

Lorne Community House: 2015 Wye River/Separation Creek Fires Case Study



Victoria's Great Ocean Road fire on Christmas Day 2015 had a devastating impact on a number of different communities, with 116 homes destroyed, road infrastructure damaged, and over 2,500 hectares of forest burnt before the fire was contained on 21 January 2016. The fires at Wye River and Separation Creek also caused the evacuation of several Great Ocean Road towns, including Lorne.

A discussion with Katy Kennedy, Coordinator of the Lorne Community House, on the 5th of October 2017 highlighted the important role that the house played in disaster management for their during this distressing time, which forms the basis of this case study.

Before the Fires

As is standard practice during the holiday period, the Lorne Community House had planned to be closed for Christmas of 2015. However, the community was still on high alert and in fire management mode due to lightning strikes occurring out the back of Lorne about a week prior.

In order to monitor any potential fires, an eye was kept on the CFA fire app and social media platforms, with meetings also held at the Community House to allow for discussion and preparation for different scenarios.



During the Fires

In a time of great need for many people, Katy was receiving a number of phone calls from local community members who were seeking help. On Boxing Day, a Facebook group was set up as a way of connecting people with the relevant information to support their decision making.

Acknowledging that there was no expectation, yet aware of the Lorne community's needs, Katy decided to open the house the day after the fires, despite its planned closure.



After the Fires

With the opening of the Community House the day after the fires, a safe haven was provided for the people of Lorne, away from the drama and associated anxiety of the events. People came in to talk about what they had done on Christmas Day, and many were scared as a result of the uncertainty surrounding whether the fire would come back and impact Lorne on New Year's.

Whilst the Shire was responsible for collecting donations, Katy was receiving calls from individuals who wanted to offer their help. In the days following the fires, the Community House also opened to the people of Wye River and Separation Creek, who came in to access the free phones and internet provided by the house.

Value of the Community House

Emotional support

It is evident that the Community House provided great value in acting as a safe haven for people to talk and gain emotional support in the wake of the fires. The sensitivity that was applied to the situation is highlighted by the fact that a 12-month anniversary was hosted at the House, as well as a 16th birthday party. Not only this, but when the next lot of planned burns occurred, the Community House again provided a safe haven for those looking to avoid triggering painful memories.

Additional Programs

Furthermore, additional programs, including yoga and art therapy classes, were put in place and able to be utilised by children to explore their feelings during this time of hardship. The effects of the fires were ultimately widespread and lasting, as it took 18 months for the re-settling of people in the community, during which Community House services continued to be utilised.

Key Learnings

In the context of a Community House, it is important to recognise a number of key learnings (detailed below), which have come out of this natural disaster:

Lack of funding

After New Year's, there was a joint effort with the town and hospitals in dealing with this disaster, with formal disaster management organisations (i.e. DHHS, Red Cross and local foundations) receiving additional funding for emergency response. However, no funds were made available for the Lorne Community House.

Under-reporting of time

In particular, the Community House experienced internal issues with under reporting of time spent on the fire. Due to the house opening for 3 days during its proposed closure period, there was a lot of work involved in changing the program to meet the needs of the town.

This additional focus also caused an increase in hours each week for the first term, as time spent with people during work hours took away time from other normal, everyday tasks.

Unpredictability of different variables

The nature of work at a Community House is unpredictable on any given day, however, in the case of the 2015 fires, the range and emotions people were dealing with were significantly bigger.

A key learning in this instance is therefore recognising the unpredictability of many different variables in planning for natural disasters. Despite Community Houses having key ideas ready, these may not be able to be implemented due to different scenarios, or may not be sufficient to respond to certain situations.

In such cases, the importance of sharing information on social media and directing people to the right channels is also recognised as an essential course of action.

In the future

As per the actions of a number of other houses, it was noted that perhaps something that the Lorne Community House could do differently in planning for natural disasters in the future is send out email correspondence providing information or advice on the particular situation.