

Why is social work under-recognised by the disaster management sector within Australia and what can be done about this?



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HowWeSurvive



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The argument

Social work as a profession is under-recognised within the disaster sector. Social work practice is multi-faceted, with a commitment to individual and community self-determination, compassion, social justice, human rights and relationality, drawing upon strengths-based and solution-focused approaches. Social work expertise should be further recognised within the disaster sector to help contribute to better outcomes for disaster impacted communities.

As a social work and socio-legal researcher, and as a newcomer to the disaster sector working within the HowWeSurvive initiative at the University of New South Wales, it has become rapidly apparent to me that social workers are not readily included within leadership fora in this sector.¹ While social workers absolutely do make significant contributions across Australia in a range of disaster contexts within strong multidisciplinary teams (e.g. Alston et al. 2019; Harms et al. 2022; Rusconi and Boetto, 2024), the explicit social justice, human rights-based and anti-oppressive lens and practice that social work brings to the disaster sector is often under-recognised. Disasters emerge out of the deeply imbalanced power relations and systems enmeshed within our social fabric and social workers, already working in long-term roles alongside marginalised communities, have the expertise to help shift power and resources in these contexts.

This paper summarises the different modes of social work practice and outlines the professional mandate as articulated through the Australian Association of Social Workers

Code of Ethics (AASW 2020b). This paper considers selected research that has suggested why social work as a profession is undervalued in the disaster sector, and reflects on what a social work enhanced disaster sector in Australia could look like. The conclusion provides suggestions for how social work could be better positioned through mitigation, preparation, response and recovery.

What is social work?

Social workers are trained through qualifying degrees in 3 non-hierarchical spheres of practice: undertaking case work and counselling with individuals and families (micro practice); community engagement and community development practice (meso practice), and advocacy, policy and inter-agency practice (macro practice) (Chenoweth and McAuliffe 2017). Some social work scholars also refer to a meta-level of social work practice, which relates to

1. The disaster management sector refers to agencies, organisations and individual professionals concerned with disaster mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery, phases which are sometimes referred to as before, during and after the disaster.

transnational issues of concern, including that of climate change and the environment (Grise-Owens et al. 2014). As Finnish social work scholar Merja Rapeli highlighted, these spheres of social work practice accord with the development of bonding, bridging and linking social capital (Rapeli 2018), concepts of sociological and social work origin (Addams 2016 (1910); Bourdieu 1986; Putnam 1995), which have been embraced by the disaster sector (Aldrich and Meyer 2015).

It is important to emphasise that the systems theory that underpins social work (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Howard et al. 2023), embraces eco-social work theory (Boetto 2019), sometimes referred to as green social work (Dominelli 2013). Eco-social work theory recognises that human wellbeing is interdependent with the wellbeing of the planet and that all forms of social work practice (and research) needs to challenge the colonial, extractive and fossil fuel driven, capitalistic, over-consumptive systems and ways that have shaped our deeply inequitable society, and which have fuelled climate warming and ensuing disasters (Cuadra and Ouis 2023). If the systems that shape inequities and harm are not recognised and challenged throughout the entire disaster management cycle, prolonged recovery processes will, at best, simply re-enforce the deeply inequitable status quo.

It is important to distinguish that micro social work practice, which is always trauma informed and person-centred, adopts primarily, although not solely, a strengths-based and solution-focused approach in therapeutic techniques, as distinct from, yet complementary to, the bio-medical lens of other professions (Marlowe and Adamson 2011). For example, social workers may lead or be part of, local health district teams in response settings and employ psychological first aid approaches to support families and individuals in the immediate weeks after an event (Lalani and Drolet 2020). However, rather than focusing upon ‘individual repair’, social work practice at all 3 levels is fundamentally concerned with addressing the structural systems that cause harm to wellbeing in the first place. For example, meso practice might link community groups together to prepare for bushfire seasons. Macro practice might identify the structural settings causing marginalisations, and advise on and devise rights-based and climate justice informed programs and policy settings to achieve socially just outcomes in these contexts.

Importantly, social workers are bound by the Australian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics where our commitment at all times to the promotion of social justice (including disaster and climate justice), human rights-based approaches (Ewenson 2024) and individual and community self-determination is clearly defined (AASW 2020b).

Why is social work under-recognised?

Australia is not alone in under-recognising social work within the disaster sector. For example, research in New Zealand found that emergency workers thought social workers were principally concerned with child protection issues (Hay and Pascoe 2022). Research in Finland found that social workers were better recognised for individual case work (Rapeli 2018), aligning the with neo-liberal trend of governments individualising problems, thus enabling governments to eschew responsibility for the structural systems that shape endemic inequities (Morley 2016). Furthermore, social work practice at all 3 levels does not reflect militaristic ‘top down’ approaches; approaches that can leave communities fearful and not heard, and which have been dominant within the disaster management sector in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia 2020; Howard et al. 2023). Across the Nordic region, social workers are legislatively mandated to be involved in disaster and land use planning in recognition of their knowledges from working alongside marginalised groups (Rapeli et al. 2018). Despite this, there remains a perceived lack of ‘professional capital’ for social workers across disaster work more broadly (Romakkaniemi et al. 2023).

What could a social work enhanced emergency management sector look like?

A social work enhanced disaster sector within Australia would put emphasis on community and individual self-determination. It would centre human rights-based and social justice approaches within all facets of this work, building upon strengths and solution-focused techniques designed to complement the approaches of other professions (Adamson 2014). Practices of relationality, compassion and reciprocity, centring the humanity and dignity of every person are core to the Code of Ethics (AASW 2020b; see also United Nations General Assembly 1948, Art. 1), setting social workers apart from traditionally detached and masculinised approaches of work and management (Holdsworth and Boddy 2024). Social workers, as human rights practitioners, approach disaster work with economic, social and cultural objectives framed as requisite rights to which people are entitled by duty bearers (governments), rather than these being welfare or development goals to be provided by charities or recovery agencies on an ‘ad hoc basis’ (Alston 2017). The promotion of collective third generation human rights, including the right to a healthy environment, which may soon be domestically enshrined in a Federal Human Rights Act (Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights 2023, 2024), creates a strong advocacy platform for social workers to progress change in this context. Through

leveraging such rights-based frameworks, social workers in the disaster sector can powerfully advocate against the climate and disaster apartheid we are accelerating towards, to progress a profound re-distribution of resources and power within society so that it is not only the wealthy who can escape and/or recover from increasingly frequent and severe disasters (Alston 2019).

Social workers understand that it is the multiple events located within intersecting systems over a life course that can lead to precarity in the wake of disasters (Hutchison 2019). Such understanding re-orientates disaster mitigation, preparation, response and recovery to acknowledge and address these underlying challenges for individuals and communities, working towards rectifying the multiplicity of long standing inequities at play in such contexts (Howard et al. 2023). In recent years social work has made headway towards decolonising the profession (despite room for further progress in some social work domains), with significant efforts and successes in centring First Nations peoples' lived experiences, expertise, histories and knowledges within social work research, teaching and practice (e.g. Crisp 2024; Newton 2019; Prehn 2024). Translating this theoretical understanding and then practice of decolonisation by social workers would contribute to the disaster sector which, at times, has entrenched harms through ongoing forms of neo-colonisation and racism (Parsons and Fisher 2022; Williamson 2022). It is important to note that there have been considerable efforts made to incorporate Indigenous knowledges into hazard management across Australia.

Some tangible and non-exhaustive possibilities for centring social work within the disaster sector could include the creation of a social work advisory role within suitable emergency preparation, response and recovery functions, such as state emergency management and recovery committees, state control centres, recovery/reconstruction agencies and disaster management peak bodies. A community-of-practice for social workers involved in disaster work could be formed through the Australian Association of Social Workers to share lessons, network, and to respond collectively to inquiry and consultative processes. Future research could map the diverse skills, activities, experiences and reflections of social workers in the disaster sector across Australia, mapping that could be shared through a variety of engaging sector forums.

What could enhance the recognition and involvement of social work in the emergency management sector?

Qualifying social work curricula across Australia has many elements, and comprises eco-social work theory, decolonisation theory, human rights education and anti-oppressive practice (AASW 2020a). Relationality, reciprocity,

humility, and valuing First Nations peoples' knowledges is key to the principles and practice of social work. While there is always room for curricula reflection and evolution, social work graduates emerge from their degrees with core skills and knowledges relevant for disaster management. Rather than focusing only on counselling and case management during recovery, noting that this is a significant role, expanding the recognition of social work expertise to mitigation, preparation, response and recovery more broadly could help challenge and address the underlying systems, and significant resource imbalances, which create the deeply uneven landscapes that make disasters so difficult for so many (Boetto et al. 2021).

The Australian Association of Social Workers is running a campaign to introduce a national registration scheme that could enhance social work's professional capital within the disaster sector (AASW n.d.). Legislation requiring qualified social workers to register before they can practice may contribute to increased professional capital (McCurdy et al. 2020). Further, funding for social workers to undertake research within this field of practice could strengthen the evidence base and the standing of the profession within the sector overall. Increased use of social media platforms, such as LinkedIn and attendance at disaster and emergency management conferences and other gatherings, could allow social work practitioners and social work researchers to effectively promote social work's roles and expertise, as well as furthering the explicit social justice and human rights-based agenda which underpins the profession.

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About the author

Dr Lisa Ewenson is a social worker and lawyer with extensive experience in applied roles promoting the human rights of marginalised communities. Lisa is now based within HowWeSurvive at the University of New South Wales, a research initiative focused upon improving outcomes for disaster impacted communities.



Georgina Bruinsma

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I agree social work as profession is under recognised within the emergency and disaster sector.

Social workers embody the notion that we are connected to communities, given the breadth of the work they conduct. The inclusion with all of the community, driven by social workers' inclusive and holistic approaches, would allow for people within marginalised communities to be considered and consulted with in relation to emergency and disaster management.

Having worked alongside several social workers throughout my career, I have found the holistic approach they provided was pivotal to the work they conduct. It is not a one-size-fits-all for support. Rather, it harnesses the knowledge and skills they possess to support people's current needs. Their ability to work on the ground level with clients as well as other practitioners is held in high regard.

I have seen firsthand the work conducted in my own community by Associate Professor Caroline (Carlie) Atkinson to establish the Northern Rivers Community Healing Hub (Healing Hub). I was fortunate enough to work alongside Carlie in the formation of the Healing Hub as a place to support people to overcome trauma from the floods in the Northern Rivers area of New South Wales in 2022. The hub was established to help healing and to enable the trauma to not be held within the body for a prolonged period of time. Instead, the hub offered supported connection and healing.

The Healing Hub was a place where practitioners, weavers and other community supports were initially provided to aid in the ease of both accessibility and community focused support. With such large numbers of the community needing support following the floods in the Northern Rivers area in 2022, many services were not operational to support the large numbers of the community affected by the floods. The Healing Hub operates in a way that invites people who feel vulnerable to seek connection or support in healing by participating in these activities with the aim to help them to also regulate themselves and reinforce their self-determination.

Facilitating social worker engagement in the emergency management sector enhances the capacity building for all communities, especially ones that are marginalised. Assistance is trauma-informed and person-centered. It is important to note the considerable efforts already made to incorporate indigenous knowledges into disaster risk reduction activities across Australia.¹ This is supported through the National Indigenous Disaster Resilience

program,² which is a research program established in 2022 within Fire to Flourish.³ The program recognises the effects of high-risk hazards for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their communities.

By acknowledging First Nations peoples' knowledges and the ways they care for the land and put community first to support their healing through ways of being, doing and belonging, we can learn the ways to care for this vast country using practices that have been used for many thousands of years. This will, in turn, ease the effects and hopefully reduce the size and scale of the hazards we face. Let's lift the voices of social workers into the emergency management sector to foster an inclusive approach that is not only considered but adopted.

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2. National Indigenous Disaster Resilience program, at www.monash.edu/msdi/news-and-events/news/articles/2024/national-indigenous-disaster-resilience-program-in-full-swing
3. Fire to Flourish, at www.firetoflourish.monash



Anne Crestani

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Resilient Villages, Blue Mountains

I wholeheartedly support Dr Ewenson's call for recognition and incorporation of the social services sector in emergency management structures and arrangements.

As I write my response to her proposal, the Bureau of Meteorology released its State of the Climate Report 2024.¹ It makes for confronting reading with Australia's climate warming by an average of 1.5 degrees since 1910, bringing with it more extreme weather events and a corresponding increase in natural hazard events. Given the sobering picture presented, Dr Ewenson's article is timely in questioning whether current emergency management structures and arrangements are fit for purpose. Her arguments add to the many voices calling for systemic change across the New South Wales emergency management system.

For the past decade, I have worked in-person and in community-centred disaster recovery and preparedness across New South Wales. Over that time, I have seen the term 'shared responsibility' become common place in emergency management rhetoric. While this is an admirable aspiration, in my experience, I have not yet witnessed where it has been effectively enacted, particularly at the local community level. Current emergency management structures in New South Wales are often characterised as hierarchical, gendered, bureaucratic and complex. They are effectively a closed

shop to those who sit outside these structures, including the social services sector.

In my experience of leading multi-disciplinary disaster recovery teams (including social workers), the work is being done on the ground and, in general, is being done very well. However, aspects of disaster funding arrangements are fundamentally inequitable due to short-term project contracts and competitive tendering processes. In addition, with no existing formal role for the social services sector, engagement is negotiated via one-off time-limited projects where funding and contracting arrangements can take months to finalise. The project I currently lead, Resilient Villages², works within a community empowerment and development framework that supports local communities to design and lead their own disaster risk reduction actions. Resilient Villages is one of a number of disaster risk reduction projects in New South Wales that are helping to build and strengthen community and individual self-determination. However, these projects largely function in isolation and without reference to a nationally coordinated framework for equitable and just outcomes.

There are currently limited examples in New South Wales of community representation on Local emergency management committees with the role being limited to that of an observer. Functionally, the door is currently closed and, in my opinion, the social services sector should not be waiting for an invitation that may never come. Dr Ewenson's recommendation for specific disaster training and registration requirements for social work practitioners may enhance the profile of the profession for advocating with the appropriate emergency management agencies along with relevant state and federal ministers.

However, it must be said that designating a formal role for the social work profession within emergency management can only be achieved and enshrined through legislative processes. Without the legislative requirement to, at minimum, consult with the sector let alone designate a formal role, there continues to be little appetite for including the social services sector as a stakeholder and partner in emergency management and disaster adaptation.

1. State of the Climate Report 2024, at www.bom.gov.au/state-of-the-climate
2. Resilient Villages project, at <https://resilientvillages.au>



Catherine Gearing

National Consultant Disaster Recovery
Social Recovery Reference Group

Dr Ewenson's article highlights the valuable social skills that are not yet fully recognised within the emergency management sector. The expertise cultivated through local connection is instrumental in generating and leading change and progress in recovery.

Through my work with the Social Recovery Reference Group¹, we actively promote the inclusion and application of the National Principles for Disaster Recovery.² As custodians of these principles, we are committed to their importance. Dr Ewenson's observations resonate particularly well with the need to understand context and recognise complexity of recovery efforts. The networks, knowledge and skills that social workers bring are pivotal in employing community-led approaches that support self-determination.

However, several challenges have hindered the incorporation of social work and broader community development expertise across the sector. The emergency management sector has historically grown out of a command-and-control model, which identified and promoted skills of those from police, military and combat agencies. Recognition of alternative skills have been slower to gain traction or funding. Limited funding for social recovery has been highlighted in the recent Independent Review of *Commonwealth Disaster Funding*³, which revealed that '88% of Commonwealth disaster funding has gone to the Built and Economic sectors since 2018-19, with only 12% for Social and Natural domains'.

There are some locally funded positions activated after a declared disaster through national and state funding arrangements, including case managers and community development roles. These are valuable in connecting communities and agencies through bonding, bridging and linking efforts. A significant challenge is the temporary nature of many recovery roles, leading to staff turnover as individuals seek stable employment. Another critical challenge involves the need for systemic changes and the connections between the 3 non-hierarchical spheres of practice. Enhancing how our micro and meso spheres can inform macro practices is essential for a holistic approach to improve emergency and disaster management.

Despite these challenges, significant opportunities exist, particularly in embedding social workers and community development practitioners within agencies to reduce staff turnover. This is increasingly important as we face more complex and cascading disasters. Our work in social recovery may involve supporting communities affected by collective trauma events such as the Martin Place siege, the Burke Street Mall incidents as well as international repatriations. Social workers skills are highly valuable to support people and communities when dealing with these events.

Many social services and community-based organisations have well developed social work skills and practices. This presents an opportunity to strengthen relationships and incorporate these networks into emergency and recovery planning and exercises. The Social Recovery Reference Group has created a Possibility Lab as a community of practice that emerged after the 2019–20 summer

bushfires. The Lab was developed in response to the needs of people in community development and community recovery roles that support local recovery but who were often isolated and sometimes new to the field. The Lab continues to evolve as it reflects the changing needs of people involved.

Thank you Dr Ewenson, for your insightful piece. We look forward to hearing more from you and the team at HowWeSurvive.

1. Social Recovery Reference Group, at <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/social-recovery-reference-group>
2. National Principles for Disaster Recovery, at <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/national-principles-for-disaster-recovery>
3. *Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding*, at www.nema.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-10/Independent%20Review%20of%20Commonwealth%20Disaster%20Funding%20-%20Final%20report%20-%20Medium%20Res.PDF



Professor Briony Rogers

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Fire to Flourish welcomes Dr Lisa Ewenson's call for a more visible and central role for social work in the disaster sector.

Disasters unfold on a social fabric, where histories, cultures, structures and relationships influence everything about a community's experience. These social processes need our close attention if we are to address injustices and drive the transformative changes needed systemically to support community flourishing in the face of climate disasters.

Fire to Flourish emerged after the 2019–20 bushfires; a catastrophic disaster that prompted calls for a reimagining of systems of support for communities. Led by Monash University and funded by philanthropy, Fire to Flourish has walked alongside its 4 partner communities of Eurobodalla, Clarence Valley and Tenterfield in NSW, and East Gippsland in Victoria, as they recover from the devastating bushfires. Together, we are co-designing a research-backed model that enables communities to lead their own recovery and create disaster resilience solutions that are right for them, and potentially scalable to others.

The picture of inequities, marginalisation, power imbalances, disenfranchisement and trauma painted by Dr Ewenson is reflected in the lived experiences of people in Fire to Flourish's partner communities. And yet, community is first on the scene when disaster strikes and they are there long after the ash and soot disappear. We consistently hear that communities are ready, capable and willing to fulfil their share of responsibilities in disaster prevention, preparedness and recovery but support and resourcing is critical, and lacking. Social work is an important part of this enabling capacity.

Fire to Flourish established 6 principles to guide its design and implementation that were co-developed through our early engagement with disaster-affected communities. These have been a critical touchstone for our program team and partner communities. Dr Ewenson makes strong arguments for how social work can reinforce these guiding principles in practice:

- Be community-led: Social work emphasises community and individual self-determination.
- Foreground Aboriginal wisdom: The social work practice of decolonisation helps address the ongoing harms of neocolonisation and racism.
- Address inequities and enhance inclusion: Commitment to social justice and human rights is central to the profession of social work.
- Be strengths-based and trauma informed: The micro scale of social work is trauma informed and strengths-based in therapeutic techniques with individuals and families.
- Be holistic and impactful: Social work is underpinned by a systemic understanding of conditions that lead to injustice and marginalisation and advocacy for changes that will lead to better outcomes.
- Learn, adapt and evolve: A social work perspective invites reflection, learning and change among individuals, families, communities and systems.

The disaster sector in Australia is at a pivotal moment. We must face the reality that our current systems are not coping with the magnitude and frequency of disasters we now experience as normal. The pathway forward must be navigated with a social compass. We need to understand and honour the lived experiences of people in disaster-affected communities, innovate solutions that empower communities and reimagine governance conditions so they enable communities to flourish. I applaud Dr Ewenson’s vision of social work being central in this journey.



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Dr Ewenson highlights the importance of integrating a social work framework within the emergency management sector to enhance outcomes for vulnerable populations—particularly relevant for those experiencing homelessness during a disaster. Australia is facing a dual crisis of increasing climatic disasters and rising homelessness¹ and her article raises some timely points.

In northern areas of New South Wales where rates of rough sleeping are higher than in Sydney, there is minimal housing, temporary accommodation or emergency shelters

available for people experiencing homelessness. In these areas, incorporating social work into future responses could be invaluable in supporting local communities and emergency management teams to develop appropriate plans to mitigate the effects before and after such events.

Consider also the correlation between natural hazards, homelessness and trauma. With 90 to 100 percent of people experiencing homelessness also facing trauma², if social work isn’t incorporated into emergency management practices at all stages of prevention, preparedness, response and recovery, is there a greater risk of exacerbating the issue? This includes the potential to further traumatise an already vulnerable population or create a new group at risk of homelessness due to property and community loss. While social work practice may not eliminate the risk, it could significantly bolster resilience to prevent homelessness resulting from disaster-related traumatic events.

Alternatively, if someone is experiencing homelessness, is it trauma-informed to require them to walk 7 kms in the heat to reach the nearest cooled centre? Should alternative responses be considered to account for their specific situations, histories and socio-economic backgrounds? Social work principles were central to a recent initiative addressing these issues. The Mobile Cooling Hub³ was designed collaboratively by Sydney University, St Vincent Health, the City of Sydney and a co-design team led by the University of Technology. It serves as a preventative measure for individuals experiencing homelessness during extreme heat events. Its design addresses trauma and social injustices that hinder access to timely assistance. It provides a mobile cooling centre that can be quickly established where people are experiencing homelessness so that they feel safe to use health interventions.

The integration of social work into emergency management is gradually evolving, but greater incorporation could significantly improve outcomes, as Dr Ewenson has suggested. It is not intentional that vulnerable populations are often overlooked in emergency management. The speed, scale and magnitude of events can make looking after everyone extremely challenging. However, by integrating social work and its related skills—those that complement the existing profession—into the sector, we can move towards a human rights-based and social-justice approach.

1. NSW Government, Street Count, at www.facs.nsw.gov.au/housing/nsw-response-to-homelessness/understanding-homelessness-through-data/street-count
2. O’Donnell M, Varker T, Cash R, Armstrong R, di Censo I, Zanatta P, Murnane A, Brophy I and Phelps A (2014) The Trauma and Homelessness Initiative. Report prepared by the Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health in Collaboration with Sacred Heart Mission, Mind Australia, Inner South Community Health and Vincent Care Victoria. www.mindaustralia.org.au/sites/default/files/2023-06/Trauma_and_homelessness_initiative_research_findings.pdf
3. University of Sydney, Pop-up mobile cooling hubs, at www.sydney.edu.au/medicine-health/our-research/research-centres/heat-and-health-research-centre/pop-up-mobile-cooling-hubs.html