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## The Toodyay experience: connecting with men in disaster recovery

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*Ryan Hamblion reflects on some of the lessons learned from the 2009 Toodyay fire recovery.*

On 29 December 2009, a bushfire event occurred in the Toodyay area (approx 50 kilometres north east of Perth). It resulted in one of the most damaging bushfires in Western Australia's history.

The fire conditions at the time were some of the worst seen in Western Australia and a Total Fire Ban was declared for the Lower West Inland (including Toodyay) on Monday 28 December 2009.

The terrain in the Toodyay area varies considerably and was significant in not only influencing the fire behaviour and winds, but also the accessibility for fire crews to combat the fire in certain areas.

The Toodyay fire was restricted to the west of the town, located in the far north east part of the Lower West inland fire district. It had started near River Road south of the Avon River and west of Folewood Road. It was eventually brought under control close to the Clackline-Toodyay Road south of the town site.

The fire destroyed a total of 38 homes and approximately 3 000 hectares of land, causing extensive damage estimated at more than \$50 million. No lives were lost and only minor injuries were reported<sup>1</sup>.

Recovery after the fires included a traditional casework and recovery approach; however, this did not seem to be effective for men affected by the fire. Different ways of working had to be developed.

### Considerations

#### Here comes a suit

Experience shows that it is harder for country people to relate to a recovery worker in a suit, as this is often associated with receiving bad news, visiting the 'bank manager' or dealing with the bureaucratic system.

#### Get out there

Committees are all well and good but nothing beats getting out into the community to talk with people – especially men. Meeting people on their property and seeing firsthand what has happened or sitting down for smoko at the pub with recovery workers goes a lot further than sitting in an office expecting people to visit.

#### Provide support in comfortable social places

Providing information and support services through clubs and social places where people are already connected worked well for reaching some affected men.

Places like Men's Sheds, Bowls Clubs and service clubs were good places to leave information and spend time to find out what was going on and who might need support.

#### Confidentiality

Building trust led to people helping to identify who needed support. Trusting the confidentiality of what was said to the worker was a crucial part of making this work. Trust and confidentiality meant being able to identify and support men before a major breakdown occurred.

#### Small, practical steps build trust

Being from a government department can be a barrier to gaining the trust of men affected by a disaster. Providing practical help in small ways such as food vouchers builds trust to work on the bigger issues such as insurance claims. Sorting out practical support means there is a greater chance of introducing emotional supports like counselling. It is important to let men know this doesn't mean lying on a couch and telling someone about innermost secrets. People can find counselling useful and it was not a sign of weakness to accept help.

#### Watch out for survivor guilt

Recovery workers found issues like survivor guilt weighed very heavily on some men. It was important to listen to what members of the community were saying about who might be affected and who might need immediate support. Identifying people to prioritise in relation to offering support was less about houses lost or structural damage.

#### Keep an eye out for your mate

Even when men were not prepared to accept help for themselves they were more often than not ready to keep an eye out for their friends. Many men did not want to talk in depth about how they were doing, but they were interested in knowing how to help their friends. Providing mental health first aid tips about what signs to look out for in the behaviour of their friends worked as a way of reaching men with information about depression and anger. It provided good opportunities to hear more about what men were experiencing.

#### Further information

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1. Fire and Emergency Services Authority (2010). *Major Incident Review of Toodyay Fire December 2009 – Final*. Available at [www.dfes.wa.gov.au/publications/MajorIncidentReports/FESA-Reports-MIR-ToodyayDec2009.pdf](http://www.dfes.wa.gov.au/publications/MajorIncidentReports/FESA-Reports-MIR-ToodyayDec2009.pdf) pp3-5.