

Foreword



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Recognising the importance of the subject matter it was a pleasure to be invited to contribute to this edition of the *Australian Journal of Emergency Management* on the topic of warnings.

The Australian journey regarding warnings has been a long one, and while the concept of a national warning system had been under consideration for some time, momentum really started to gain pace following the development, testing and analysis of the Community Information and Warning System in Victoria in 2004. While the systems, processes and technology used for the trial were ahead of their time, Australia has not sat on its laurels. Since then, Australia has developed and implemented a national warning system, Emergency Alert, which has progressed in leaps and bounds.

It would come as no surprise that the issue of warnings and public information comes up frequently in inquiries. In the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission and numerous inquiries since including, most recently, the independent Inquiry into the 2019–20 Victorian Fire Season, the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements and the independent bushfire inquiries in New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland, the issue of how to improve capacity to provide timely and meaningful warnings and public information arises. In response to this scrutiny, and with a natural desire for continuous improvement, it is fair to say that the emergency management sector continues to work hard to improve what has been developed. Improvement is based on experience of an increasing frequency and duration of emergencies that present increased complexity, reveal greater community need and create a greater expectation of warning systems that are all things to all people.

Having a technologically advanced warning system is one thing, however, its capacity to provide enhanced community safety outcomes relies on more than just technology. Community awareness of risk is important to ensure that warnings are received in context and community education about the purpose, capacity and limitations of the system is important. It is crucial that a warning system be more than just a method of providing a call to action. It also needs to provide timely and accurate information to assist in community decision-making as, after all, we are increasingly expecting communities to share responsibility for their safety outcomes.

Warning and information systems are integral as part of a broader functional community safety system. Ongoing research, education and appropriate investment are enablers to continuous improvement in this critical space. No system is perfect, and we will always, through a combination of planned improvement activity and the inevitable inquiries, find ways to do it better.

As I frequently say when conducting inquiries, ‘Anything that hurts you can teach you, and if it keeps hurting you it’s because you haven’t learnt’. This applies equally to the improvement of warning systems as it does any other emergency management activity. I look forward to seeing further advances in the provision of warnings and information in the future.