



Effective
Change



Evaluation of the Bushfire Recovery Outreach – Legal Information Project

Final Report

Prepared by Effective Change Pty Ltd
for Hume Riverina Community Legal Service
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Report commissioned by Hume Riverina Community Legal Service

Front cover image: Hume Riverina Community Legal Service stall at the Mount Beauty Community Picnic

Acknowledgements

Effective Change wishes to acknowledge and thank the stakeholders and representatives who participated in consultations and interviews for this evaluation.



Effective Change Pty Ltd acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Victoria and pays respect to their Elders past, present and future.



EVALUATION



RESEARCH



CONSULTATION & FACILITATION



RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT



PLANNING



ORGANISATIONAL & SERVICE REVIEW

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Introduction

This report presents the Evaluation of the Hume Riverina Community Legal Service (HRCLS) Bushfire Recovery Project.

Background

Hume Riverina Community Legal Service

Based in Albury-Wodonga on the border between Victoria and NSW, HRCLS provides free legal advice and services across the seven Local Government Areas (LGAs) of the Ovens Murray region and across 10 LGAs in the Southern Riverina of NSW. HRCLS is auspiced by Upper Murray Family Care (UMFC) and is accredited by Community Legal Centres Australia.

HRCLS is one of the few cross-border community legal centres (CLC) in Australia, covering the two jurisdictions of Victoria and NSW. The organisation receives core funding from Victorian Legal Aid and Legal Aid NSW to provide legal services to the communities living on the border, as well as Commonwealth and philanthropic funding for a range of services and programs.

The Black Summer bushfires

The Black Summer bushfires of 2019/2020 generated major bushfires that burned for months along the eastern seaboard. In the Hume Region, in north-eastern Victoria, Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMVic) and the CFA responded to 1596 ignitions during the 2019/2020 Black Summer fires. The fires burnt huge areas of public and private land, caused widespread impacts to communities, the environment and led to the fatality of one FFMVic firefighter.¹

Bushfire Recovery Support

Following the fires, the Commonwealth Government provided funding for Legal Assistance Bushfire Support to support relief and recovery from the bushfire disaster. Funding was allocated by the Department of Justice and Community Safety and administered by Victoria Legal Aid (VLA), to Community Legal Centres providing services to clients affected by the bushfire disasters.

Hume Riverina Community Legal Service received funding through the Commonwealth Legal Assistance Bushfire Support, as well as additional funding from the Victorian Government through Bushfire Recovery Victoria (BRV). Funds from both the Commonwealth and the Victorian Governments were combined to develop the Bushfire Recovery Project.

Aims of the Bushfire Recovery Project

The aims of the Bushfire Recovery Project were to:

- address urgent and unmet need resulting directly from the impacts of the fires
- respond to legal needs around family violence, known to escalate during and after disasters.
- assist regional communities to better understand, identify and respond to legal issues
- attend regional communities to provide outreach services and to raise awareness of legal issues and legal services.

About the evaluation

Effective Change was engaged by HRCLS to evaluate the Bushfire Recovery Project, with a particular focus on the work funded through the Commonwealth Government for the Bushfire Recovery Outreach – Legal Information (BROLI) project.

The purpose of the evaluation was to:

- assess the achievement of the project aims and objectives
- document the work undertaken
- identify the factors which enabled and challenged the project
- identify the emerging lessons from the experience.

The evaluation was also undertaken for the purpose of funding accountability to the Commonwealth Government through VLA.

Project management

The project was managed by the HRCLS Manager and Principal Lawyer and the Managing Lawyer, Generalist Services. For the consultants, the project was managed by Clare Keating, Director, Effective Change.

Report overview

This report is structured in the following sections:

- Background to the Black Summer Bushfires
- Evaluation methodology
- Evaluation findings
- Conclusion.

The Black Summer Bushfires

The 2019-2020 summer bushfire period was an unprecedented extreme event for Australia, seeing over 17 million hectares burned across NSW, Victoria, Queensland, ACT, Western Australia and South Australia, the loss of 33 lives and 3,094 homes. In Victoria, five lives were lost and the bushfires destroyed more than 300 homes and 6,632 head of stock and directly affected 18 local government areas. A State of Disaster was declared by the Victorian Government on 3 January 2020. In total, 1.5 million hectares of land was burnt in Victoria.²

Hume Region

The Hume Region was affected by multiple fires – with Forest Fire Management Victoria and the Country Fire Authority responding to 1,596 ignitions. Two massive fires impacted the region:

- The **Upper Murray fire** which started in NSW and crossed into Victoria on 30 December 2019. The fire continued to grow rapidly and was not contained until 24th January 2020. This fire burnt through the Towong Shire, on the NSW-Victorian border.
- The **Ovens New Years' Eve fire** burnt through the Alpine Shire. Multiple fires were ignited by lightning on New Years' Eve through the King, Buffalo, Kiewa and Wongungarra River catchments. Under extreme fire weather conditions, this fire increased rapidly in size and merged with eight other fires to form the Ovens New Years' Eve Fire Complex. This included the merging of two significant fires in the Alpine National Park which directly threatened the Dinner Plain Alpine Village. This fire was not contained until 5th February 2020.



Photo, Dinner Plain Alpine Village (Photo credit: Cam Walker)

Impacts of the fires

The fires caused significant damage across the region including:

- the loss of 189 properties, 246 sheds and extensive fencing and farming infrastructure losses
- over 20,000 ha crops and pasture destroyed
- stock losses including beehives
- loss of wildlife, wildlife habitat and biodiversity
- damage to potable water.

Public land damage included:

- State Forests, National Parks and Crown Land
- roads and bridges
- recreation sites
- Aboriginal historical cultural sites of significance
- heritage sites
- extensive areas of immature Alpine ash and Mountain ash forest regrowth from previous fires

The economic impacts of the fires were widespread with damage and disruption across the major industries in the region from tourism, including hospitality and accommodation, farming, forestry, agriculture, winemaking through to bee-keeping. Immediate economic losses were estimated in the tens of millions of dollars, as well as the prospect on on-going economic impacts and the need for long-term recovery.

The fires caused widespread disruptions to power, water, telecommunications and road networks which had immediate and lasting consequences for local industries and communities.³

The **Alpine Shire** had 29% of its footprint directly impacted by the bushfire with 6% of the burnt area impacting private land and the balance in public land or plantations. One third (32.7%) of **Towong Shire** was burnt and over 6,300 head of stock were lost.

Personal and community impacts

‘The human impact on the community is a far more difficult assessment to make and quantify as many issues and traumas are not immediately apparent and will manifest over time’

Towong Shire Municipal Recovery Plan, 2019-2021,
updated 2020

The Municipal Recovery Plans for both Towong Shire and Alpine Shire note the devastating impacts the fires had on their communities. In Towong Shire from January to May 2020 there were 223 referrals to the Victorian Bushfire Case Management Service, predominantly managed by Gateway Health.

Communities were affected by the fires psychologically, physically, and financially. Residents were exposed to extended periods of hypervigilance when the fires were directly impacting their communities, and during periods of high risk. Many communities experienced evacuations of residents and tourists. Hospitals, aged care facilities, primary care services were evacuated. People lost work and time for holidays. Small and larger social networks were disrupted. Air quality across the region was poor for weeks due to the bushfire smoke and was associated with hospitalisations for respiratory and cardiovascular problems. Across Victoria it is estimated that up to 120 excess deaths were associated with the bushfire smoke.



Fires engulfed areas near Walwa (Photo credit: Twitter: Declan Kuch)

Source: ABC news 31 December 2019 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-31/victorian-bushfire-emergency-mallacoota-gippsland-corryong/11834010>

‘On December 30, 2019 the Upper Murray was faced with one of its biggest natural disasters ever as wildfire engulfed the region.

The fire started in New South Wales on 26 December near Walwa and burned into mid-January.

Our region suffered huge personal and business losses, especially in the agricultural sector. The impact on our beautiful, natural environment has been immense. The secondary and tertiary impacts on the broader community and businesses cannot be underestimated.’

David Wortmann, Towong Shire Mayor ⁴

The Bushfire Recovery Project

The Bushfire Recovery Project was funded and established to enable free legal information, advice and assistance to be provided to people impacted by the Black Summer fires, and where possible, to do so in their communities.

Project overview

The Bushfire Recovery Project aimed to provide free and accessible legal assistance services to people impacted by the fires through:

- outreach services in impacted communities, remote (phone and online) options and/or consultations at HRCLS or other agency offices
- focusing on family violence and family law legal support, recognising that these issues are known to emerge after disasters as well as civil law issues, noting that these are often not identified as legal in nature and often arise in clusters
- working in partnership with key local agencies to engage impacted communities.

Through the focus on collaboration with local agencies, the Bushfire Recovery Project also aimed to:

- provide holistic care addressing legal and non-legal issues
- develop efficient referral protocols, providing secondary consultations and training for community-based staff
- improve the coordination of services and contribute to local service system's preparedness for responding to disasters.

Funding and resourcing

Funding for the Bushfire Recovery Project was received through three funding programs. The Bushfire Recovery – Outreach Legal Information (BROLI) funding supported the engagement of two lawyers and one community development worker.

| Funding source | Funding Period | Amount |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------|
| Bushfire Support | 2019-20 | \$65,000 |
| | 2020-21 | \$135,000 |
| Emergency Recovery Victoria (ERV)* | 1/1/2021 – 31/12/2021 | \$150,000 |
| | 1/1/2022 – 31/12/2022 | \$300,000 |
| | Until June 2023 | \$300,000 |
| | Until June 2024 | \$150,000 |
| BROLI | 1/4/2022 – 31/3/24 | \$745,590 |

* established in 2020 as Bushfire Recovery Victoria, transitioned to ERV in 2022.

Catchment area

The Bushfire Recovery project operated in the seven LGAs of the Ovens Murray region serviced by HRCLS,

with the primary focus on the most severely impacted areas of Towong and Alpine Shires. The surrounding LGAs of Wodonga, Indigo and Wangaratta did not experience fires of the same scale, but these areas were impacted by smoke from the fires for weeks.



Working in partnership

HRCLS worked with local agencies and councils to deliver the Bushfire Recovery project. These organisations, mainly based in the regional cities of Wodonga and Wangaratta, also received bushfire recovery funding and had the following support roles to:

- Gateway Health provided personal support, counselling and case management services
- the Centre Against Violence (CAV) provided Family Violence, crisis support and counselling
- Upper Murray Family Care (UMFC) financial counsellors provided financial counselling
- Towong Shire and Alpine Shire appointed Bushfire Area Recovery Officers to assist local residents affected by the fires.

In addition to working with existing local partners, the project aimed to:

- create relationships with new community partners in the smaller towns in bushfire impacted areas to facilitate outreach activities
- work with a network of relevant legal services, including specialist Community Legal Centres, Gippsland CLC and Disaster Legal Help Victoria to facilitate clients' access to specialist assistance and for this network to identify key learnings in relation to responding to regional communities affected by disaster.

Services and activities delivered

Legal assistance services

The table below shows the legal assistance services delivered through BROLI from 1 April 2022 to 4 February 2024. The main services were providing legal advice and undertaking legal tasks.

| Service type | 2022/2023 | 2023/2024 | Total |
|----------------------|-----------|-----------|-------|
| Legal Advices | 187 | 165 | 352 |
| Legal Tasks | 47 | 43 | 90 |
| Referrals | 11 | 4 | 15 |
| Court/Tribunal | 4 | 4 | 8 |
| Dispute Resolution | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Other Representation | 11 | 10 | 21 |
| | | | 489 |

Legal issue types included credit and debt, consumer complaints and tenancy issues. As anticipated by HRCLS, the majority of legal advices related to family violence, family breakdown and family law.

Regular outreach clinics were delivered in the following towns in the most impacted local government areas:

- Towong Shire: Corryong and Tallangatta
- Alpine Shire: Mount Beauty, Bright and Myrtleford.

It should be noted that at various times Covid-19 restrictions prevented holding face to face clinics, but advice and consultations were provided by telephone or online. Advice clinics were also provided at CAV in Wodonga, and from the HRCLS office in Wodonga, an arrangement made possible by the existing relationships of trust between referrers and HRCLS.

Community engagement

The Bushfire Recovery Community Development worker and lawyers visited community locations, such as Neighbourhood Centres and attended a range of community events. The purpose of these activities was to establish relationships with community and staff, promote HRCLS service and legal awareness raising through specifically designed legal health checks and distribution of emergency preparedness packs.

Secondary consultations

Lawyers regularly provided secondary consultations to staff from partner agencies, particularly for clients engaged with multiple agencies, to provide seamless services for clients.

Network meetings and collaborative work

Bushfire Recovery lawyers regularly participated in local networks, such as Community Recovery Committees

and Family Violence Prevention Committees and in CLC networks such as the Disaster and Climate Justice Working Group and Disaster Legal Help Victoria Community of Practice.

Bushfire Recovery clients

Clients assisted

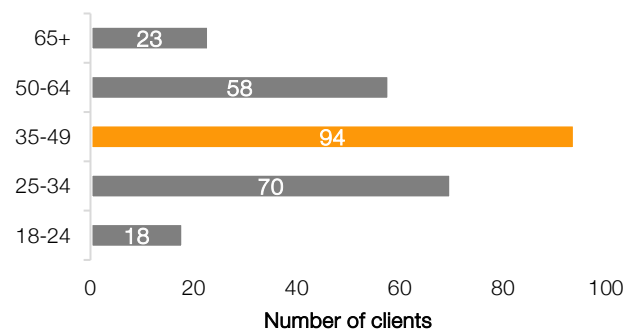
The Bushfire Recovery Project assisted **267 clients** between 1 April 2022 to 4 February 2024. Just over half - 52% or 139 clients - were assisted in the first 12 months of the project. In the ten months (from 1/4/2023 to 4/2/2024) 128 clients (48%) were assisted.

Key demographic characteristics of the Bushfire Recovery Project clients include:

| | | |
|-------------------|----------------|------------|
| Gender | Female: 85% | Male: 14% |
| Indigenous status | Yes: 7% | No: 92% |
| Country of birth | Australia: 89% | Other: 11% |

Clients assisted ranged from 18 years to 65 and older (see: Graph 1). A small number of clients assisted (fewer than 5) were under 18 years. More than one third (36%) of clients were in the 35-49 years age range, 26% were in the 25-34 years age range and 31% were 50 years or older.

Graph1: Number of clients by age range



Demographic characteristics also show high levels of disadvantage and vulnerabilities in the client profile:

- 60% of clients were sole parents and 20% were single compared to 6% in two-parent families
- 73% of clients had a family violence indicator and 3% were at risk of family violence
- 61% of clients had a disability
- 9% of clients were homeless and 47% of clients were at risk of homelessness and/or mental health
- 73% of clients were on Centrelink payments, 16% of clients did not have means to pay for legal advice and 1% could not access funds.

Methodology

Key evaluation questions

Key evaluation questions were developed to be addressed through the evaluation. Broadly, these questions covered the following topics:

- How have the legal and non-legal/health needs in bushfire affected communities been met as a result of the Bushfire Recovery services provided and the partnerships that HRCLS works within?
- What were the enablers for the Bushfire Recovery work?
- What were the barriers to the Bushfire Recovery work?
- What lessons can be learned to better prevent / meet the needs of at-risk communities?
- Are there other needs in communities which have not been considered or addressed?

Methods

The evaluation was conducted using a mixed methods approach including:

- qualitative information collection through individual stakeholder interviews
- desktop analysis of service delivery data
- desktop scan and review of relevant external literature and reports.

Information collection

Twenty-four (24) stakeholders were interviewed in February and March 2024, using interview schedules addressing the key evaluation questions tailored to their roles. Interviewees were also asked to outline their roles and their interaction with the Bushfire Recovery team.

Stakeholders represented:

- partner agencies and councils
- specialist and peak community legal centres
- local organisations who worked with the Bushfire Recovery team
- other key external stakeholders
- HRCLS staff.

The following list outlines the roles of the staff consulted.

Regional partner agencies

- Gateway Health, Program Manager Community Recovery & Resilience Program
- UMFC, Team Leader, Financial Counselling
- CAV, Community Connections Coordinator

Councils

- Towong Shire, Community Recovery Officer
- Alpine Shire, Community Recovery Officer

Community Legal Centres

- Consumer Action Law Centre, People & Culture Manager
- Social Security Rights Victoria, CEO and Bushfire Lawyer
- Justice Connect, Manager, Innovation
- Federation CLCs, Climate Justice Lead
- Disaster Legal Help Victoria, Program Manager

Local organisations

- Corryong Foodshare, Pastor, Co-Founder
- Tallangatta Neighbourhood Centre, Coordinator
- Mount Beauty Neighbourhood House, Chairperson
- Corryong Neighbourhood House, Coordinator
- Alpine Recovery Committee, Deputy Chair

Other external stakeholders

- Department of Families, Fairness & Housing, Manager, Community Partnerships
- Elder Rights Advocacy, Community Development Network Officer
- North-East Multicultural Association, Community Development Worker

HRCLS staff

- Manager and Principal Lawyer
- Managing Lawyer, Generalist Services
- Three (3) lawyers
- Community Engagement Worker – Disaster Recovery

Data analysis and reporting

Data from the range of sources was analysed against the evaluation framework. A draft report was prepared and discussed with HRCLS. The final report, incorporating feedback from HRCLS, was then submitted.

Evaluation findings

Establishing the context

Local stakeholders involved in bushfire recovery work emphasised the importance of establishing the impact of the bushfires on the communities supported through the Bushfire Recovery Project.

They noted that:

- the 2019/2020 fires were on an unprecedented scale and burnt for weeks
- smoke from the fires was extensive and caused additional health impacts for residents
- the fires in Victoria were preceded by weeks of high alert as fires burnt throughout NSW and Queensland
- the fires occurred during the Christmas/New Year holiday period when regional areas had an influx of visitors unfamiliar with the territory
- Alpine Shire reported that 10,000 people, mainly tourists, had to be evacuated during the fires.

Further, to understand the impact of the fires, it is also necessary to understand the geography of the affected areas and the communities living there. The area is made up of mountains, rivers and valleys, with winding and often mountainous single carriage roads.

Towong Shire covers a vast area with a population density of less than one person per square kilometre. The Shire is made up of small rural towns such as Tallangatta and Corryong with populations of less than 2,000 people and many smaller communities. Corryong is considered one of the most isolated towns in Victoria.

Alpine Shire is also mountainous, with rivers and valleys and a small population which swells over holiday periods. Most working residents are employed in tourism, hospitality, and health care.

It is not difficult to appreciate that the experience of being ringed by enormous fires, with unpassable roads, must have been terrifying. The aftermath of the bushfires was also extremely difficult, given their scale, the challenges of the terrain, and the extent of damage to communications and access roads.

Less than two months after the fires were contained, the COVID-19 global pandemic was declared by the World Health Organisation on 12 March 2020. The restrictions and lockdowns which followed significantly hampered recovery actions. The communities of the Upper Murray region were particularly impacted by the border closures imposed at different times by Victoria and NSW. Public health measures lasted up until late 2022.

The region also experienced severe floods in 2022, as well as storms and bushfires on a smaller scale at various times. A landslide on the Bogong High Plains Road, between Mount Beauty and Falls Creek, closed the road and isolated mountain communities for six months between October 2022 to April 2023.

These factors combined point not only to the immediate challenges for recovery, but also the added complexities of compounding disasters and their impacts on traumatised communities.

Stakeholders also highlighted the age of the populations of both Shires. Residents are significantly older than the average Victorian population. In Alpine Shire 35% of residents are aged over 60 years, and 39% of the population of Corryong is over 60, compared to 22.4% of the population of Victoria. Residents are less likely to be digitally literate, and even if they were, the already unreliable mobile phone and internet connections in the region were significantly disrupted by the fires.

Stakeholders from bushfire affected areas also emphasised the need to understand the lack of permanent support services in their towns, and therefore the absence of relationships or trust in 'outside' services as part of the context of understanding the recovery efforts.

‘When disaster strikes, it comes on top of a history of fires, floods, economic downturns. It gives you an insight into the resilience of communities.’

(Regional, Health and Wellbeing Coordinator)

How were the legal and non-legal needs of affected communities met?

Partnerships to meet the needs of communities

The Bushfire Recovery project established three levels of partnerships to meet the legal and non-legal needs of communities.

- **Partnership with key regional agencies** - HRCLS, CAV, Gateway Health and UMFC. These agencies had pre-existing integrated relationships, at executive and practitioner levels.
- **Newly created, local partnerships** with small organisations, mainly Neighbourhood Houses / Centres, local health services and organisations such as Corryong Foodshare. The Neighbourhood Houses in Corryong, Mount Beauty, Myrtleford and Tallangatta are small organisations with very few paid staff and a volunteer workforce. These centres are trusted community hubs, resources and de facto gateways to communities. They become organising centres after any disaster and took on this role after the bushfires. The Corryong Neighbourhood House, for example, reported that they opened two days after the fires.
- **Partnerships with specialist CLCs and networks** HRCLS participated in the Disaster and Climate Justice network facilitated by FCLC and the Community of Practice facilitated by Disaster Legal Help Victoria. Members included Consumer Action Legal Centre (CALC), Social Security Rights Victoria (SSRV), Tenants Victoria, Justice Connect, Women's Legal Service, Gippsland CLC, Federation of CLC Victoria and Disaster Legal Help Victoria. HRCLS had individual relationships and referral pathways with specialist services.

In addition, HRCLS participated in:

- a regional recovery network facilitated by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing
- two local Family Violence Prevention Committees
- two local Community Recovery Committees
- the Northeast Resilience Network.

Each level of partnership had a specific purpose.

The partnership with **key regional agencies** was developed to provide wraparound services for clients impacted by the fires and needing support across health, legal and family violence 'silos'. The regional partners had pre-existing collaborative relationships and reported that they had trusting and efficient referral pathways to and from HRCLS for bushfire clients.

Partnerships with **small local organisations** were essential as an entry point to communities and to deliver the Bushfire Recovery Project. For HRCLS, as a service wanting to provide longer term support, partnering with Neighbourhood Houses and other trusted, local organisations, was vital.

For Neighbourhood Houses, as a natural point of community connection, it was beneficial to host HRCLS legal outreach clinics and they were keen to promote this offering to communities. The photo below from the Tallangatta Neighbourhood House facebook page is promoting the fortnightly visits from the HRCLS lawyer.



HRCLS lawyer visiting Tallangatta Neighbourhood House

Partnerships with **specialist community legal services** were established so that ideally HRCLS could refer complex cases for specialist support as needed. Examples include complex insurance claims, referred to CALC and Centrelink disputes referred to SSRV. HRCLS lawyers could seek secondary consultations from specialist services or, with client consent, attend online consultations between specialist lawyers and clients. By keeping in the loop this way, they could continue to assist the client with their case and help to explain specialist advice. At the same time, this practice enhanced the capacity of HRCLS lawyers.

Specialists provided training and resources both for HRCLS and for community. Enabled by HRCLS' local relationships, CALC, Tenants Vic and SSRV visited the regions to deliver community information sessions.

The connections to wider CLC networks were made to share learnings around disaster responses and recovery work, identify sector-wide issues for advocacy and generate ideas for resources to develop for generalist CLCs and communities.

Legal assistance to meet the needs of communities

The Bushfire Recovery Project supported 267 clients and undertook 489 types of legal assistance, often using the legal health check as a basis, predominantly providing 352 legal advices (up to 4 Feb 2024). On average this equates to 1.8 legal tasks per client. In practice, it meant that some clients required multiple types of assistance, and other clients would have only required assistance with a single task.

Legal assistance was provided flexibly, with a range of settings made available. It included providing advice through outreach clinics, located in Neighbourhood Houses and other community organisations. The arrangements for clinics were developed with the organisations, and changed over time, according to the level of demand in the community, for example, changing from fortnightly to monthly sessions.



HRCLS lawyer on outreach visit

In addition, telephone and online consultations were available to clients throughout the project. If the client preferred and needed, face to face appointments could then be scheduled at the next lawyer visit to the most convenient town. Stakeholders noted that, while online consultations were not preferred, clients became more familiar and adept at this as a result of restrictions through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Clinics were also held at the CAV offices in Wodonga or Wangaratta. This was an important option to offer clients from smaller towns, wishing to seek family violence advice discreetly.

The availability of lawyers was in itself an important part of the recovery process for clients. Even if a legal remedy was not available, being listened to, and having someone explain the legal constraints, in a trauma-informed manner, was helpful for clients' mental health and wellbeing.

‘Even if people don’t get an answer or the answer they want, it’s important for the client that someone has listened to what they want to say.’

(HRCLS Bushfire Recovery Lawyer)

Referrals and secondary consultations

Data is not comprehensively collected on secondary consultations, but this was an important feature of the Bushfire Recovery work. Referrals and secondary consultations were a regular feature of the collaborative work between the regional partners. All partners reported that referrals flowed smoothly, that partners were available for secondary consultations and that this was vital for providing wraparound services to clients. Significantly through the partnerships with small local community organisations, these organisations also became important referral sources to the Bushfire Recovery Project. Through the relationships established with lawyers, they also gained the confidence to contact lawyers for secondary consultations if they were unsure about making a referral or had specific concerns about a client.

‘We trust the HRCLS lawyers. The community trusts us, so they trust us when we refer them to HRCLS.’

(Corryong Neighbourhood Centre)

Legal education and information sessions

HRCLS provided legal education sessions for:

- Gateway Health Bushfire Recovery staff
- UMFC financial counsellors
- Family Violence Committees
- Community Recovery Committees.

They also provided legal education for staff and volunteers at Neighbourhood Houses, sometimes through a workshop approach, but more frequently holding informal discussions around the table, having a cuppa and a chat. Ensuring that these important navigators were informed about recognising a legal need and knowing how to refer to HRCLS was a critical component of the project.

General community information sessions on common legal problems were held during the project, but it was difficult to engage community members this way. This

was attributed to a range of factors, including the level of trauma in the community, different client situations needing tailored information, community exhaustion and the overwhelming nature of their problems.

Targeted community information sessions were also delivered jointly by specialist CLCs - Tenants Victoria, CALC and SSRV - and HRCLS. These sessions worked well as they were targeted and attracted people with specific issues and enabled direct referrals to be made.



HRCLS stand at the Bright Health Expo staffed by HRCLS lawyer

Community engagement

Community engagement activities were an important component of providing legal assistance, by promoting HRCLS services, building community legal awareness and helping the community to become both legally aware and legally ready for disaster.

HRCLS lawyers and staff attended a wide range of community events, such as Resilient Community Picnics, Wellness and Resilience Days, Christmas parties, Ag Field Days and 16 Days of Activism events. Regional partners also attended events to promote their services, and for all service providers to provide the message to the community that there were recovery support services available to them. Provision of the legal health check and the developed emergency preparedness packs were an essential element of this community engagement and allowed for legal education/awareness to be shared organically in the community.

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS PACK

Hume Riverina Community Legal Service are a partner of **Disaster Legal Help Victoria**; connecting people with legal help for problems related to a disaster. We encourage the community to use this **Emergency Preparedness Pack** to help you be legally prepared in the event of an emergency or natural disaster.

Inside you will find:

- A Disaster Legal Help Victoria 'Disaster Checklist': Your five-point plan for being legally prepared
- A Disaster Legal Help Victoria 'Inventory Checklist' - use this checklist to keep a record of the valuables within your home. This checklist will make any potential insurance claim for contents less stressful for you
 - A digital version of the "Inventory Checklist" is available at www.disasterlegalthelp.org.au/being-legally-prepared
- Important Documents Checklist
- A CFA 'Leaving Early—Bushfire Survival Planning Template' to help you plan your actions leading up to a bushfire, actions during the bushfire season, actions leading up to fire risk days and action on fire risk days;
- A Disaster Legal Help Victoria Information Sheet regarding 'Your Rights in a Fire Emergency—Stay or Go Orders'
- Hume Riverina Community Legal Service - Free Legal Health Check
- Victorian Emergency Contacts List

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Disaster Checklist: Your five-point plan for being legally prepared

- 1** **Make sure your insurance is up to date** and covers you for things like fires, storms and floods, and that you are fully insured for the complete value of your property
- 2** **Create an inventory list (photos optional)**, describing your home or business premises and other assets, such as machinery, stock or jewellery, along with their value and condition
- 3** **Get your important documents together** such as wills, titles, rental contracts, birth certificates, passport, insurance documents, Centrelink or Medicare paperwork
- 4** **Put your documents kit in a weather-proof place**, such as a fireproof safe at home, a safety deposit box, email them to yourself or store electronic or hard copies at a different location
- 5** **Keep a list of emergency contacts** you may need for dealing with recovery from a natural disaster, including:

Disaster Legal Help Victoria
on 1800 113 432

Visit disasterlegalthelp.org.au for more information

Sample pages from the HRCLS Emergency Preparedness Pack

Legal needs post-disaster

What the research tells us

- Common areas of law for disaster recovery legal work include:
 - residential tenancy and housing law
 - insurance law
 - employment law
 - social security law (including accessing disaster payments).⁵
- The association between disasters and increased in family violence has been documented in Australian literature.⁶

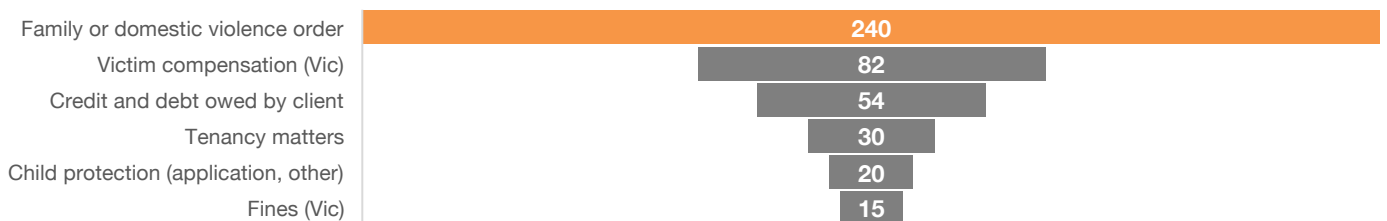
What the data tells us

- The Bushfire Recovery Project data indicates increased family violence post-disaster. As Graph 2 shows, 54% of civil law advices were provided for family violence orders - the most frequent 'problem type' of all civil law advice. Client data also reinforces these findings with 73% of clients presenting with a family violence indicator.
- In terms of family law, Graph 3 shows that child contacts or contact orders was the most frequent problem type and represented 48% of all family law problems. The high demand for family law advice also highlights the breakdown of relationships following a disaster. Sixty per cent (60%) of Bushfire Recovery clients were sole parents.
- HRCLS lawyers and partners confirmed the demand for the common areas of law for disaster recovery legal work. They also identified a range of more nuanced legal issues to emerge after the fires:
 - denial of insurance claims

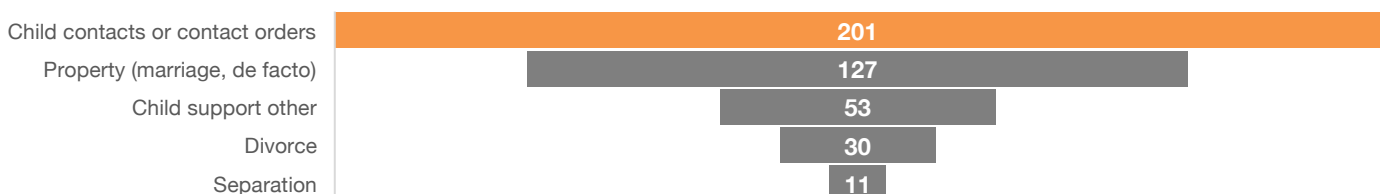
- complexities for farms located next to Crown Land or state forests
- disability discrimination
- elder abuse
- generational feuds
- interruptions to power, water, telephone and internet access
- legal remedies sought through the Ombudsman
- matters without a legal remedy
- motor vehicle accidents
- neighbour issues and disputes
- planning laws
- private road access issues
- succession planning and inheritance matters, especially for farmholders.

- Lawyers and practitioners consistently stated their observance that the bushfire disaster:
 - uncovered underlying issues such as lack of identity documents or unpaid debt
 - made existing issues worse
 - created new legal problems.
- Delays in identifying legal issues and/or access to legal support can have dire results, delaying legal action, increasing costs and compounding problems. The 'long tail' of disaster related issues was emphasised by the lawyers consulted for the evaluation, with lawyers still working to resolve some matters four years after the fires.
- Client data and anecdotal feedback also reinforces research findings which suggest that the most vulnerable in the community are most likely to shoulder the greatest burden of legal issues.⁷

Graph 2: Civil Law – Most frequent problem types 1 April 2022 – 4 February 2024



Graph 3: Family Law – Most frequent problem types 1 April 2022 – 4 February 2024



Enabling factors for the bushfire recovery work

Funding

The overarching enabling factor for the bushfire recovery work was the provision of Commonwealth and state funds. Without these funds it would not have been financially feasible for HRCLS, or their regional to undertake this work.

Service delivery

- Delivery of free, face-to-face legal services and community engagement activities to the impacted communities was a key enabler. Visits to local communities were critical. Local stakeholders were emphatic that affected community members needed to see lawyers face to face to discuss their issues.
- Provision of legal support from a regional legal service and from local professionals was also critical. Stakeholders emphasised that people impacted by the fires *'needed to hear from a trusted source and they need to know they are there for the long haul.'* It was essential that the staff they were consulting 'knew' and understood the region and could relate to rural community members and understand that sometimes just having a cup of tea and a quiet chat can be more impactful than anything else.
- HRCLS worked to earn the trust of communities through their reliability and 'keeping their word' and this was noticed by local communities. *'Word passes around pretty quickly about who is doing good work, who to avoid.'*
- HRCLS learnt and adapted their approaches throughout the project to meet the needs of communities. For example:
 - changing from a 1800 phone number (which may have looked like a call centre number) to a landline number centre when they understood the importance community members placed on speaking directly to a person.
 - reaching out to community at 'their' events, such as Ag Field Days or the Working Dog Training School events, sponsored by Gateway Health, Red Cross and Towong Shire.

Organisational factors

- Successful delivery of Bushfire Recovery support was also attributed to HRCLS:
 - willingness to collaborate and skills in maintaining organisational relationships
 - stability of staff in senior roles

- willingness to take on a leadership role in the region
- organisational practices, such as introducing new staff to their partners and providing an effective handover.

- HRCLS staff skills and attributes were also recognised as enabling factors, including their:
 - understanding of trauma and skills in trauma-informed legal practice
 - attitudes and interpersonal skills – *'very approachable'* *'very active in the sector'*, *'very generous'*
 - willingness to 'go the extra mile' such as home visits to individuals unable to get to a community centre and assisting small organisations with legal advice on minor issues
 - knowledge of the region and the individual local communities.

'HRCLS are 'exceptional at relationship building'... 'a leader in how they share knowledge and collaborate.'

(Specialist CLCs)

Regional partnerships

- The effectiveness of all levels of the Bushfire Recovery partnerships and referral pathways was a key enabler for the work and:
 - enabled clients to receive wraparound services
 - saved clients the burden of re-telling their stories as far as that was possible.
- As health services are one of the first services to be activated after a disaster, the connections to Gateway Health, UMFC financial counselling and local health providers was 'crucial.'
- Having regional and local partnerships enabled service providers to present a united front to the community, provide consistent messaging and to cross-promote and cross-refer.
- Regional partners noted that the mutual respect between service providers and the shared sense of common purpose to best serve the community and to learn together, was a key enabler for their work.

'The connections between agencies are good for our communities and good for our practitioners.' (CAV)

Strategic connections

- The connections to specialists CLCs greatly enhanced the Bushfire Recovery work by providing access to specialist advice and to worker helplines, eg. through CALC, SSRV, Tenants Vic. Effective referral pathways also enabled clients with complex matters to receive expert advice. The connections also enabled specialist services to work with HRCLS to provide targeted information sessions.
- Equally, specialist CLCs benefited from having access to the regional experiences for their strategic policy and systemic advocacy work, and for their work in supporting for the preparedness for disasters for the broader CLC sector.



Social Security Rights Victoria and HRCLS staff visiting Mount Beauty Neighbourhood Centre

Barriers and challenges

While many factors supported the Bushfire Recovery work, significant barriers and challenges were also encountered.

Community level

- Regional service providers emphasised the challenges of trying to engage traumatised communities, particularly communities that felt neglected and underserved by support services. One service provider described there being *'such a feeling in the town of "We were left so alone"'*.
- There are also challenges providing legal advice to traumatised individuals, which would apply to most clients. The psychological impacts of compounding trauma and post-traumatic stress affect memory, mood, the ability to concentrate, process or retain information. The trauma related not only to the bushfires as a discrete event, but also the

overwhelming nature of facing the long-term recovery process.

'In some ways the recovery has been harder than the actual fires. The fires were traumatic, but they came and went. The recovery feels like it is never-ending.' (HRCLS Case study)

In small towns, where services do not have shop fronts, one stakeholder explained that people are not experienced *'service users and they don't know how to ask for what they need, they're not used to having services available.'* Service providers also noted reluctance and embarrassment to ask for help, particularly in relation to financial matters and for the older generations.

- Travel and the lack of public transport in the region is a barrier, which regional stakeholders do not feel metropolitan funders fully appreciate. Local services noted that *'people won't travel down the mountain / to Wodonga / to Wangaratta.'* This is not a matter of being obtuse – the trip can be dangerous, many people do not have cars or do not drive, particularly the older residents. The trip from Corryong to Wangaratta takes 2.5 hours one way, from Bright to Wangaratta is 1.25 hours one way. There is one bus from Bright to Wangaratta three times per week.
- The level of isolation of some communities, including multicultural communities, and the reluctance to seek help or awareness that help is available, was a challenge for the project. There are concerns there may still be pockets of need in the community that have not been identified or addressed.
- The level of red tape and bureaucracy involved with recovery support was overwhelming for many residents. The need, for example, to prove your identity for relief funding, after losing all identity documents in the fire, and then being advised to 'go online' to apply for new documents was too much for some older residents. Stakeholders reported that bushfire-affected residents were triggered by the red tape and bureaucracy.

'Families have just been wrecked through the process. Some long-term residents found it just too hard and have packed up and left.' (Corryong Foodshare)

Local service system

- Small local organisations have, at times, been overwhelmed by demand and the calls on their services. Corryong Foodshare, for example, had a 300% increase in the number of clients seeking support. Corryong Neighbourhood House opened two days after the fires, and was operating as a community hub for weeks, before the local council relief centre was opened.

Regional service system

- HRCLS had ceased outreach services to Towong and Alpine Shires in the 2019/20 financial year, due to funding cuts. Gateway Health, CAV and UMFC were also not providing outreach services to these areas before the fires. Relationships with local communities essentially had to be built from scratch. Gateway Health remarked that they were shocked at the level of anger initially encountered.
- Staff recruitment and turnover was a key barrier for the Bushfire Recovery project, with turnover of staff in the lawyer and community development roles, resulting in:
 - additional demands on the overall management of delivering the project services
 - challenges recruiting new staff, difficult at the best of times for rural services, but more challenging with tight timelines and short-term employment contracts on offer
 - a loss to the organisation of knowledge and networks when staff members left and a need to establish new relationships between practitioners.
- Regional partners also experienced staff turnover, disrupting corporate knowledge and existing practitioner level relationships. The psychological demands imposed by recovery work and the rolling disasters of the fires, COVID and floods, contributed to staff burnout.
- Time pressures and responding to urgent needs were challenging throughout the project. Finding time, for example, to coordinate with regional partners was difficult. CAV staff reported that they were able to carpool with HRCLS staff on a couple of trips to Corryong. They would have preferred to do this more often as joint visits would make the trip safer, more collegiate, allow for informal planning and debriefing and would be more economical.

Service delivery

- Service delivery was interrupted at times by further disasters. For example, information sessions to be run by SSRV with Gateway Health planned for Mt Beauty Neighbourhood Centre for local communities in October 2022 had to be postponed due to severe flooding.
- Attempting to deliver conventional community legal education sessions was not as successful as hoped. HRCLS found that it was too difficult to engage the general community – people were worn out - by the fires, by the trauma, by the recovery, by COVID. During the project, the approach changed from holding a ‘session’ to the lawyer simply having a cuppa with groups at a Neighbourhood House and using a Preparedness Checklist or Legal Health Check to chat about the topics.
- The complexity and long-term nature of some legal issues, found in practice, was also confirmed through the 2023 Victorian Law Foundation Public Understanding of Law Survey (PULS) which found that ‘those affected by bushfires were more likely to have justiciable problems, have a greater number and longer lasting problems, and make greater use of services.’¹⁸ The PULS also found that ‘people rarely attributed or connected these problems to their experience of bushfires.’¹⁹

Strategic level

- The nature of the funding was seen as the most significant barrier to the Bushfire Recovery work, in particular funding distributed following a natural disaster for a limited time. Funding was ‘released so far after the event’ and not received until 2022, two years after the fires.
- Changes at strategic levels were also challenging. During the recovery period, Bushfire Recovery Victoria was re-shaped to Emergency Recovery Victoria. Whilst this was seen as an important acknowledgement of the reality of disasters beyond bushfires, there was also a significant turnover of staff, disrupting relationships and leading to a loss of corporate knowledge.

Future improvements

Some service gaps were noted, to be addressed in the future.

- The North-East Multicultural Association highlighted the importance of connecting with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, noting that HRCLS delivered preparedness sessions through their organisation. CALD communities may not be as connected to community services and less likely to be connected to mainstream media and emergency broadcasters such as the ABC.
- It was noted that communities are not static and new residents, including CALD residents, are moving to the regions as a result of cost-of-living pressures. It is imperative that new residents are informed about preparing for emergencies.
- Community stakeholders noted cancellations of insurance policies due to cost-of-living pressures and flagged this as an issue of concern.
- One stakeholder noted that more connections and partnerships are needed outside the community sector, with Agricultural business, real estate agents, banks and other peak bodies in the private sector.

Lessons from the bushfire recovery work

- **Human tragedies need a human response.** Communities needed to see people face to face. Stakeholders reported that providing in person legal support 'humanised the lawyers' for communities, especially important for people who were intimidated by legal issues and may never have met with a lawyer.
- **Communities need to be listened to.** Communities which have been under-serviced for years have developed their own independence and resilience – they didn't need unknown services and professionals to come in and tell them what they need. They have their own views on how to best work with them. In addition, what works for one community, may well be different for another community.
- **Communities want to engage with a familiar service that will be there for the long term** and who live alongside them. While surge workforces staffed by metropolitan staff may have been necessary immediately after the fires, the message from local stakeholders was that communities

essentially don't want, or are reluctant, to engage with people from outside the region who do not know or understand the area, the relationship of the communities to the land, the agricultural or rural lifestyle and the needs of the communities – irrespective of their positive intentions. As communities which have been underserved for many years, the influx of various services after the bushfires heightened their reluctance to engage. Strong community relationships are best forged outside the crisis period.

- **Community legal education is needed before the disaster and is difficult to provide after the disaster.** There is a growing acknowledgement within the community of the need to understand the potential legal issues of a disaster and to ensure that they are prepared, but after a disaster is a difficult time to attract the general community.
- **Engage community at their community events.** The Bushfire Recovery Project found greater success engaging the community at events they were attending, such as The Working Dog Training School events, sponsored by Gateway Health, the Red Cross and Towong Shire Council. Farmers are unlikely to leave their farm for events that aren't directly related to their working life.
- **Recognise community vulnerabilities.** The client data indicated a high level of vulnerability, such as a high incidence of disability and/or mental health issues. Older people in rural communities are less likely to be digitally connected. Older cohorts are likely to have left school quite early to work on farms or in rural industries. Their literacy skills may be fairly basic, and legal documents or 'legalese' can be confusing, overwhelming and stressful. While multicultural communities may be smaller in rural areas, this may increase their isolation in the community. These vulnerabilities need to be recognised and require sensitive responses from professionals.
- **Recognise that communities can be both resilient and vulnerable at the same time.** Community stakeholders described the resilience and independence of their communities, saying '*we're resilient because we've had to learn to live on our own.*' Corryong is close to having its own power grid, and most farms have generators. Yackandandah in the Alpine Shire, is known as the town with the community-owned petrol station, purchased through shares more than 20 years ago, rather than let the town's only petrol station close.

Disaster recovery support services need to be provided recognising community's strengths and history, as well as their vulnerabilities.

- **Family violence and indicators of family violence can present differently in rural communities.** There is a growing awareness of an increased incidence of family violence after a disaster, but it is important for new staff, especially from metropolitan areas, to recognise different risks and presentations in rural communities. For example, the high presence of rifles, the level of isolation for victim-survivors living on rural properties, no police station or a single officer and 12-hour police stations in small towns, which means that it may take police from a 24-hour station in Wodonga two hours to respond to an emergency after-hours call for assistance from Corryong. Further, within small communities, there is a reluctance to disclose family violence matters for fear of 'everyone' knowing, word spreading in the community, and perpetrators learning of disclosures through their own networks.
- **When support is needed, digital communication cannot be relied on at the time of the disaster.**

Strategic issues

- **Climate change induced disasters need to be acknowledged as the new business as usual.** All stakeholders consulted observed that the increasing frequency and intensity of climate change related disasters required an acknowledgement that response to, and recovery from, disasters is now 'business as usual' rather than a series of isolated and discrete events. Some Alpine Shire residents, for example, experienced unprecedented fires, landslips that isolated their communities, floods on two occasions, serious storms and smaller bushfires in the space of two years – at the same time as a 'once in 100 years' global pandemic.
- **Rather than scaling up and winding down after each event, rural service providers need to have sufficient permanent staff to respond to disasters.** Scaling up the outreach model for the Bushfire Recovery Project took at least six months. Building, maintaining and managing organisational and community relationships takes staff time. Without funding, this is either not feasible for rural service providers, or it is done at a significant cost to organisations. Participation in local networks and committees, is essential for coordinated service

delivery, but also takes staff time. Delivery of services to traumatised, disaster affected communities takes time. CLCs, as well as health and other community service providers reported that rural organisations need adequate funding to ensure their preparedness to respond to disasters and assist with community recovery.

- **Funding models need to recognise and fund the time and effort required to create strong community connections.** Establishing partnerships and building trusting relationships with communities were vital activities for the HRCLS Bushfire Recovery work. Relationship building takes time. Travel to communities takes time. This time needs to be included in funding models.
- **Uncertain or delayed funding creates uncertainty of employment.** The BROLI project had eight staff move through the two lawyer positions. Four staff were in their roles for less than 12 months. Rural professional services face perennial challenges attracting staff. Short term disaster recovery funding does not make rural recruitment any easier and inevitably results in time spent on recruitment instead of supporting the community with their legal needs.
- **Recovery work requires specific and specialised skills.** Staff working in disaster recovery must be skilled, trauma-informed practitioners and able to work sensitively and supportively with traumatised communities. It is not possible to recruit lawyers at short notice with the requisite knowledge, skills and attitudes, nor to attract staff with these skills with short term contracts. Community legal centres invest considerable resources in careful recruitment and professional development. Without consistent funding, rural service providers face staff turnover, with losses in knowledge and relationships.
- **Recovery workers require appropriate management and support.** Repeated exposure to traumatised clients and traumatic stories can be traumatising for staff. CLCs and service providers supporting recovery work need to provide appropriate training on vicarious trauma and trauma-informed practice, supports for staff including internal and external supervision, psychological debriefing, reflective practice meetings and informal debriefing with peers, as well as general staff wellbeing supports.

If not, organisations open themselves to the risk of psychological injuries to staff. However, it must be

recognised that there are costs to organisations, in terms of time and money, in providing these vital supports.

- **A suite of new legal needs and issues is starting to emerge from disasters.** Specialist CLCs noted new legal needs and complications emerging from experiences of disasters, including legal issues that do not have a legal remedy. For example, social security laws are not framed with disasters in mind, yet impact many people affected by disasters. Planning, insurance and business interruptions are emerging areas of legal need, but most generalist CLCs do not have this technical expertise.
- **Networking and collaborative work strengthens communities and provides broader benefits, but they require ongoing collaborative work, upskilling and resourcing.** Local networks and partnerships facilitate delivery of more coordinated and holistic services to people affected by disasters. Members of the Disaster Legal Help Victoria Community of Practice and the FCLC Disaster and Climate Justice Working Group noted the importance of sharing information, learning from direct experience, and gathering knowledge for advocacy – not only to governments, but also to the insurance industry, for example. The shared learning was also useful for helping to shape training, legal education and resource development. Rural CLCs benefit from having efficient access to the expertise of specialist CLCs, the ability to refer clients with complex cases, to receive training, upskilling and secondary consultations. Coordinated and collaborative work and learning at all levels benefits individuals, legal services, local communities, regions and the state. With appropriate funding support, there is scope for more collaborative planning to occur to further improve the efficiency and effectiveness of these collaborative relationships.

Conclusion

The HRCLS Bushfire Recovery Project was funded through the Commonwealth Government's Legal Assistance Bushfire Support to assist communities impacted by the devastating Black Summer bushfires of 2019/20 to address their legal needs, with a particular focus on civil and family violence legal needs, given the known association between family violence and disasters and the lack of awareness of civil law issues in the community.

Funding supported the engagement of two lawyers and one community development worker. Over 22 months, from 1 April 2022 to 4 February 2024, HRCLS lawyers supported 267 clients, providing legal advices, undertaking legal tasks, referrals and other representations.

The project's achievements are only partially indicated through the data.

To achieve its aims supporting community recovery in the most significantly impacted areas of Alpine and Towong Shire, HRCLS worked in close partnership with key regional partners – CAV, Gateway Health and UMFC – in order to provide holistic support addressing legal, family violence, mental health and financial issues.

Additional partnerships were developed with specialist CLCs to address complex legal needs beyond the expertise of a generalist CLC. Relationships were also created with local community organisations in the towns across the two impacted shires, providing the gateway to engage the community.

Local community organisations hosted HRCLS outreach clinics. Legal education and information sessions were also provided at these centres for community members, and for community volunteers, contributing to building local capacity.

The evaluation found that the three levels of partnerships established through the project with regional partners, specialist CLCs and with small community organisations created an important scaffold of support for the community. The partnerships at all levels were respectful and of mutual benefit, and most importantly served the community.

HRCLS also worked to promote their services and engage the community at local events, such as

Agricultural Field Days and Working Dog Training School events, often alongside their regional partners.

The project endured many challenges, including initially establishing relationships with remote and isolated communities who had lived through weeks of being encircled by fires and suffered losses to their livelihoods, communities and networks.

The vulnerability of clients is evident from the demographic data, with most clients experiencing financial stress, disability, and/or mental health issues and at risk of homelessness. Added to this were the experiences of extended and multiple traumas, frustrations with bureaucracy, loss of livelihoods, property and, for nearly three quarters of clients, indicators of family violence. Legal issues faced by clients ranged from family law matters, disability discrimination, Centrelink matters, insurance, housing credit and debt, to planning laws and elder abuse.

HRCLS lawyers' competence in providing trauma-informed legal support was essential to keeping the services functioning. As was their commitment to building genuine, trusted and long-term relationships with community organisations. HRCLS understood the clear message from these traumatised communities that they wanted face-to-face appointments with lawyers. Showing up for local communities, nurturing relationships and participating in community events all required an investment of time and effort - the round trip alone from Wodonga to Corryong may take four to five hours of driving time.

The funding model caused recruitment challenges for HRCLS, and also their regional partners, when only short-term contracts could be offered for demanding, regional roles.

The project has generated a range of important lessons for providing legal support to communities after disasters, which can be shared with peak bodies, specialist CLCs and the CLC sector more broadly.

The key lesson that all stakeholders felt needed to be taken from the experience was to acknowledge and prepare for the new 'business as usual' nature of rolling disasters facing regional communities. As the project reaches its term, there is scope to celebrate the strong community connections created and support provided. But there is also concern that the lessons from this, and other, disasters may be overlooked and the scaffold of support may be withdrawn, leaving communities and service providers facing the prospect of starting from scratch next time round.

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