

# How can State Housing Authorities improve their response to natural disasters?

STATE HOUSING AUTHORITIES PLAY A CRITICAL ROLE IN RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES AFFECTED BY NATURAL DISASTERS BUT CAN STILL IMPROVE THEIR PLANNING AND CAPACITY BY STUDYING THE EXPERIENCES AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM PREVIOUS DISASTER RESPONSE EFFORTS.

## KEY POINTS

- State Housing Authorities (SHAs) play a critical role in responding to natural disasters by providing emergency shelter, temporary forms of housing, repairs to damaged property and welfare support for affected households. The capacity and experience of SHAs to understand and manage such events is currently varied.
- When natural disasters do occur, the valuable lessons learned from responding to such events must be immediately documented and the required policy and practice changes made before the momentum and new knowledge are dissipated.
- More successful outcomes could be achieved through an increased investment by SHAs in disaster management planning procedures, improved communications and coordination mechanisms, better management of critical data, more routine use of tools such as risk-mapping, and effective training of all staff.
- In response and recovery, SHAs must operate effectively with other government and non-government agencies. There is a need for an improved understanding of different roles and responsibilities within the SHA and within other agencies, as well as a strong chain of command and control.

*This bulletin is based on research by **Associate Professor Keith Jacobs** and **Dr Stewart Williams** of the AHURI Southern Research Centre with assistance from **Professor Peter Newton** and **Professor Edward Blakely**. It explored how Australian State Housing Authorities prepare for and respond to natural disasters, revealing the insights of staff and tenants with experience of floods, bushfires and cyclones.*

- SHAs must manage a number of conflicting roles and competing demands that are intensified when responding to a natural disaster, specifically balancing their role in the provision of social welfare and asset maintenance, with that of direct service delivery and corporate concerns.

## CONTEXT

Natural disasters are those rapid onset events that cause widespread injury, death and damage to property, and usually require a multi-agency response involving all tiers of government in the recovery. While there are many smaller environmental emergencies that occur annually in Australia, the incidence of disasters each costing over \$10 million is by far the most costly, and shows an upward trend. It is expected that the frequency and intensity of such events will continue to increase with the predicted impacts of population growth, demographic shifts and climate change.

SHAs typically provide emergency, temporary and/or permanent accommodation to communities affected by disaster. They must also manage the repair and maintenance of public housing stock while caring for those usually worst affected, including the elderly, poor and disabled, among their own tenants. However SHA policy and practice in disaster management is not necessarily proven and rarely tested as such events are by definition extra-ordinary phenomena. Furthermore, while key lessons are learned in situ, the insights and experiences of SHA staff and tenants are often left unrecorded. This research addresses such shortcomings.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The research was conducted in two-stages. First, an international literature review was conducted examining disaster management policy and practice in nations such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom and Australia with a focus on housing issues and recent significant events. Following this, new empirical material relating to SHAs in Australia was collected and analysed. Three case studies were selected to examine the most common and costly types of disaster: coastal storms and floods (following Newcastle's floods in 2007), bushfires (following the Canberra bushfires

in 2003), and cyclones (following Tropical Cyclone Larry in Cairns in 2006).

The research methodology used one-on-one, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with SHA staff and tenants in the three case-study locations.

## KEY FINDINGS

### ***Experiences and lessons learned***

The most significant lessons learned were attained through the direct experiences of responding to a disaster. Interviewees and discussants noted that the complexity of any disaster is always underestimated but that staff generally worked successfully with people from other agencies and the community and still managed in times of crisis. On the other hand, it was widely reported that institutional knowledge was often easily lost with the departure of experienced staff. In most cases SHAs had not documented many of their insights or learning from previous incidents, nor implemented what had subsequently seemed to be sensible or even necessary practices. The desire and the opportunity for implementing change often waned as momentum dissipated quickly after a disaster.

### ***Planning for clear communications and coordination***

Interviewees were adamant that a SHA's capacity to successfully manage a disaster lay in its approach to internal planning and preparations. A common recommendation was that when a natural disaster occurs, SHAs should identify the personnel allocated key roles and detail their responsibilities via current information sheets and policy and procedure manuals. This information should also be provided as part of any staff induction processes. Communications and coordination of the response effort was most timely and effective when based on the use of checklists, templates and other pro forma documents.

The formalisation of disaster management roles and responsibilities within SHAs as well as within various other agencies was seen as important in coordinating efforts. Effective agreements must also be in place with suppliers and tradespeople in the housing and construction industry to ensure reliable

supply of materials. Relations with the providers of alternative housing and accommodation options are of critical importance, and would benefit from being more thoroughly identified, inventoried and managed prior to any disaster incident occurring.

Suggestions from discussants for improving communications and coordination included: the provision of more information and emergency kits upon signing a tenancy; clearer signage on public housing estates following a disaster about what help was available; greater use of local knowledge and community networks; the dissemination of information through various media; and education through schools and non-government organisations.

### ***Improving disaster preparation***

Adequate funding and the allocation of resources including staff were deemed essential if disaster planning was to be effective. Budgeting arrangements should take account of the need for immediate cash payment to affected households, as well as the loss of income through rental abatements and the additional cost of the recovery efforts (including equipment hire and purchase, additional staffing and repairs not covered by insurance payouts).

Data management is important in a disaster and something which interviewees thought needed better preparation. Large amounts of data had to be managed while under great stress, yet needed to be accurate, readily available, and easily updated. While senior management, ministers and the media must have access to information in order to keep abreast of the situation and any progress made, operatives cannot afford to be overloaded with unnecessary tasks in data collection. Thus Information Technology and other staff require that macros and templates are prepared and ready if needed, the availability and contact details of housing staff and their skills can be easily identified, and that they can find information on SHA assets such as vehicles and equipment as well as housing property locations, risk exposure and condition.

Ongoing professional development and training of staff is important for any disaster preparation. SHA staff are aware of the increasing importance of new tools used in hazard mitigation and they advocated a greater use of instruments such as GIS mapping.

They also proposed more training with regular, face-to-face meetings, team-building exercises and practical scenarios which involve staff at all levels including managers and corporate heads. Additional training needs were also identified in areas such as handling and retrieval of relevant data, stress management, public relations and media communications, and research and training explicitly for disaster management.

### ***Response and recovery***

During the response and recovery stages of a disaster SHAs require an effective hierarchy of communications. It is also important with a multi-agency response that the involvement of various tiers of government as well as police, State Emergency Services and other service providers is well understood. It is critical that there are no duplications or gaps in terms of the operation. Interviewees and discussants noted that there is a need to identify all the relevant agencies and to formalise their roles and responsibilities through Memoranda of Understanding, networking and other relationship-building exercises.

Response efforts are best coordinated when all the agencies meet regularly for debriefings and updates, and SHA staff and other service providers are co-located. Service delivery in a crisis is likewise most effective when provided through local sites such as Housing Contact Centres and Disaster Recovery Centres. It also provides a point for delivery of special support services such as counselling.

A strong chain of 'command and control' was deemed essential in the response and recovery from a disaster with senior management having a critical role in leading activities and making on-the-spot decisions. They can also be effective in allowing their staff to address the more critical and immediate needs and issues on the ground rather than expecting them to continue with their otherwise normal duties.

### ***Conflicting roles and competing demands***

SHAs are divided between two main roles in a disaster: they must continue to provide a housing and human welfare service to public housing

tenants at a time of crisis, as well as focusing on the physical practices and technical aspects of managing the infrastructure of the SHA. This latter role can include managing an extensive number of public housing properties that have been damaged or prone to further deterioration and are therefore in need of repair (sometimes immediately). These difficult circumstances and competing demands can also lead to tensions with tenants and hamper response efforts.

The funding made available for disaster management is sometimes inadequate for similar reasons. The competing demands that SHAs face in the routine of their normal work practices are intensified in a disaster.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Major policy implications derive from the key findings of the research as follows:

- Lessons learned from each natural disaster response must be better documented and used to inform policy and staff training. This would assist in improving the capacity to understand and manage disasters in future by ensuring that knowledge is not lost before meaningful change is implemented.
- SHAs must continue to plan for future natural disasters, with improved communications and coordination processes given a high priority. The roles and responsibilities of SHA personnel should be more clearly articulated as well as greater engagement with other stakeholders.
- Disaster preparation should address the key areas of data management, the use of risk-

mapping and procedural toolkits, updating and streamlining of administrative processes, and training of all staff in policy requirements. More adequate funds are required to support each of these initiatives. Disaster preparation should be included in business continuity, budgeting and planning cycles.

- For SHAs to operate effectively in disaster response and recovery requires a strong chain of command and control within SHAs and across the various agencies involved, as well as a clear understanding and formalisation of their different roles and responsibilities.
- The conflicting roles and competing demands within SHAs demand a transparency and sensitivity in policy that balances bureaucratic control and autonomy, and so allows flexibility in providing the appropriate responses in managing complex local realities.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 40520 *Natural disaster preparation and response: issues for State Housing Authorities*.

Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website: [www.ahuri.edu.au](http://www.ahuri.edu.au)

The following documents are available:

- Positioning Paper
- Final Report

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