'Functions', 1 b) reconstruction and recovery following disasters and other emergencies,*

Add an additional clause:

[(iv) supporting the psychological wellbeing of disaster affected communities over the immediate and longer term.]

In clause of the same section, *(d) to coordinate the development and implementation of whole-of-government policies for—*

Add an additional clause:

[(iv) supporting the psychological wellbeing of communities before, during and after disasters.]

- 3) Consider amending *Part 4 State disaster mitigation and disaster adaptation plans, Division 1 State disaster mitigation plans, Section 31 Purpose of State disaster mitigation plan as follows*

(2) The State disaster mitigation plan must include or identify the following matters

Add an additional clause:

[(f) strategies to safeguard and support the psychological wellbeing of individuals and communities in the event of a disaster.]

- 4) Consider amending *Part 4 State disaster mitigation and disaster adaptation plans, Division 2 State disaster adaptation plans, 36 Content of a disaster adaptation plan as follows:*

(2) A disaster adaptation plan must—

(b) include or identify the following—

Add an additional clause:

[(v) strategies to safeguard and support the psychological wellbeing of individuals and communities in the event of a disaster.]

Background Research

Association between disaster exposure, mental health and suicidality

Traumatic events, such as natural disasters and disease outbreaks, have a physical, social and emotional impact on those affected¹ and the risk of suicide increases in the aftermath of such disasters². For example, research into the impact of the 2009 Victorian Black Saturday Bushfires found 22% of people in high-impact communities reported mental health disorder symptoms at twice the rate of people in low-impact communities³.

Furthermore, research shows that successive disasters have a compounding effect⁴ on people's mental health. We have seen this with the onset of the 2019/20 bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic reaching Australia, with numerous flood situations adding their own impact.

Importantly, the community's most vulnerable are of particular concern. An influential model of suicidal behaviour predicts that effects of the stressors associated with disasters such as COVID-19 are magnified for people already facing existing situational stressors, suicidal ideation, and mental illness⁵.

In addition, the effects of the pandemic and other disasters place some groups in the community at even higher risk of adverse mental health and wellbeing outcomes than others. Young people, people with disabilities, and those in domestic and family violence situations, are particularly exposed.⁶

Long term impact of disasters

Research suggests disasters have a long-term impact on mental health⁷, and the compounding effect of successive disasters, as mentioned above, further exacerbates this.

In Australia, we have seen this previously with major bushfire disasters. A study into the mental health impacts of the Black Saturday Bushfires of 2009 found the effects were still being felt ten years later⁸. We are also seeing this with the 2019/2020 bushfires, with demand continuing at pace for 13 HELP, Lifeline's bushfire helpline set up in response to the 2019/2020 bushfires.

Global trends also indicate that the mental health impacts of the COVID-19 crisis can be expected to continue for the longer term. The impacts of COVID-19 on psychological factors are only beginning to be quantified, but disaster outcome-modelling clearly predicts the effects will be unfolding for years to come.

¹ World Health Organization. (2016). Psychological First Aid For All: Supporting People in the Aftermath of Crisis Events, available online: https://www.who.int/mental_health/world-mental-health-day/ppt.pdf.

²Jafari, H., Heidari, M., Heidari, S. & Sayfour, N. (2020). Risk factors for suicidal behaviours after natural disasters: A systematic review, *The Malaysian Journal of Medicine*, 27(3).

³ Gibbs, L., Bryant, R., Harms, L., Forbes, D., Block, K., Gallagher, H.C., Ireton, G., Richardson, J., Pattison, P., MacDougall, C., Lusher, D., Baker, E., Kellett, C., Pirrone, A., Molyneaux, R., Kosta, L., Brady, K., Lok, M., Van Kessel, G. & Waters, E. (2016). *Beyond Bushfires: Community Resilience and Recovery Final Report*, University of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.

⁴ Lennart Reifels, Matthew J. Spittal, Michel L. A. Dücker, Katherine Mills & Jane Pirkis (2018) Suicidality Risk and (Repeat) Disaster Exposure: Findings From a Nationally Representative Population Survey, *Psychiatry*, 81:2, 158-172, DOI: [10.1080/00332747.2017.1385049](https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.2017.1385049)

⁵ Rory C. O'Connor and Olivia J. Kirtley, "The Integrated Motivational-Volitional Model of Suicidal Behaviour," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 373, no. 1754 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2017.0268>.

⁶ World Health Organization (2022). *Mental Health and Climate Change: Policy Brief*. [9789240045125-eng.pdf \(who.int\)](https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/9789240045125-eng-pdf)

⁷ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "Phases of Disaster," *Recovering from Disasters*, 2020, <https://www.samhsa.gov/dtac/recovering-disasters/phases-disaster>.

⁸ Gibbs L, Molyneaux R, Harms L, Gallagher H C, Block K, Richardson J, Brandenburg V, O'Donnell M, Kellett C, Quinn P, Kosta L, Brady K, Ireton G, MacDougall C, Bryant R. 10 Years Beyond Bushfires Report 2020. University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

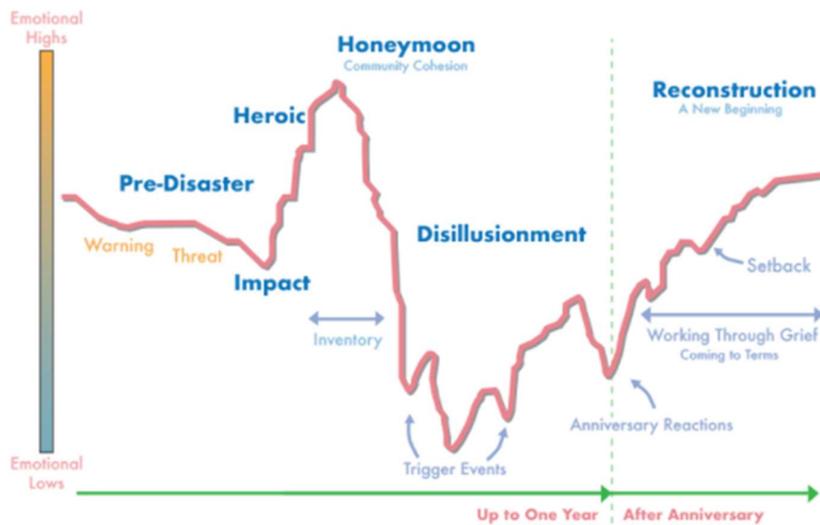
For more information, please contact Emma Carr, National Manager of Strategic Government Relations, at

or on

Emerging research published in *Nature Human Behaviour* by Tanaka and Okamoto⁹ reported an increase in the suicide rate in Japan despite an early decline during the pandemic. The increase was particularly evident among vulnerable groups, including women working in industries impacted by lockdown (37%), as well as teenagers and children (49%).

Those findings are consistent with widely accepted models of the psychological impacts of disaster, which can be summarised as a series of psychosocial phases that unfold over years with fluctuating emotional highs and lows (see Figure 1). Notably, a phenomenon of the 'heroic' and 'honeymoon' phases is that there can be a drop and delayed increase in the suicide rates as communities draw together in the aftermath of disasters¹⁰. Notably, those phases can be followed by periods of disillusionment in which trigger events prompt crisis and emotional lows, particularly when disaster-affected individuals' economic, social and emotional resources are depleted.

Figure 1. Psychological Impacts of Disaster (from Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2020, adapted from Zunin & Myers as cited in DeWolfe, D. J., 2000. Training manual for mental health and human service workers in major disasters, 2nd Ed.)



⁹ Takanao Tanaka and Shohei Okamoto, "Increase in Suicide Following an Initial Decline during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Japan," *Nature Human Behaviour*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-01042-z>.

¹⁰ Kairi Kõlves, Keili E. Kõlves, and Diego De Leo, "Natural Disasters and Suicidal Behaviours: A Systematic Literature Review," *Journal of Affective Disorders* 146, no. 1 (2013): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2012.07.037>.

For more information, please contact Emma Carr, National Manager of Strategic Government Relations, at [REDACTED] or on [REDACTED].

About Lifeline: a national charity with a local footprint

Lifeline Australia is a national charity providing all Australians experiencing emotional distress with access to 24-hour crisis support and suicide prevention services.

Lifeline exists to ensure that no person in Australia has to face their darkest moments alone. Our network delivers digital services to Australian people in crisis wherever and whenever they are needed and on whichever platform they are most comfortable using, including:

- Lifeline's 13 11 14 crisis line;
- an online Crisis Support Chat service;
- Crisis Text service;
- a suicide Hot Spot Service targeting known suicide locations; and
- a range of online self-help and referral resources.

Lifeline Australia has 23-member organisations, forming a network of 43 Lifeline Centres, operating in all states and territories.

In NSW, Lifeline's 15 Centres deliver crisis support and suicide prevention services within their communities. In addition to this critical local NSW support, these centres provide essential staffing for Lifeline's national digital services (phone, text, webchat). Combined, our centres across urban, regional and rural NSW are staffed by approximately 250 FTE centre staff and over 800 crisis supporter volunteers.

As the state becomes more disaster prone, Lifeline's volunteer teams are there to assist.

In the aftermath of NSW floods, Lifeline's local teams were able to work with the NSW Government to provide rapid response services on the ground during and in the aftermath of the disaster. Not only did these teams provide support and counselling to people in distress, but they were able to facilitate local community collection sites to ensure that people who had lost everything had access to free clothes, furniture, food and other necessities.

Lifeline in New South Wales delivers a number of training sessions, workshops and support groups including:

- Accidental Counsellor
- Rapid response
- Flood Engagement and Support
- Community Mental Health BBQs
- Gamble aware
- Face to Face counselling
- After Care Service
- Suicide Bereavement Support Group
- REACH & Wellbeing programs for people with depression and bipolar disorder
- Hoarding Treatment program
- Emergency Relief service
- Financial & Gambling Counselling
- Mobile Café
- Men's Table Group

For more information, please contact Emma Carr, National Manager of Strategic Government Relations, at [REDACTED] or on [REDACTED].

- Disaster Recovery
- Resilience Workshops
- Wholesome Collective (Connecting Community with food)
- Black Summer Fridays Support
- Eclipse aftercare support group
- Domestic Violence Workshops
- Suicide Prevention networks

For more information, please contact Emma Carr, National Manager of Strategic Government Relations, at [REDACTED] or on [REDACTED].



Contact: Emma Carr, National Manager Strategic Government Relations

or (

