

practical stories

Gender in emergency management policy

The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) is developing a gender in emergency management strategy which aims to reduce the negative consequences of gender-blind practices.

Evidence shows that the incidence of family violence increases post-disaster. Men are more likely to die in floods and bushfires than women and men strongly influence family decisions to stay and defend homes during bushfires, sometimes with tragic results. To positively affect such outcomes, the influence of gender roles and differences must be understood and addressed.

The MAV's strategy will help councils improve their understanding of gender differences and incorporate gender considerations into their emergency management policy, planning, decision making and service delivery. As a first step a fact sheet is being developed to raise awareness of how gender and emergency management interact, and to provide practical advice to help councils make this interaction positive.

Local government's role in emergency management

Local government plays an important role in emergency management, both in partnership with others, and through its own legislated emergency management obligations. Councils are not emergency response agencies, however they currently have the following roles:

- developing emergency management plans
- undertaking mitigation activities
- communicating with, and providing information to, communities
- providing support to response agencies
- co-ordinating relief and recovery for the community, and
- ensuring business continuity.

Why is gender relevant to emergency management?

Women and men experience disasters differently. Gendered roles such as caring for children and the elderly or knowing how to operate a generator, water pump or communication radio network affects how women and men will experience and recover from natural disasters. Gender often shapes how people perceive what is risky, who makes decisions and how we get support or help following disasters. Ignoring or being blind to these different needs can have serious implications for the protection and recovery of people caught up in crises.

Addressing gender issues in emergency management will result in more resilient and equitable communities that are stronger in the face of disaster.

Benefits of integrating gender into emergency management

Emergency management is more effective when based on an understanding of the different needs, vulnerabilities, interests, points of view, capacities, contributions and coping strategies of women and men of all ages before, during and after disaster. All people benefit when gender issues are addressed in times of disaster.

Integrating gender into emergency management decision-making, policy development and service delivery will contribute to:

- better targeting of council resources
- increased understanding of support and services by community members
- reduced incidents of domestic violence
- reduced levels of risk taking during and after an emergency
- greater community participation and equality, and
- increased social, economic and community resilience.

How can local government take gender into account in emergency management?

Emergency management committees and decision-making processes

- Include gender specific organisations and groups.
- Develop a pre-disaster action plan with a contact list of gender specific support organisations.
- Address gender inequities in representation.

Relief centres

- Ensure there is a safe space for women and children e.g. consider breastfeeding needs or managing violent relationships.

Communication

- Tailor disaster risk and recovery information for women and men when needed e.g. the likelihood of increased incidents of family violence, risky behaviour in floods and deciding when to leave during a bushfire incident.
- Take notice of who attends community meetings and make it easier for women and men to participate e.g. to hear advice and provide points of view.

Policies and plans

- Understand the make-up of the community when developing policy and plans by using gender disaggregated data.

- Involve women and men, boys and girls in identifying and addressing local hazards.
- Take into account different needs and capacities of women and men, girls and boys.
- Identify groups of women and men who may be particularly vulnerable in the community.
- Ensure disaster recovery packages are gender equitable e.g. support women's and men's employment.

Evaluation and performance measures

- Ask questions about whether and how gender is considered in emergency management policies, plans, activities and the use of resources.
- Analyse results data by gender.
- Include a gender focus in research.

Volunteers

- Recognise how gender stereotyping affects the development and sustainability of emergency management volunteer groups.
- Partner with existing women's and men's groups as the networks and expertise may already exist.
- Extend the volunteer opportunities and roles available to women, men, girls and boys.

Programs

- Ensure support is available in ways that men and women will find useful.
- Provide women-friendly and men-friendly activities and outreach services.
- Provide mental health and family violence information in formats and places where women and men already meet and support each other.

Local government activities

Family violence and natural disasters training

Research shows that family violence increases during and after disaster. Victorian local government areas affected by floods in 2011—Moira, Shepparton and Wellington—have improved the knowledge and skills of local disaster recovery workers to recognise and effectively respond to family violence. This has been achieved by providing family violence and natural disasters pilot training.

Disaster recovery staff who support communities post-disaster can undertake Common Risk Assessment Family Violence training—free until the end of 2013 (www.dvrcv.org.au/training) or Family Violence and Natural Disasters training (www.whealth.com.au).

Through Women's Eyes: disaster resilience project

The Alpine Shire partnered with Women's Health Goulburn North East in early 2012 to bring together 31 women from 16 to 80+ years of age from across the Shire to identify how disaster resilience can be improved. Women met in small groups in Kancoona, Mt Beauty, Myrtleford and Rosewhite to identify the

strengths of women and the different ways men are affected during and after disasters. The project was supported by the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal. Project findings are available at www.whealth.com.au in the form of videos, posters and information sheets.

Evenings with Rob Gordon

People affected by disaster have been helped to understand how they, their families and friends may be feeling and responding through information sessions provided by local government disaster recovery programs. Psychologist, Dr Rob Gordon, provided information about the dynamics of communities after traumatic events such as bushfires and floods.

Feedback from people attending these sessions identified that the style of information delivery was particularly useful to men. The sessions were informative and matter of fact and offered new 'words' (e.g. 'fire brain') and ways to understand what people experience and feel in the wake of disasters. Information was also provided about ways people can help each other and find the support available when it all gets too much. Information about managing emotions in emergencies is at www.dhs.vic.gov.au/emergency.

MAV gender in emergency management strategy

The MAV recognises that gender is important and is developing a strategy to improve emergency management in local government and reduce the negative consequences of gender-blind practices. The strategy aims to ensure gender differences are considered and incorporated into emergency management policy, planning, decision-making and service delivery.

Further information

Web: www.mav.asn.au/policy-services/emergency-management

Email: emergencymgt@mav.asn.au.