



Community Legal Centres South Australia: Disaster Legal Assistance and Community Resilience

A history of prevention, preparedness, response and recovery

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Introduction

Community Legal Centres South Australia (CLCSA) and its member centres have developed a substantial body of experience in delivering legal assistance to communities affected by natural disasters. Through sustained outreach, community partnerships, applied research and practical innovation, CLCSA has contributed to the integration of legal assistance into South Australia's emergency management arrangements.



Natural disasters create legal problems that extend well beyond the immediate emergency. These may involve insurance, housing, property damage, financial hardship, lost identification documents, employment, government assistance and disputes arising during reconstruction and recovery. Such issues can be particularly difficult for people living in regional and remote communities, where access to legal services may already be limited.

CLCSA's approach recognises that legal assistance has a role throughout the four stages of emergency management: Prevention, Preparedness, Response and Recovery (PPRR). Its work has progressively shifted beyond responding to legal problems after a disaster towards identifying legal risks, supporting household preparedness and maintaining a presence in affected communities throughout recovery.

This paper documents the development of that approach, drawing on CLCSA's experience during the 2019–2020 summer bushfires, the 2022–2023 River Murray floods, and subsequent community preparedness initiatives.

Research and the development of disaster legal assistance

An important contribution to CLCSA's disaster legal assistance work was the independent evaluation undertaken by the Climate and Sustainability Policy Research Group (CASPR), titled *South Australian Bushfire Legal Services: Review of Current Practices*.

Commissioned by the South Australian Attorney-General's Department, the evaluation examined the Bushfire Community Legal Project, including its first 18 months of service delivery. It considered the effectiveness of the outreach model and the circumstances in which legal assistance could best support communities experiencing disaster recovery.



A significant finding was the importance of relationships developed between legal service providers and affected communities. In rural and regional settings, trust, continuity and local engagement were identified as essential elements of effective service delivery. The evaluation also highlighted the need for funding arrangements capable of supporting the urgency, geographic reach and extended duration of disaster recovery work.

These findings provided an evidence base for an approach that CLCSA had developed through practical experience: legal assistance is most effective when it is accessible, locally informed and sustained over time, rather than confined to a single intervention following an emergency.

The evaluation also contributed to broader consideration of how legal assistance could be incorporated into emergency management planning, particularly as climate-related disasters place increasing demands on communities and service providers.

The 2019–2020 summer bushfires



The 2019–2020 summer bushfires represented a significant period in the development of CLCSA's disaster legal outreach capability.

In response to the fires, CLCSA undertook sustained outreach across Kangaroo Island and the Yorke Peninsula. The project was designed to overcome the geographic and practical barriers that often prevent affected residents from obtaining timely legal assistance.

Over approximately six months, legal outreach was conducted on a weekly basis, reaching communities throughout the affected areas. This regular presence enabled legal practitioners to establish relationships with residents, identify emerging concerns and provide assistance as legal needs developed during recovery.

The work encompassed insurance matters, damaged property, financial hardship, documentation, government assistance and other legal consequences of the bushfires. Legal practitioners also worked alongside local services and recovery organisations, recognising that legal problems frequently intersected with broader financial, housing and welfare concerns.

Holly McCoy and Ippei Okazaki were closely involved in the delivery of the project, particularly the outreach undertaken on Kangaroo Island.

The sustained nature of the program was an important feature of its effectiveness. Residents were not necessarily ready to identify or discuss legal concerns immediately after the fires. Regular visits provided opportunities for assistance when individuals and families were better placed to consider their circumstances and make decisions.



Recognition through the Resilient Australia Awards

CLCSA Bushfire Community Legal Project received formal recognition through the 2021 Resilient Australia Awards, winning the South Australian Community Project Award and subsequently receiving a Highly Commended award at the national level.



The awards acknowledged the project's contribution to community resilience and the value of sustained legal outreach as part of disaster recovery.

The recognition was particularly significant in demonstrating that access to legal assistance contributes to disaster resilience by helping individuals protect their interests, understand their rights and make informed decisions during periods of considerable uncertainty.

The 2022–2023 River Murray floods

CLCSA's experience during the River Murray floods further developed its capacity to provide legal assistance across the full emergency management cycle.

Unlike a response commencing only after a disaster, the River Murray work involved legal assistance before, during and after the flooding.

The Riverland Community Legal Centre, with its established presence in Berri, provided an important foundation for regional legal assistance. This existing local service was complemented by CLCSA-coordinated outreach across the Murraylands, including Murray Bridge, Mannum and surrounding river communities.



Ippei Okazaki undertook extensive on-the-ground engagement over a period exceeding four months, travelling throughout the affected areas and visiting communities along the river.

A particular focus was the section of the River Murray between Younghusband and Mannum, where door-to-door visits were undertaken to help households prepare for the anticipated flooding.

This work involved speaking directly with residents about the importance of identifying, organising and safeguarding essential documents, including identification, insurance records, property information and other documents that could become difficult to access or replace following inundation.



Residents were also provided with information about legal assistance and the potential legal consequences of flood damage, displacement and insurance claims.

The proactive nature of this engagement distinguished it from conventional post-disaster legal assistance. By reaching households before floodwaters arrived, the outreach sought to

reduce avoidable legal and administrative difficulties and improve residents' capacity to respond to the emergency.

As floodwaters receded, legal assistance continued to address the issues arising during recovery. This continuity reflected the understanding that legal needs do not necessarily follow the operational timelines of emergency response agencies and may persist long after the immediate emergency has ended.

The River Murray experience reinforced the value of combining established regional legal services with flexible outreach capacity, enabling legal assistance to be delivered at the locations and times it was most needed.

Innovation in household preparedness: Grab & Go Important Documents Bags

An important development arising from CLCSA's disaster preparedness work has been the design and distribution of the Grab & Go Important Documents Bag.

The initiative was developed in recognition of a recurring problem identified during disaster outreach: households frequently experience difficulty locating, protecting or replacing important documents following an evacuation, bushfire or flood.

The bags were designed to provide a simple, practical means of encouraging households to gather essential records in advance of an emergency. These may include identification, insurance policies, property records, financial information, medical documents and emergency contacts.



The initiative was conceived and designed by Ippei Okazaki, drawing on direct engagement with communities affected by disasters. Feedback from residents informed subsequent refinements to the design and practical use of the bags.

Two production rounds have been completed, with more than 10,000 bags distributed to households. Significant distribution activities have occurred in Mount Barker, the Adelaide Hills and Kangaroo Island.

A further production is planned, extending the initiative's reach into additional regional communities.

preparedness component of the PPRR framework. Rather than focusing exclusively on the provision of legal advice, it encourages households to take preventive action that may reduce the complexity, cost and delay associated with replacing essential records after a disaster.

Its development also illustrates the importance of incorporating community feedback into the design of disaster preparedness resources. The bags have evolved through successive production rounds in response to the needs and experiences of the people for whom they were intended.

Recent Activities and Ongoing Community Engagement

CLCSA and its member centres continue to maintain a strong community presence across South Australia, delivering approximately 12 to 17 outreach services each week, in addition to their established office-based services.

This extensive outreach network provides an important foundation for responding to emerging community needs, including those arising from natural disasters.

More recently, CLCSA and Community Justice Services SA (CJSSA) attended the Deep Creek bushfire, despite it not being a formally declared emergency, working alongside the Country Fire Service (CFS) and other community organisations to support affected residents.

CLCSA also has a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the South Australian Housing Trust, providing an established arrangement for the deployment of community legal assistance to emergency relief centres when required. This supports the integration of legal services alongside housing, financial counselling, emergency relief and other community support agencies. South Australia regularly experiences natural hazards, including bushfires, floods, severe storms and hail events, which can create significant legal and practical challenges for affected households.

CLCSA's ongoing outreach, interagency partnerships and emergency response arrangements demonstrate its commitment to ensuring that legal assistance remains accessible before, during and after disasters, including events that do not meet the threshold for a formally declared emergency.

Integrating legal assistance into the PPRR framework

The experience accumulated through these initiatives has demonstrated the relevance of community legal assistance across each stage of emergency management.

PPRR stage	Contribution of community legal centres
Prevention	Identifying foreseeable legal risks and promoting measures that reduce vulnerability to the legal consequences of disasters.
Preparedness	Supporting household document readiness, providing information about insurance and legal obligations, and undertaking proactive community outreach.
Response	Deploying legal practitioners to emergency relief centres and affected communities to provide timely information, advice and referrals.

Recovery	Maintaining access to legal assistance for insurance, housing, property, financial and other matters arising during reconstruction and recovery.
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The progression from the bushfire outreach program to the River Murray flood response and the development of the Grab & Go initiative reflects an increasingly integrated approach to disaster legal assistance.

Three principles have been particularly important.

First, local engagement and continuity are fundamental to effective service delivery. Established relationships with residents, councils, community organisations and recovery agencies enable legal services to identify needs that may otherwise remain unrecognised.

Second, legal assistance should be proactive as well as responsive. Early intervention, including household preparedness and direct outreach, can reduce the likelihood of legal difficulties becoming more complex during recovery.



Third, disaster legal assistance requires sustained capacity. Legal issues may emerge progressively over months or years, requiring flexible deployment arrangements and continued coordination between legal and non-legal services.

These principles have informed CLCSA's broader work in developing resources, strengthening interagency relationships and preparing legal practitioners for deployment within emergency relief and recovery settings.

Implications for future emergency deployments

The experience of CLCSA and its member centres provides an established foundation for future disaster legal assistance in South Australia.

Deployments to emergency relief and recovery centres form part of a broader service model that includes preparedness activities, community education, direct outreach, interagency coordination and longer-term recovery assistance.

For legal practitioners, this requires an understanding that effective disaster assistance extends beyond responding to individual legal enquiries. It includes recognising emerging legal needs, working collaboratively with other service providers, understanding the circumstances of affected communities and providing assistance in a manner appropriate to the stage of the emergency.

The work undertaken across Kangaroo Island, the Yorke Peninsula, the Riverland and Murraylands demonstrates the importance of maintaining a visible and accessible legal service presence, particularly where geographic isolation or the effects of a disaster make conventional office-based assistance difficult to access.

CLCSA's disaster legal assistance work has also demonstrated the value of combining professional legal expertise with practical, community-informed initiatives that strengthen preparedness and resilience.

As South Australia continues to experience the effects of bushfires, floods and other natural hazards, these experiences provide a basis for strengthening the integration of legal assistance within emergency management planning and operations.

The continuing objective is to ensure that people affected by disasters have timely access to appropriate legal assistance, irrespective of their location or circumstances, and that legal needs are recognised and addressed throughout prevention, preparedness, response and recovery.

References

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