

# Evacuation centres are lifeboats, not cruise ships: managing expectations and prioritising improvements

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Resilience NSW has accountability for coordinating evacuation centres during disasters. Evacuation centres provide basic needs for those with nowhere else to go. However, meeting these needs and managing expectations during the catastrophic 2019–20 bushfire season proved challenging.

## What we did

The 2019–20 bushfire season in NSW was the state's worst natural hazard event, causing the destruction of over 2,400 homes and resulting in a significant disaster relief workload. The Welfare Services Functional Area (WSFA) hosted by Resilience NSW and supported by multiple agencies, operated 100 evacuation centres where 30,000 evacuees were registered and over 8,000 people were placed in emergency commercial accommodation.

Historically, there has only been one or two evacuation centres at a time, which are managed locally. In this event, due to the size, scale and duration of the continued operations, state-level coordination became more important.

## The challenges

An evacuation centre is a lifeboat, not a cruise ship. It exists in times of emergencies to provide basic needs of individuals, families and their animals. Accommodating the needs of over 30,000 evacuees was challenging, especially if people required greater needs that cannot be accessed in an evacuation centre or had inflated expectations about the levels of comfort that would be provided.

With multiple evacuation centres open 24 hours, in some cases for many weeks, resourcing of staff became a challenge. In some circumstances, staff with little or no training were deployed to work in complex roles and experienced very stressful

conditions. Evacuation Centres are staffed by Department of Communities and Justice and supported by Salvation Army, Disaster Recovery Chaplains, Red Cross and Anglicare. The situation was constantly evolving as evacuation centres opened and closed based on the escalation of the bushfires. Resourcing and rostering for these centres were significant tasks that was hampered by a lack of access to some areas.

Several evacuation centres on the NSW South Coast were over capacity due to a swell in population during the holiday season. Road closures inhibited evacuees moving to other areas or transiting through the area. Preferably, evacuees should seek accommodation with friends or family and consider staying overnight at an evacuation centre their last resort. In the best circumstances, the WSFA provides commercial accommodation for people with the greatest need such as the elderly, people with disabilities and families with young children. This was a challenge due to low vacancy rates during peak holiday season and resulted in many people requiring the facilities of evacuation centres.

Another challenge was the presentation of residents from aged care residences at evacuation centres. In some circumstances, there was no option but for residents to sleep on the floor. Aged care residences are required to have pre-approved arrangements with other facilities or commercial providers to house their residents in such events. Evacuation centre staff were confronted by the arrival of aged care residents as they are not nurses or carers, yet they were expected to

provide care to individuals who required significant support. It was also confronting for elderly individuals who were distressed by the emergency and were taken to a facility where they could not access suitable care. There were complaints made against aged care residences that did not have adequate emergency procedures in place. This resulted in a recommendation from the NSW Bushfire Inquiry to review the Evacuation Decision Guidelines for Private Health and Residential Care Facilities.

Evacuation centre staff also encountered people with significant medical needs who were dropped off by their carer. In one circumstance a lady in a wheelchair who was non-verbal was left unattended with no information provided about her medical requirements while her carer left to attend to their home. As an evacuation centre can only provide basic first aid, this individual was relocated to a hospital.

The support of vulnerable people is a challenging issue that has no easy solution. There are areas that can be improved within an evacuation centre however, the key is early preparedness and ensuring that people with special needs have an emergency plan in place. It is unrealistic to expect that an evacuation centre will have all the same comforts of someone's home and evacuation centre staff are not medical professionals nor carers.

Major disasters attract media attention and often pull on the heartstrings of people wanting to help. With 2,400 homes destroyed by bushfires, communities rallied and provided support through donations, with millions of dollars going to charities to support affected residents. The issue for many evacuation centres was unsolicited donations ranging from clothes, toys, appliances, food and even furniture that was dropped off at the centres. NSW Government policy mandates that physical donations must not be accepted, and people are encouraged to make monetary donations to charities. Despite this, large volumes of donations were left at centres. This created a space problem and, in many circumstances, disposal of second-hand items resulted in a cost to government.

## NSW Bushfire Inquiry

The ability to learn lessons following a disaster is critical and NSW was subject to both the NSW Bushfire Inquiry<sup>1</sup> as well as the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements. The NSW Bushfire Inquiry produced recommendations for the sector, several of which Resilience NSW is implementing in evacuation centres. One recommendation includes increased training for evacuation centre staff and Resilience NSW has rolled out evacuation centre training for over 1,100 staff from the Department of Communities and Justice to better prepare for future events. Resilience NSW will also work with the community partner agencies to support them in a targeted recruitment campaign and to induct additional volunteers.

Further work is underway to address recommendations in relation to auditing identified evacuation centres to ensure they are fit-for-purpose with a risk assessment and consideration

of alternative power sources. Resilience NSW, along with State Emergency Management Committee (SEMC) stakeholders, are auditing facilities as well as capturing data at a centralised point. Currently, the selection and audit of evacuation centre locations occurs at the Local Emergency Management Committees to ensure local risks are considered. One emerging challenge is that they have different systems and there is no state-level list of either the approved locations or whether an audit has been conducted. Resilience NSW is working with SEMC members to update critical state-level guidelines, including the NSW Evacuation Management Guidelines<sup>2</sup>. This will include better approaches to support people's animals and their registration during evacuations as well as updated criteria around the suitability of centre locations.

Further changes have been required in the management of evacuations and evacuation centres since February 2020 due to the pandemic. It is a complex scenario to evacuate large groups in one location together while minimising the risk of spreading COVID-19. Resilience NSW worked with NSW Health and other SEMC representatives to create COVID-safe evacuation plans. A supplement was added to the NSW Evacuation Management Guidelines stipulating ways to reduce the spread of COVID-19 during evacuation. These include evacuation as the last resort and encouraging people to stay with friends and family. In the event evacuation is necessary, anyone who has COVID-19 or their close contacts who are self-isolating will be accommodated separately by NSW Health and will not be permitted to attend an evacuation centre. Physical evacuation centres will have, physical distancing, sanitisation, additional cleaning, staggered meals times and a focus on putting evacuees in commercial accommodation quickly rather than staying in the evacuation centre.

A new COVID-safe concept is a drive-through evacuation centre where evacuees remain in their vehicle while they are triaged and a needs assessment is completed before they are sent to suitable accommodation.

The experience of managing such a large evacuation significantly increased Resilience NSW's experience and capability. During the floods in March 2021, where 33 evacuation centres were established, lessons learned from the 2019–20 bushfire season had already been implemented. There were more trained and prepared staff and processes were fresh in mind. Resilience NSW is committed to implementing improvements and building capability.

## Endnotes

1. Final Report of the NSW Bushfire Inquiry July 2020, at [www.nsw.gov.au/nsw-government/projects-and-initiatives/nsw-bushfire-inquiry](http://www.nsw.gov.au/nsw-government/projects-and-initiatives/nsw-bushfire-inquiry).
2. NSW Evacuation Management Guidelines March 2014, at: [www.opengov.nsw.gov.au/publications/19473](http://www.opengov.nsw.gov.au/publications/19473).