

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE
STANDING COMMITTEE**

**INQUIRY INTO THE RECOGNITION AND ADEQUACY
OF THE RESPONSES BY STATE GOVERNMENT AGENCIES
TO EXPERIENCE OF TRAUMA BY WORKERS AND VOLUNTEERS
ARISING FROM DISASTERS**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT MELBOURNE
TUESDAY, 3 JULY 2012**

SESSION TWO

Members

**Mr A.P. O’Gorman (Chairman)
Mr A.P. Jacob (Deputy Chairman)
Ms M.M. Quirk
Mr I.M. Britza
Mr T.G. Stephens**

Hearing commenced at 10.45 am**COGHLAN, MR ANDREW****National Manager, Emergency Services, Australian Red Cross,
155 Pelham Street,
Carlton 3053, examined:**

The CHAIRMAN: Andrew, have you any opening statement you would like to make or would you like us to throw questions at you?

Mr Coghlan: I had a look at the questions that David sent me, the preamble and so forth, and I have got some information on each of those. I do not know if you want to ask the questions or how you want to do it.

The CHAIRMAN: We tend to ask not only those questions but other questions as well. Can you describe to us the scope of the Red Cross operations in Australia that deal with disasters and emergencies?

Mr Coghlan: Essentially, we are an international organisation and Australian Red Cross is the Australian arm. We have responsibilities under each state and territory legislation or emergency management arrangements to undertake various roles within those states, mindful that emergency management is a state and territory responsibility. As well as that we have strong relationships with the federal government and also local governments. In saying that, I will give you a little piece of background, if I may. About six or seven years ago Australian Red Cross went from being a federated organisation in which we had Victorian Red Cross and Queensland Red Cross et cetera to one nationally driven organisation. That was a significant change in how the organisation works; in particular, the impact on the emergencies program has been that we have been able to utilise our resource strengths, insights and so forth across the whole country. We now run an emergency service program in which we have staff and volunteers in each state and territory, and in the event of a large-scale disaster we are able to draw upon the resources of the whole country, both staff and volunteers.

Similarly, we do that in the development of our practices and so forth in between disasters. Again, we made a conscious decision back in about 2006 to shift from a focus just on meeting people's immediate needs in the aftermath of disasters in places like evacuation centres and the like to a commitment to actually supporting people and communities to prepare for disasters and longer-term recovery. We see ourselves as very much engaged in the whole community resilience concept from before an event to after the event and cyclically carrying on in that way. That was a very deliberate shift back in 2006. I came into this role, which was created at that stage, having worked prior to that in both state and federal governments in emergency management. Essentially, the mandate was to pull it all together and to start doing things consistently around the country. A little bit more specifically, the sorts of things we do in disasters, when there is a big event on, in most states and territories we have a key role in evacuation processes, usually working in evacuation centres or relief centres, depending on what they are called in the state or territory concerned. That goes from Queensland, where we actually coordinate the activities of everyone in those centres in partnership with local government, to other states, where we have a more supportive role with volunteers and staff on hand lending a hand and providing personal support of psychological first aid. They are some of the key things in a nutshell.

The CHAIRMAN: Can you tell us how you prepare your staff for the traumas that they might come across?

Mr Coghlan: There is a range of different things, through training and different things—what we call our personal support training. Probably our core business is providing personal support services, which are essentially information for people and listening to people when disasters happen. People who are involved in that, whether they are paid staff or volunteers, go through a training process, and if you become a staff member or a volunteer you will go through this training process which, essentially, will do two things. It will give you the context in which you will be working out there in the community when disasters happen, but as well as that it will also give you some insights, information and skills around self-care and looking after yourself when an emergency is on and you are involved in it. As well as that we have training for our team leaders and managers, so when they are out in the field with staff and volunteers they are able to keep an eye on things and have an awareness of different circumstances in which people might be struggling, or whatever, and the sort of supports they can point them to. We have done quite a bit of work over the last probably three or four years, since Black Saturday, in particular, where given the scale of that event and our involvement in it we really got a strong sense of how big these things can be.

[10.50 am]

We had always that known that, I guess, theoretically, but that really brought home to us the scale of things and what the real impact on the organisation can be. Similarly, the floods and cyclone Yasi up in Queensland 12 or 18 months ago now had a huge impact on the whole organisation. Essentially, when there is an event of that scale virtually the whole of the Red Cross gets involved, certainly for the first couple of weeks, in support of the emergencies team. In so doing we have done quite a bit of review and development work on our operational processes and we have become a lot better at managing and getting our staff and volunteers ready to go and be active in these situations. We have done things like the training programs, but as well as that we get a lot more information to people beforehand about what they are going to be going into, what our expectations of them are, the sorts of things they might be seeing in the community and the sorts of people they might be dealing with. On Black Saturday there was a lot of death and injury and that sort of stuff—not that we had a specific role in looking after families of deceased, but inevitably we come across people who have had some connection in evacuation centres and through our outreach work after those sorts of events.

We now have a process in which we have developed some tools. This is something that is still progressing and that I think we are getting better at, but there is still work to be done. Essentially, if you are one of the 10,000 or so volunteers that we have on the books who are registered to do emergency service work or you are one of our 100 or so staff that we have involved in this, you will be given a call or be contacted by email or SMS, depending on the circumstance, and you will be invited to be involved in that activation—particularly with volunteer staff it is a little bit less of an invitation, if you like. We actually talk to people about what has happened, where we are intending sending them and what role we will have them undertaking—even down to the simple things like flight times, the sort of accommodation they will be in, the sort of tasks they will be performing, whether they will be at an evacuation centre out in the mud and rain or the bushfire area or whether they will be working in a room like this on some sort of behind-the-scenes telephone answering service or whatever the case may be.

We are very clear with people up-front about what they are getting themselves into, and we really try to tighten up our administrative arrangements in terms of flight times, accommodation and the like. We had some feedback—I guess out of the Queensland stuff more than Black Saturday; but with Queensland there was a lot of movement of people around the country in a hurry. There was a changing landscape in places like Brisbane where the floodwaters were going through the city; in fact, we had to evacuate our office at one point because we were quite close to the Brisbane River up there. Some of our volunteers, and staff for that matter, were challenged by, “I’m going to turn up somewhere on an airplane, Brisbane airport, and I don’t know where I’m going from there.” So

we have had to get a lot better and develop systems to ensure that people have a sense when they are leaving, where they are going, what they are going to be doing and how long they are going to be there for. We have tightened up our shifts so that people now work for only four or five days at a stretch, with a day either end to travel, and then they are home again.

Again, we have learnt from experience that you can work people pretty hard for a couple of weeks or something, but at the end of the process they do not come out too well the other side. So we are lot clearer on how long they are going to be there, what they are going to be doing, what they are going to be exposed to et cetera. As a part of that we also have a checklist or a questionnaire that gives them a sense of what they are going to be dealing with and that asks them to go through some questions around whether they are in a position to deal with that sort of work at present. For someone going into an office setting from an office setting it is probably not that challenging, but if you have someone who is a volunteer, who works in an office in an administrative role or something similar five days a week and suddenly you are putting them out in the field where it could be hot and humid, if you are in Queensland, we take into consideration their age and whether they are equipped to be out doing the sort of work we are going to be demanding of them.

People actually get to manage themselves and make some decisions before they get on the plane: is this really for me? We have also made a shift from having a lot of volunteers who are willing to give us a couple of hours Tuesday afternoon and another couple of hours on Friday to trying to get a team of people who are more able to say they can give us the next five days, and we get a strong commitment from them; we are then able to roster things effectively and it cuts down on the back-of-house work that is involved as well. That is a bit of a long-winded answer, but I hope you get a bit of a sense of where we are headed.

The CHAIRMAN: What about the families of the people who you deploy? Do you keep in touch with them or do you expect the volunteers themselves to maintain that family connection?

Mr Coghlan: It is a little bit of both. By and large, it is down to the individual to keep their family in touch with what they are doing and where they are going and so forth. But one of the keys things with the pre-deployment questionnaire I spoke of is that we invite people to sit down with their partner or someone close and of relevance and go through this thing, so it is not just me sitting down thinking, "I've really got to do this and I'm not so sure about that question, but when I get there I'll work it out." We actually invite them to sit down with their partner, or whoever is dependent on them or whatever, and go through this thing and think about, "Do I really want to be in Queensland for the week when one of the kids is sick or the elderly parent is in hospital and I have other responsibilities?"

Certainly the onus is still very much on the person we are sending, but there is a bit more of an invitation to engage with their family or whomever in making the call as to whether they go. Once they are on site doing work out in the field it is really down to them to stay in touch with family. As I say, it is very clear from the outset that they are going to be away for five or six days and then they will be home again, so people know that is going to happen.

The CHAIRMAN: When you get called to a disaster event, how quickly can you get somebody from around the country to Queensland?

Mr Coghlan: It is twofold, Tony. I hope I have not misled you a little by focusing on the interstate movement on planes and so forth. We, obviously, also start with a core team in communities that are affected. So, for instance, in a place like Emerald where they have a lot of flood damage or seem to every couple of years now, or Charleville or Mackay, we actually have volunteers locally who are in emergency services teams who will activate and be at the evacuation centre as soon as they get the call pretty much. Once they have fed the cat and put the dog out, they are there. The interstate-type concept is where the event is of a scale that warrants moving people around like that. We get people activated pretty quickly in that regard. It is a little bit contingent upon airlines and

schedules and those sorts of things, but we have very good relationships with airlines and with state government agencies that also do a lot of moving people around. So, it happens pretty quickly.

If, for instance, a Black Saturday happened, we would have people activated straightaway out in relief centres in Victoria; they are called relief centres. We would have people on the ground virtually straightaway from local communities and from our Victorian offices—mainly Melbourne, but a couple of regional ones as well. Then we would be straightaway setting up an operational team that would start to scope: What is the problem out on the ground? What sort of resources are we going to need? Where do we need to draw them from? How quickly can we get them there?

The CHAIRMAN: Do you do any follow-up with your volunteers when they go home as sort of psychological—

Mr Coghlan: We do a couple of things. Again, they do this pre-deployment stuff. When they get out in the field, whether they are from another state or whether they are a local person, the manager of the team will actually do a briefing with people as to, “We are going out to do some outreach work. We are going to be out in 30-degree temperatures today. The terrain is a bit rough, so wear your right shoes”, and all that sort of thing. We will remind people that we have a peer support process built into those teams so they can rely on one another and we also have our employee assistance program, which is available to both staff and volunteers day to day but in a disaster it has a particular focus. If the event is big enough and of a type—i.e. Black Saturday—where it is warranted, we might also put some debriefers out in the field with our teams. So, for instance, in Black Saturday, we had some qualified psychologists who were actually working in the field with some of our teams in what we considered to be the hot spots or the worse-affected areas. So, we did that.

When they come back, at the end of each day, we actually sit down with our teams of volunteers and staff and we go through what we call a “hot debrief”, which is a quick discussion about what you experienced during the day, what you saw, what it was like et cetera. That usually has a fairly operational focus in that people will tell you, “I got to those six houses and not those three and there were these challenges with road blocks”, and all those sort of things, but in addition we will ask people about how they are travelling and whether they are okay to get out there again the next day.

When they actually go home—again, whether that be going home to two blocks away or whether that be going home to another state—we have a process whereby one of their peers, who is deliberately chosen and trained and so forth, will actually give them a call—the aim is within 10 days. It is not always that, but we are working on that. We will call them within 10 days just to see how they are tracking. They have a bit of a script they will take them through. “How are you going? What was the experience like? Are you sleeping okay? Are things back to normal at home?” And a bit of a reminder that there is, again, the employee assistance package if they feel that they need something a bit more than that. That is something we have been doing for only probably the last 12 months or so.

It was one of the big learnings out of the Queensland experience. They have been fine out in the field, they get home, sit down, they are a bit tired, they have a think about it and suddenly they feel a bit—traumatised is too strong a word—upset about the experience, potentially. We are coming at it I guess from two points of view: one being the care and support of those people; the other being maximising our potential to do things in the future. We want to learn from people’s experiences. We want to have those people come back next time and we want to make the most of that opportunity too.

[11.00 am]

The CHAIRMAN: What does your EAP involve?

Mr Coghlan: It is an organisation that works through our HR function. To be honest, I do not know tonnes about the individual organisation, but they provide support, as any employee assistance

program does, from personal counselling—type things right through to dealing with any challenges in the workplace that might need mediation and those sorts of things. In the disaster context, essentially, it is that personal support, counselling—type function where you can actually get on the phone with them. A couple of my team have been through that recently where they actually ring them up, have a bit of a conversation about the experience you have had and so forth and depending on how that conversation goes, the EAP provider will either speak to you once and you decide between you that that is enough or there might be two, three, half a dozen calls or even face-to-face conversation with a psychologist, if appropriate.

The CHAIRMAN: And your peer support, how does that work and the training they get?

Mr Coghlan: That is a little less formal. The training is still a bit of a work in progress. At this stage, it is largely based on identifying people who come from a background or have experience in psychology, social work—one of those caring-type professions. We will assign those people with a role to make the calls or do the peer support out in the field and we take it from there, but very much they are providing—not a triage, but a very basic level of support for people with the potential to refer on to EAP or more highly skilled services if necessary.

The CHAIRMAN: What particular training do they get?

Mr Coghlan: At this stage it is just an extension of our basic personal support course, but it is something we are actually working on developing further at the moment. We have been doing that with the Australian Psychological Society, the peak body for psychs here in Australia, who we have that partnership with both to deliver services out in the field, but also to work with us organisationally. They developed with us a couple of years ago a questionnaire that the peer support people use, but in terms of training to get that to another level, that is the next step in development at the moment.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Can you just maybe outline some of the issues that arose post-Queensland? You said that following that event you realised that maybe you needed to do a little more.

Mr Coghlan: Yes, sure, Margaret. Given the scale of what happened, Queensland gets all the attention. I did not bring it with me, but we have a nice map of Australia which shows that that summer, the summer before last, we actually had people working on emergencies over January–February in, I think, seven of the eight states and territories. The ACT was the only one that did not have a direct impact from something. We had bushfires out your way. We had floods and cyclones in Queensland —

Ms M.M. QUIRK: The extensive ones here got a bit overshadowed.

Mr Coghlan: Absolutely. We had floods here and in New South Wales. A smallish cyclone went through Darwin and South Australia had something go through as well—we were dealing with a heatwave down there. So, it was the whole of the country. We determined after that that we would actually do a review of what we did and how we did it; not as a finger-pointing exercise, but as an opportunity to learn and grow and develop from it. It was an internet-based thing where, I think, we surveyed 1,000 volunteers and staff. From that we had a response of about 70-75% rate, which was a good response rate.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: That is excellent, yes.

Mr Coghlan: Asking them all sorts of things from: What was your experience like out in the field? How well were your travel arrangements made? What was your accommodation like? How did you feel when you got back after the event? The whole gamut, really, of activation. How effective was the activation process? Did you get the right phone calls at the right time to get you there? Did you feel supported et cetera? What was your team manager like? What was your role in the team? A whole range of things. We then ran a workshop where we had 60 to 70 people come together in Melbourne from all those different events—both staff and volunteers. We went through a two-day discussion of a range of different topics along similar lines based on the feedback from the

questionnaires. At the end of that we came up with what we called a set of half a dozen major projects that really identified the work that we need to do around the country for the next two to three years. Over the last 12 to 18 months, we have obviously started on that. Some of that activation work and the briefing and debriefing processes were some of the first steps; we prioritised those. There is more to be done over the next 12 to 18 months.

We have also done a lot of work out of that on our incident management processes. We run a thing called AIIMS—the Australasian Inter-service Incident Management System, which you will no doubt come across. It is very strongly driven by fire agencies in particular, but a number of other organisations are getting into it as well nowadays and that is pretty much the standard. We spent some time a couple of years ago sitting down with some of the people who built that system or who were well versed in it and tailored it to our needs. Obviously, we are not putting fire trucks and fire hoses out there, but we are still mobilising people into different places to do different tasks. So, it is a somewhat leaner version of the AIIMS that we run, but we decided we needed that sort of process to move the people around as quickly as we needed to. We have really built it from there. There has been quite a bit of activity over the past few years.

In terms of people's experiences, going back to your original question, the major thing we found—funnily enough, we find it with people who have been through the disasters as well—is that while, yes, there is a level of trauma, exposure to people's grief, to people's awkward experiences, whatever, that is a factor, but the overwhelming majority of things that need to be done well and improved are actually practical things. If you put it in terms of people who have been through the disaster, if you can get them back in a house and give them a sense of what is going on and what to expect next and help them with their insurance company or whatever, a lot of the need for the counselling—as you often see in the paper, “The counsellors are coming to town”—is alleviated. It is a small percentage of people who actually have mental health problems emerging out of these experiences, not to diminish that. Similarly, with staff and volunteers, not that we have a lot that end up with mental health challenges, but a lot of it, we reckon, if you get the practical stuff right and keep communicating with them and give them a sense of the context they are going to be working in, what they are going to be doing, what the place is going to be like and take the uncertainty out of it, you actually address a lot of challenges and you make their experience a lot easier and a lot more manageable.

I say that not just from Red Cross experience but having worked in government as well with agencies involved in this sort of work. Some people are not necessarily cut out for this sort of work. People who are good managers, good team workers, good administrators, whatever, on a day-to-day basis generally go okay out in the field, but for some they do not cope with the flexibility you need, the change, the environment you are in et cetera. We have also acknowledged that within our work that for some people they might get into it and a day or two in, they are struggling. Trying to provide a climate and a culture where it is okay to put up your hand and say, “Look, this actually is not for me”, and that does not have recriminations back in your career or whatever, that it is reasonable to do that. I think a lot of this is around cultural shift too and acceptability that these experiences can be quite daunting and they are not for everyone. While we can have all the systems in the world in place, I think the culture of an organisation is really important too in terms of supporting people.

[11.10 am]

Ms M.M. QUIRK: It is kind of a contradiction in terms. What sort of attrition rates do you have for your volunteers?

Mr Coghlan: Good question—to which I do not know the answer, off the top of my head. I would not have said it was particularly high.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Most people peel away, and you do not necessarily know why they did either, presumably.

Mr Coghlan: That is true; absolutely. But again, if volunteers are leaving, just as when staff leave an organisation, we are trying to get better at finding out from them why they are leaving and understanding what it was about. It is a bit harder to measure, too, with volunteers in that there has been quite a shift in volunteering over the last 10 years or so from people you have on the books for 20 or 30 years and you keep as volunteers in the organisation to a lot of younger people who want to volunteer episodically—for Black Saturday, for the flood in Queensland—and then they want out of there. As an organisation—other organisations are the same—we have to get better at managing that and utilising that willingness, but at the same time accepting that they are not going to be volunteers with us still in 30 years' time.

The CHAIRMAN: Andrew, our major agencies in WA that you deal with, I assume, are child protection. What other departments in WA do you deal with?

Mr Coghlan: FESA.

The CHAIRMAN: And what is your role with those two departments?

Mr Coghlan: From my perspective, it is somewhat at arm's length. Ruth, who I think you have met in your Perth-based sessions, is our manager of emergencies over in Western Australia. We have an executive director who runs Red Cross activities in the west, Steve Joske. They would be the two main connects in WA. Ruth in particular, with the guys in child protection and also FESA. The SES would be another. We are represented on various state committees around emergency management, particularly the sort of welfare end of it. Just as a comment, too, I think that has been one of the changes we have been trying to make over the last few years. It is giving people a sense that as an organisation, Red Cross is actually internationally expert in emergency management. We are not just a welfare agency that does a bit of stuff in emergency management. In big events like Black Saturday and what was happening in Queensland, we have been able to show that that experience and expertise both locally and from offshore is something we can bring to the table and bring to discussions that government agencies are having.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: We spoke to your counterpart in New York, actually.

Mr Coghlan: New York—you are well travelled. New York, New Orleans—some good experiences in some of those places.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Oh, and New Orleans as well.

The CHAIRMAN: In the US, they are contracted by government to provide services. You are not actually contracted as a backup, are you?

Mr Coghlan: By and large, no. It is not a contracted arrangement. It is usually just a terms-of-agreement, memorandum type thing. As I said at the outset, we have specific roles in each state and territory legislation or emergency management arrangements. The one thing we have across the country, which is supported through Attorney Generals federally, is we run a thing called the national registration inquiry system, which is a mechanism for connecting with your relatives when a disaster has happened. That happens everywhere. That is driven by the feds; we actually do the work on the ground in partnership with state agencies. The point I was getting to, Tony, was that in the states where there have been big events in recent times, we have been able to lend —

Ms M.M. QUIRK: The profile is sort of different.

Mr Coghlan: It is different, but also we have been able to offer, I think, some good insights and support from our experiences in different parts of the country and globally. It would be great in the future to be able to do that across the whole country, including Western Australia.

The CHAIRMAN: Your EAP—do you use an outside organisation for that?

Mr Coghlan: Yes, we do.

The CHAIRMAN: Is it GPC, or do you know who it is?

Mr Coghlan: I would need to check with the HR guys. I could come back to David with that.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you ever use retired staff or people who are no longer volunteering as peer supporters?

Mr Coghlan: They would come in as volunteers in the broader sense. Some of our volunteers are retired staff, and some of those roles are undertaken by them, but it is not a deliberate strategy. I am aware that some of the state government agencies and New South Wales particularly, have made a big program out of recruiting X staff members to come and do work. The child protection equivalent there—the community service department—they do a lot of that.

The CHAIRMAN: I missed the first question. Any particular lessons from Black Saturday that you can impart to us that we can take back?

Mr Coghlan: Lots of different things. I guess at the risk of stating the obvious to some people who were involved in the profession, the political aspect and context of the events when they get to that sort of scale, and it was the same in Queensland. I would reflect not just on the Red Cross experience but more broadly, having worked as a recovery coordinator with AGs for about 10 years beforehand. Lots of work goes into all these arrangements and plans and so forth, day-to-day. We see that in every state and territory and every agency. I think one of the challenges in emergency management in Australia is how, when the big event happens and there is the media profile and the public expectation and all the rest of it, and your Premiers, your Prime Minister et cetera are getting involved in these events, how do you translate what you have planned and worked on for years? Particularly in bureaucracy, I think more lower levels, how do you actually make that work when suddenly this thing is of a really high profile and it is on the front pages of the paper? By and large it works, but I think that is one of the challenges we have. When we bring in the expert advisers or the key people to drive these things, whether it be a Peter Cosgrove or Christine Nixon or whoever is, it is maximising what has already been done, recognising the importance and the role that those guys play and the profile that you need to give the community to give it some sense of certainty while at the same time maximising the work that has already been taking place and the sorts of things you are exploring over this little exercise. How do you make sure that does not get lost in the hurly-burly of it all when it actually does happen? It is fine in scale events up to a reasonable size. When you get to the really big one, how do you actually translate from what we would do in the smaller scale events into the suddenly massive one? That would be my reflection.

Mr T.G. STEPHENS: Your national headquarters is here and all of your national personnel are here.

Mr Coghlan: It is a little bit of a mixture, Tom, in that, yes, our national office is in Carlton. We have a couple of hundred people roughly over there. That said, as a national organisation, if we find the best person for the job lived in Brisbane, they might work out of our Brisbane state office even though they are in a national role. A lot of that goes on. For instance, in the emergencies team there is a staff of about 100 across the country. Of those, there are nine or 10 in the national team who work sort of in the office with me. Of those nine or 10, three of them are actually in other state offices—four in fact; we just recruited someone into another role. Close to half—40%—of my team is actually spread around the place. That is obviously one of the big shifts in Red Cross; it is moving to a far more unified entity that works together very effectively.

The CHAIRMAN: Andrew, thanks very much for coming in.

Mr Coghlan: A pleasure, Tony.

The CHAIRMAN: Thanks for your work; it is much appreciated. We will send you out a draft of the transcript. If there are any corrections, can you send that back to us?

Mr Coghlan: The other thing I would say, too—we mentioned this in conversation with DCP and FESA and others—if the sorts of tools we are using in terms of questionnaires around activations and things, if you are interested in any of those, we are happy to provide those.

The CHAIRMAN: Thanks very much. Thanks for rushing down here this morning.

Hearing concluded at 11.18 am
