

Management of support services at Port Arthur

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The Tasmanian Emergency Welfare Plan identifies the Department of Community and Health Services as lead agency for providing personal services in the event of a disaster. The department is also responsible for the planning and co-ordination of these activities.

The range of recovery services for which the department is responsible includes community counselling and debriefing, accommodation, child care, clothing, legal services, financial assistance and referral services for victims.

Immediately after the shootings, the Department established a recovery centre at the SES Headquarters at Nubeena, 15 km from Port Arthur.

The management of a comparatively large, 24-hour relief effort in a small rural community required a delicate balancing of resources while being sensitive to community needs and expectations. The centre played a significant role in ensuring that support services were responsive to community needs.

Introduction

An underlying principle in the provision of personal services is that recovery works best when conducted at the local level with the active participation of the affected community and maximum reliance on local capacities and expertise.

Early on Monday 29 April (the day after the shootings) a team of six counsellors established a presence at the Nubeena centre, providing an immediate information, advice and counselling support service. By that evening it was apparent that an operations centre was required to support these services and identify the on-going needs of affected individuals and the community.

A management team assembled in Hobart by mid-morning on the Tuesday and arrived at Nubeena early that afternoon. The SES centre was an ideal location as it was close to the Council chambers and was seen by local people as a legitimate focus for support services. It also enabled us to establish close links with the SES volunteers who were to

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perform a crucial role in working with our teams on the Peninsula.

By noon Wednesday the operations centre was fully established, providing a local base for 24-hour, personal support services. During the first two weeks, the centre was staffed by 35 counsellors and 5 administrative staff. Staff were rostered on three shifts between 7.30 a.m. and 10.00 p.m. each day. Two workers were rostered on an overnight telephone counselling service between 10.00 p.m. and 7.30 a.m. This service was based across the road from the centre in a room at the local motel.

The teams worked two days on, with an overnight stay on the Peninsula, then rostered off for a day between shifts.

On the Peninsula, nearly 400 people (out of a population of 1600 people) sought face-to-face or telephone counselling or information. A significant number requested follow-up assistance.

About 80 individuals were registered as having made direct contact with the operations centre in the first week. The actual number may be higher as not all contacts were able to be registered in the first two days of operations. The second week was much quieter, with demand for direct services to individuals dropping to six a day. However many individuals had multiple contacts.

There were no discernible trends in relation to average contact times. Some individuals were seeking information and left almost immediately after being handed pamphlets, while others required several hours contact time. One hour plus seems to be an accepted average.

The Nubeena centre remained the major focus of relief efforts. However, the Department also set up counselling sites at the Taranna Community Hall and the Eaglehawk Neck Fire Station within one week of the shootings. The sites are located approximately 10 and 17 kilometres respectively from Port Arthur.

These sites were established after requests from local government and members of the communities. It was important to respond to such a strong request from the community.

A perception existed within these communities that all services were based at Nubeena. The provision of counselling services within the Eaglehawk Neck and Taranna communities was seen as an acknowledgment of these areas as communities in their own right.

The sites attracted few referrals during the time they operated. However any discussion related to closing them down met with a strong community reaction. The communities saw them as a safety net if people needed them.

No one in the community actually expressed a personal need to access services at the two sites, but they were certain that others in the community would. This expression of concern for others was to become a common theme in the initial weeks of recovery operations and required special attention and sensitive management by the Operations Centre at Nubeena.

The Taranna and Eaglehawk Neck sites closed after the third week of operations once the initial crisis had passed, having fulfilled a vital, symbolic role.

Roles and responsibilities

Nubeena Centre management

The operations centre at Nubeena was managed by a co-ordinator who was responsible for the operation of the counselling services and liaison with community groups, local government and other agencies working in the area.

A counselling co-ordinator was responsible for rosters, in co-operation with the Hobart operations centre, and for ensuring that requests for assistance were responded to appropriately.

The counselling co-ordinator was assisted by two experienced counsellors who checked each referral sheet as it was completed. This was to ensure that individual requests for assistance were followed up and to prevent over-servicing. The risk of over-servicing was

high due to members of the community referring family, friends, neighbours and work colleagues for support. Multiple referrals were common and a system of assessing which ones should be responded to and in what manner was essential.

A major difficulty encountered in those first few hectic days was keeping track of the whereabouts of staff and visitors to the centre. By Wednesday a system of signing visitors and counsellors in and out was established. This system ensured that we knew who had been to the centre, their reason for being there and most importantly, where the counselling teams were at any given time. It made the job of the counselling co-ordinator much easier, especially when advising members of the community where particular counsellors were and when they could be expected back.

An important step in involving the local community in the recovery process was making use of local resources. In particular it was seen to be important to use local suppliers wherever possible.

To this end, counselling teams were accommodated in motels on the Peninsula during their shifts, and meals were catered for locally. Wherever possible the team purchased goods and services from local businesses rather than having them sent from Hobart.

The co-ordination team met at 8.30 a.m. and 5.00 p.m. daily. The purpose of the meetings was to review centre operations at the end of each day and to ensure that lessons learned were implemented the following day. Feedback from the operational debriefing of counsellors from the previous evening was provided to the morning meeting and adjustments to rosters or tasks were undertaken accordingly.

Minutes from these meetings formed the basis for daily briefing which were faxed to the operations centre in Hobart.

Communications between Nubeena and the Hobart operations centre were difficult during the first week. However, despite some initial problems, requests for changes to rosters or the provision of additional resources were responded to quickly and without question. By the beginning of the second week a system of regular tele-conferences was in place and communications were more orderly and systematic from that time on.

An audit of security procedures undertaken at the end of the first week identified the need for locked brief cases, filing cabinets and a shredder. These were delivered on site within hours of the request being issued.

As it was not possible to install a secure landline for the computers, confidential information was transported to Hobart in locked brief cases at the end of each shift.

The operations centre handled a large number of visitors from other relief agencies, the media and politicians. All were requesting information about how the community was coping and how they could best respond to the situation.

The provision by our department of a media liaison officer at the Council chambers ensured that requests from the media could be redirected.

State Emergency Service volunteers

The local SES volunteers played an important role in enabling the department to provide support services on the Peninsula through the provision of local knowledge and expertise.

Many had been in the front line response on the afternoon of the shootings and continued on duty over the coming weeks, working with counselling staff at the operations centre. They were able to provide advice and assistance on local conditions and services. They also kept the operations centre stocked with hot food and drinks and ensured that essential services were maintained. They earned the respect and friendship of all the staff who passed through the operations centre.

The partnership and co-operation between these volunteers and the department was an outstanding success of the operations centre.

Role of the Army

A valuable contribution to the success of the recovery centre was the role played by a psychology unit from the Australian Defence Force Command Centre. This unit arrived at Nubeena on Tuesday evening, offering to assist in the establishment of the operations centre.

The Army team members were all of senior rank and several had experience in overseas 'hot spots' such as Rwanda and Mogadishu. They undertook a variety of roles including logistical support and advice to the management team on centre operations.

One of their most valuable contributions was as observers, feeding back information about what was working and what was not. It was an essential and highly successful element of centre operations.

The Army personnel commented on how difficult it was to remain aloof from the frenetic activity of the centre during that first week. However, both adminis-

trative and counselling staff commented on the strong impact the Army personnel had in reducing their stress levels by providing 'islands of calm in the storm'.

The Army team also assisted with emergency counselling, especially in the evenings when the rostered teams were called out on home visits.

They were also part of a counselling support team that attended the first community information session, held four days after the shootings at the local school hall.

Communications

Communications on the Peninsula and from the Peninsula to Hobart were fragmented and difficult (to say the least) in the first week of operations.

The local telephone exchange could barely cope with the volume of calls from the Emergency Services, the local community and our own operations centre. One of our first priorities was to arrange for additional lines. A line was dedicated to communications between Nubeena and Hobart. Another was set up as a local 'Hot Line' for the public. A third line was installed for use by the administrative staff, who were liaising with local businesses regarding accommodation, provision of meals and other services for the operations centre.

The turn around time for a request to Telstra was usually only a matter of hours, a remarkable achievement considering the demand from a range of groups working on the Peninsula.

We discovered that mobile phones did not work on the Peninsula. This made communication with key operation centre personnel impossible when they were away from the centre. Within hours of discussing the problem with Hobart operations centre, three satellite phones had been ordered from interstate. They arrived by air freight the following day. Once staff had mastered the intricacies of pointing the miniature satellite dish due east and at an elevation of 30 degrees, communications in the field was much easier.

The satellite phones were only needed for the first 1½ weeks of operations and proved invaluable in overcoming the difficulties that the terrain presented for mobile communications.

Lessons learned

Management of a 24-hour presence on the Tasman Peninsula.

The management of a comparatively large, 24-hour government presence in a small rural community required a

delicate balancing of resources while being sensitive to community perceptions and expectations.

There was some tension in the community between the perception of the government 'taking over' and government being responsive to community needs. An often-repeated comment that we heard in those first weeks after the shootings was 'it feels like we have been invaded'.

We all heard concerns, expressed repeatedly, about the highly-visible presence of large numbers of government vehicles and personnel wearing government identification badges. These concerns were always qualified with appreciative comments about the supportive and caring role undertaken by individual workers.

In order to manage the ambivalent reaction to our presence, the operations centre developed a code of behaviour for staff. Upon arrival, staff were briefed on their role and its impact on the community. Wherever possible, they were to travel and socialise in small groups. This was especially important for staff who were staying overnight in local accommodation. Staff were asked not to congregate and socialise in places that were seen to belong to the locals, such as public bars and restaurants. A roster for lunch and evening meals at local hotels was arranged to spread the groups out. Each group left the restaurants soon after completing their meals, and not delaying any longer than necessary.

Staff who had been working long, stressful days found this difficult, but understood the need to be sensitive to community feelings. It was especially important to understand that many of the staff working in the hotels, restaurants and shops had lost relatives, friends or a member of their immediate family. It was not unusual in those early days to encounter staff or guests in tears or exhibiting other signs of severe emotional stress. Everybody did their best to respond sensitively to these incidents.

Staff who were being debriefed back in Hobart commented upon the added stress that this placed upon them while on the Peninsula.

Convergence

Wherever possible recovery managers need to ensure that their intervention into a community has been negotiated with the community and is responsive and relevant to their needs. Convergence of people and organisations who have not negotiated their presence can often

disrupt community recovery rather than assist it.

Convergence of individuals, fringe religious groups and independent counsellors from within Tasmania and other states contributed to the concern of some community members about over servicing and invasion of privacy.

A common response became 'the next person to ask me if I am OK, or if I need counselling will get a punch on the nose!'. There was no ready answer to the question of how to control this convergence. The issue was discussed at community meetings with local government and management at the site. After discussion with community representatives and recovery centre staff, it was agreed that accredited counsellors would wear photo identification badges at all times and ensure that they only contacted people who had requested assistance.

Wherever possible, outreach services were offered through existing community networks where friends, family or work colleagues were able to introduce counsellors to people identified as requiring support. This strategy assisted in decreasing unwarranted intrusion on people's privacy. Individual complaints were followed up and those found to be responsible were informed of community concern and invited to co-ordinate their activities through the operations centre.

Importance of symbolism

How recovery agencies are perceived to respond to a disaster can often be more important than what they actually do. The message generated by symbolic gestures can be more significant than what is often seen to be a more logical and efficient use of resources by recovery managers. Recovery managers need to ensure that this is taken into account in the planning and response phases.

The establishment of the Eaglehawk Neck and Taranna sites is an example of the significance of symbolism in recovery management.

Treatment versus support

The nature of the response to the shootings generated a debate about the community reaction to professional terminology i.e. the community equated counselling with treatment. The community was much more accepting of services labelled as 'personal support' than those labelled 'counselling'.

Literature advertising the services provided by the operations centre was altered to emphasise the information, advice and support role rather than

counselling. This was done after consultation with community representatives.

An interesting outcome, however, has been a perception that counselling is now more widely understood and accepted in the community than it was prior to the shootings.

The community commented most favourably upon those counsellors who provided practical assistance and 'a cup of tea and a shoulder to cry on'. One person remarked that the 'counsellors were great, especially those who let you know it was alright to cry, or shed a tear themselves'.

Nature of the emergency

Recovery management planning and training has tended to focus on providing accommodation, material assistance and practical help to victims of natural disasters, such as flood and fire. The scale and nature of this event was completely different. We had to adjust to providing personal support on an unprecedented scale. The fact that it was another human being who had deliberately shot so many people was almost beyond comprehension. Many workers commented upon how much more difficult it was for them to function effectively in the first few weeks of the response.

Recovery managers need to understand that the scale and nature of an emergency will affect the ability of workers to function effectively and they need to provide appropriate supports and debriefing to suit the circumstances.

Staff continuity

An additional management pressure on the recovery centre was ensuring continuity of counselling staff. Many individuals and families would only accept support from the worker with whom they had initially made contact following the shootings. They felt that that worker understood what they had been through. They did not want to have to tell their story all over again. The sheer volume of calls for assistance in the first two weeks made it difficult to meet these requests on occasions.

There were many examples of staff having formed close, personal relationships with victims and being asked to accompany victims and their families to the church service at the historic site, funerals and other significant community events. Many staff returned to the Peninsula on their rostered days off to honour these commitments. Incorporating these activities into the rosters proved to be a logistical nightmare.

The need for flexible management arrangements

In the aftermath of an emergency there is a need for management arrangements to be flexible and responsive to community need. There were many examples of innovative and sometimes heroic management decisions in the weeks following the shootings. There was an all pervading 'can-do' attitude amongst those working on the Tasman Peninsula during the initial crisis period. Managers need to ensure that this energy is productively directed and not stifled.

Composition of response teams

Six member teams (five workers and a co-ordinator) seemed to be the most effective unit. Where possible workers operated in pairs. Feedback suggests that those who had worked together previously were the most effective and the least stressed at the end of their shifts. Managers need to ensure that this is built into future planning.

Worker isolation

Recovery managers need to ensure that mechanisms are in place to enable 'front line' workers to receive regular briefings on the broader impact of the emergency.

Staff commented on the sense of isolation, of feeling cut off from the rest of the world while working on the Peninsula. They often referred to 'coming into' and 'going out' of the area. One of the local residents commented upon his surprise at seeing people in the streets of Hobart with tears in their eyes. He had not understood how the tragedy had impacted upon the rest of Tasmanian and Australia until he travelled to Hobart for the memorial service. This was a feeling shared by many workers.

Many who worked on the Peninsula for extended periods of time were surprised by the effort required to re-adjust to being back in their own communities. Everybody relied upon the media to fill in the gaps about what was happening in 'the outside world'. Those who had access to the back copies of newspapers and tapes of television news coverage seemed to adjust more quickly than those who did not.

Conclusions

The Department of Community and Health Services moved quickly to establish a recovery operations centre at Nubeena from which support services were provided.

Heavy demands were placed upon support services on the Peninsula in the immediate aftermath of the shootings.

Feedback from the affected community has indicated that these services were seen to be appropriate and to have met community expectations.

By the end of the third week the crisis response phase was winding down. A team of representatives from non-government organisations and State and Commonwealth agencies was assembled. Their brief was to provide ongoing personal support and to evaluate the need for longer-term strategies. The team was based at the SES centre for a four-week period during this transition phase of the operations.

Did we make a difference?

The answer to this question would seem to be self-evident to recovery managers. However, I have been asked the question a sufficient number of times since the shootings to question our role in the immediate aftermath of the shootings.

A disaster of the magnitude of the shootings at Port Arthur undermines people's sense of normality. Social supports and helping networks within a community become disrupted. Many experience intense feelings of loss, grief and anger. They need to understand that what is happening to them is a normal response to an abnormal situation.

The more information that affected communities have available to them, the less likely they are to require ongoing support and specialist services. Those who understand what is happening to them tend to cope better than those who do not have that awareness.

The operations centre provided advice, support and information to the community to enable them to have a better understanding of these effects and to guide their own recovery. A significant number of individuals required immediate support or counselling due to compounding effects of this and past traumas.

It is the local networks that work best in providing supports to disaster affected communities. The role of the operations centre was to support local networks to manage their own recovery. Practical assistance was also seen as important by the community. For example, professional child care was provided to enable parents and child care workers to attend significant community events such as memorial services and funerals.

Later, massage sessions offered by the Catholic Welfare agency Centacare were booked out. A significant number of Tasman Peninsula residents who did not seek counselling or other support

services attended the sessions and referred many others.

The General Manager of the Tasman Council, Greg Burgess, best summed up the difference we made in his address to the Welfare Administrators Conference in Hobart in 1996.

'It was our responsibility to manage our own recovery. The Department understood that. It did not come in and take over, but offered support, advice and encouragement. When we faltered or were unsure of which way to turn, they were there with a steadying hand to guide us. At no time did we feel as if we had lost control or been taken over.'

That is what we set out to do and that was the difference we made.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations can be drawn from the operation of the recovery centre.

- Relief agencies need to be aware of the significant impact they can have on small disaster-affected communities. Sensitivity to community expectations and feelings is essential.
- Convergence of people and organisations who have not negotiated their presence can often disrupt community recovery rather than assist it.
- The provision of practical assistance in the form of 'a cup of tea and a shoulder to cry on' is more appropriate than providing treatment in the crisis phase of an emergency.
- Recovery managers need to understand that the scale and nature of an emergency will affect the ability of workers to function effectively and of the need to provide appropriate supports and debriefing to suit the circumstances.
- Providing continuity of workers to disaster-affected people is an important issue that needs to be factored into planning and responses.
- Management arrangements need to be flexible and responsive to the needs of those affected.
- Teams of workers who know each other are more effective and are less stressed by the emergency than those who are working together for the first time.
- Managers need to ensure that 'front line' workers have opportunities to access information on the broader aspects of the disaster.
- Managers and co-ordinators should have access to observers to monitor operations and provide feedback on operational issues.