

## **INQUIRY INTO RESPONSE TO MAJOR FLOODING ACROSS NEW SOUTH WALES IN 2022**

**Organisation:** Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of NSW

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# Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of NSW

## Select Committee on the response to major flooding across New South Wales in 2022

*The AH&MRC Acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands on which the AH&MRC stands, the lands of the Bidjigal and Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. The AH&MRC pays respect to Elders past, present and emerging.*



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## About the AH&MRC

The AH&MRC is a membership-based organisation and the Peak Body for Aboriginal Health in New South Wales. We represent 49 Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) across the state.

The AH&MRC assists ACCHOs to ensure they have access to an adequately resourced and skilled workforce to provide high-quality health care services for Aboriginal communities. The AH&MRC is committed to the delivery of four key priorities:

- Aboriginal Community Control and Innovation
- Education and Workforce
- Research and Data
- Governance and Finance

The AH&MRC welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry on behalf of its members.



## AH&MRC Response

The 2022 floods had a devastating impact on communities across the east coast of Australia. This was particularly the case for Northern New South Wales, with townships including Ballina, Lismore, Tweed, Kempsey, Nambucca, Bellingen and Casino being among the worst affected. Many of these communities have sizeable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities including Cabbage Tree Island and Wardell. An analysis of the localities which were declared as natural disaster zones found that approximately 36,509 (4.2 per cent of the affected population). In regional New South Wales, the proportion of Aboriginal people affected by the floods increased to 6.2 percent. These figures are highly disproportionate noting that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders account for approximately 3.3 per cent of the state's population.

These communities faced significant challenges including forced evacuation, displacement (with more than 3600 homes in the northern rivers region alone being deemed uninhabitable), loss of property, damage to businesses and disrupted access to food and other critical services. This is in addition to the health impacts, with communities being left vulnerable to problems such as water borne diseases as well as long term health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, these impacts are only exacerbated by pre-existing socioeconomic disadvantage. For example, Aboriginal people are more likely to have a baseline level of poor health (burden of disease is 2.3 times higher than the non-Indigenous population) leaving them more susceptible to acute health problems in the event of a disaster.

### **The adequacy of NSW Government support for affected Aboriginal communities**

At the peak of the crisis, local Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations were among the first to provide relief and they continue to play a central role in the ongoing response. The AH&MRC has undertaken extensive consultation with its member services within the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health sector, regarding the support received from government in the immediate and long-term response. The overwhelming view of the ACCHO sector is that the response from government, at both the state and federal levels, has been slow, uncoordinated, and inadequate. Instead, it is local support that has kept affected communities going throughout recent and past natural disasters, with individuals, services, and businesses, helping each other to get back on their feet. ACCHOs across New South Wales have raised concerns regarding:

#### **Governance**

- Many services raised concerns regarding the lack of engagement by Local Emergency Management Committees (LEMC). In many areas, membership of Local Emergency Management Committees is restricted to government agency representatives. This meant that local organisations such as ACCHOs were excluded from critical conversations in the wake of the floods.
- Government took a top-down approach, with Aboriginal Affairs representatives acting as proxies for the sector and ACCHOs having to rely on them to pass on information from the LEMCs. There was only one reported instance where the local ACCHO was invited to LEMC meetings, and this was attributed to their existing relationship with the local police. The consensus across the board is that the inclusion of local services in this and other disasters is an afterthought.

## **Government response coordination**

- ACCHOs found that bureaucratic processes affected the timeliness and efficiency of the response. Coordination between Resilience NSW and other government agencies including the Department for Communities and Justice and NSW Health has been poor, with local services being unclear about the responsibilities of different agencies in the response.
- This lack of clarity has also made it challenging for ACCHOs to respond efficiently. For example, some ACCHOs found it difficult to promptly establish pop-up clinics at the temporary housing sites that community has been evacuated to as they were unclear on which agencies to coordinate with. This meant that people with chronic health conditions were unable to have their needs assessed and accommodated for in a timely manner, potentially leading to poor health outcomes. For example, pop-up clinics could have quickly provided scripts for medication lost in the floods.

## **Resourcing**

- ACCHOs are generally under-resourced, the strain of which is felt most in times of crisis. Many ACCHOs sustained significant damage during the recent floods, with services such as Bullinah AMS site being deemed unusable. In addition to funding the rebuilding of their facilities, they must also provide health services and resources to their local communities.
- At the federal level, there has been a lack of support from the Primary Health Networks (PHNs). It has been noted that in some areas, PHNs deployed to evacuation centres over a week after the first onslaught. There have been reports of PHNs providing very little support other than requesting receipts for expenses covered by ACCHOs for potential reimbursement. The little funding provided by PHNs has been targeted towards the provision of telehealth services which does not serve Aboriginal communities noting that telecommunications have been down; many do not have access to their phones, and many do not use these services as they are culturally inappropriate.
- At the state level, the NSW government has provided piecemeal grants administered through various agencies. While these grants provide some relief, the sector is of the view that on the back of previous floods, bushfires and a pandemic, the government should not be focussing on band aid solutions and should instead consider stable, long term funding solutions. ACCHOs are central to recovery efforts and should be adequately resourced and equipped with the necessary staff to support comprehensive services delivery in this process (social and wellbeing support workers, paediatricians, GPs, nurses, social workers etc.).

Notably, these issues are not exclusive to the recent floods. Many of them have been recurring themes in previous disasters including the 2019-20 Bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic. These disasters have exposed the persistent lack of disaster preparation and planning in Aboriginal communities and the inability of government to appropriately engage these communities in times of crisis.



## **The broader emergency management policy environment as it relates to Aboriginal communities**


The AH&MRC is of the view that this inquiry should be the catalyst for a wider reform of the NSW State Emergency Management Plan (the Plan) and its underpinning structures, which to date, have failed to adequately support Aboriginal communities. Recent years have seen an increase in the occurrence of natural disasters in Australia, a trend which is anticipated to persist as the impacts of climate change worsen. This and previous disasters have shown that Aboriginal communities are disproportionately impacted by disasters and often overlooked in the ensuing responses.

While the Plan identifies community and stakeholder engagement as being critical in emergency management across the full spectrum of prevention, preparation, response and recovery, the accounts of ACCHOs in the recent floods and previous emergencies including the bushfires and COVID-19 suggest a lack of engagement with Aboriginal communities in emergency management. A cursory search of the Plan for the terms 'Indigenous', 'Aboriginal' or 'culture' yields no results. Unfortunately, the same can be said for its sub-plans. A similar scan of regional emergency management plans showed varying consideration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in disaster planning across the regions. Some regional plans make no mention of Aboriginal people at all, while others have passing acknowledgement, generally in population statistics. These plans do little to explore the unique risks and hazards encountered by Aboriginal communities, nor the way in which Aboriginal organisations and governance structures can be engaged in the face of disaster. This has resulted in inconsistent engagement practices across the state, with the engagement of Aboriginal community organisations being dependent on the health of their relationship with local government agencies. It has also created a lack of trust and partnership between government and these organisations.

With regard to governance, the State Emergency Management Committee membership is comprised of senior government officials, however, provisions are made for representatives of non-government agencies and such other persons as nominated by the Minister from time to time. It is critical that when these provisions are used, Aboriginal people are represented. This should be through peak bodies such as CAPO and not through government agencies. The greatest opportunity, however, is within LEMCs. The 2019 Bushfire Inquiry recommended that to ensure that Aboriginal communities can access appropriate support during emergencies, Resilience NSW work with Local Emergency Management Committees and Aboriginal Affairs to facilitate the inclusion of local Aboriginal communities in emergency planning and preparation. As previously noted, in many areas, LEMC membership is restricted to government agency representatives, with Aboriginal community organisations continuing to be excluded from critical conversations around preparedness, response and recovery planning.

There are existing models in other jurisdictions which the NSW government could draw on to inform this work. The Victorian government's most recent emergency management plan acknowledges the critical role of Traditional Owners and sets a mandate for their engagement in the management of emergencies including mitigation, response and recovery. Going a step further, the Queensland government has developed the Guide to disaster risk management in Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, a standalone emergency management framework that considers risks specific to Aboriginal communities in the state and seeks to support agencies to work effectively with these communities in disaster planning and response.

As organisations embedded in, and governed by communities, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations are an asset in times of disaster. They can provide critical information that mainstream services would not otherwise have access to and are highly agile, being able to respond immediately in the wake of emergencies. Moreover, a sense of trust exists between these organisations and their communities. They have demonstrated their value in previous



disasters, such as the 2019 bushfires were acknowledged for having worked on the ground to provide vital assistance including health, food, housing and mental health supports<sup>1</sup>. There is a need for this value to be recognised in emergency management policies and governance structures.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://caepr.cass.anu.edu.au/research/publications/aboriginal-community-governance-frontlines-and-faultlines-black-summer>



## Recommendations

### The AH&MRC recommends:

1. That the NSW Government expand funding for ACCHOs in flood impacted areas to support long term recovery. This should include funding for additional social and emotional workforce supports critical for community healing.
2. That the NSW Government undertake a review of the state's Emergency Management Plan, its sub-plans and regional plans with a view to strengthen their coverage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to ensure that they are adequately accounted for. This review should explore:
  - a. Opportunities to bolster Aboriginal community representation in emergency governance structures;
  - b. Opportunities to create more Aboriginal specific roles within emergency services;
  - c. Opportunities to streamline disaster response coordination within government to ensure that Aboriginal communities can access support in a timely and efficient manner;
  - d. Opportunities to maximise the use of Aboriginal community organisations in disaster response (including resourcing and capability building); and
  - e. Opportunities to improve cultural competency within recovery agencies.
3. That beyond the forementioned work, the NSW Government look to develop a standalone disaster management framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, that accounts for their unique needs and risks. There may be potential to draw on the Queensland Government's model. This should be developed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations.

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