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Person-Centred Emergency Management Approach: A Case Study from Mackay, Queensland

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Abstract

Emergency managers have long grappled with reducing risk for people who are more vulnerable in disasters such as people with disability and seniors. One way is to leverage the routine interactions that service providers have with the people they support. Research shows, however, that service providers are not adequately prepared for disasters, nor integrated into emergency planning.

This paper describes how one regional city employed a capacity development approach to engage community, health, aged care, and disability service providers, together with emergency managers, to learn about and use the Person-Centred Emergency Preparedness (P-CEP) toolkit to impact the disaster resilience of people with disability and other high-risk groups.

Mackay Regional Council partnered with The University of Sydney and Queenslanders with Disability Network to introduce P-CEP to over 100 service providers. Participants also included Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Australian South Sea Islander organisations, domestic violence services, and public-facing local government staff. Participants learned to use P-CEP to enable people with disability to develop personal emergency preparedness tailored to their individual support needs. The project was supported by Peer Leaders – people with disability were trained in P-CEP. Participants also met with emergency services and learned about their capabilities and limitations during disasters, thereby resetting their expectations to create a sense of personal responsibility.

Key actions included: (a) distributing over 2,500 P-CEP resources; (b) extracting early learnings to provide practical tips distributed via an eBulletin; (c) creating opportunities for people not connected to formal support services to access and learn P-CEP; and (d) facilitating conversations with emergency services to help build shared responsibility.

We will share these good practice examples and a Resource Package by people with disability designed for local government to lead disability inclusive emergency planning.

Keywords

disaster risk reduction, disability, person-centred, capability development, community engagement

Background

Mackay is a city on the north-central Queensland coast located within a tropical cyclone zone. Most of the region is low-lying, making it susceptible to storm tide and flooding. Several major disaster events have impacted the region, including:

- 1918 Cyclone – Destroyed or significantly damaged 93% of dwellings and killed scores (State Library of Queensland 2018).
- 1958 Pioneer River Flood – Highest recorded for the catchment (Bureau of Meteorology 2021).
- 2008 Mackay Flood – Over 600 mm of rain fell in only six hours (Bureau of Meteorology, 2008) causing \$410 million in damages (Insurance Council of Australia 2021).
- 2017 Severe Tropical Cyclone Debbie – Second-most expensive cyclone in Australian history (Insurance Council of Australia 2021).
- 2018 Central Queensland Bushfires – First disaster-declared bushfire event for the region (Queensland Reconstruction Authority, 2019).

The Project

Mackay Regional Council previously held a list of at-risk residents, such as people with severe and complex needs. Mackay expected to use this list to aid disaster response. However, this approach did not consider the capabilities or involvement of Mackay residents in taking steps to increase their own preparedness to respond and recover from disasters in our community. Instead, it reinforced a deficit-based approach and expectations that emergency personnel would be there in an emergency to rescue them. The total population of Mackay is 118,000 (Remplan, 2021). Just over 5,000 residents identified as having a need for assistance with self-care, mobility, or communication because of disability, long term health condition, or old age (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Council needed a new strategy that would be more effective in preparing this population and the services that support them for emergencies.

To support Council in shifting practice toward person-centred and capability focused approaches to disaster risk reduction, we initiated a partnership with The University of Sydney and the Queenslanders with Disability Network (QDN). Together we undertook a capacity development approach to working with disability, community and health services providers to: (a) build their capabilities in Person-Centred Emergency Preparedness (Villeneuve, 2019); and (b) leverage their routine interactions with the people

they support to enable people with disability and other high-risk groups to learn about and use the Australian-designed Person-Centred Emergency Preparedness (P-CEP) Workbook (Villeneuve, Abson, Yen, & Moss, 2020).

Person-Centred Emergency Preparedness

P-CEP is used by people with disability to self-assess their preparedness, capabilities, and support needs and to plan, together with their support network, for how they will manage those support needs in emergencies (Villeneuve, 2021). It can also be used by other at-risk groups, such as seniors, people with mental health, and chronic health conditions. Four steps guide the self-assessment process (Figure 1). Detail on the P-CEP is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the reader is directed to (Villeneuve, Abson, Pertiwi, & Moss, 2021a; Villeneuve, 2021b; Villeneuve, 2021c) for more information about how it was co-designed and field tested with people with disability.

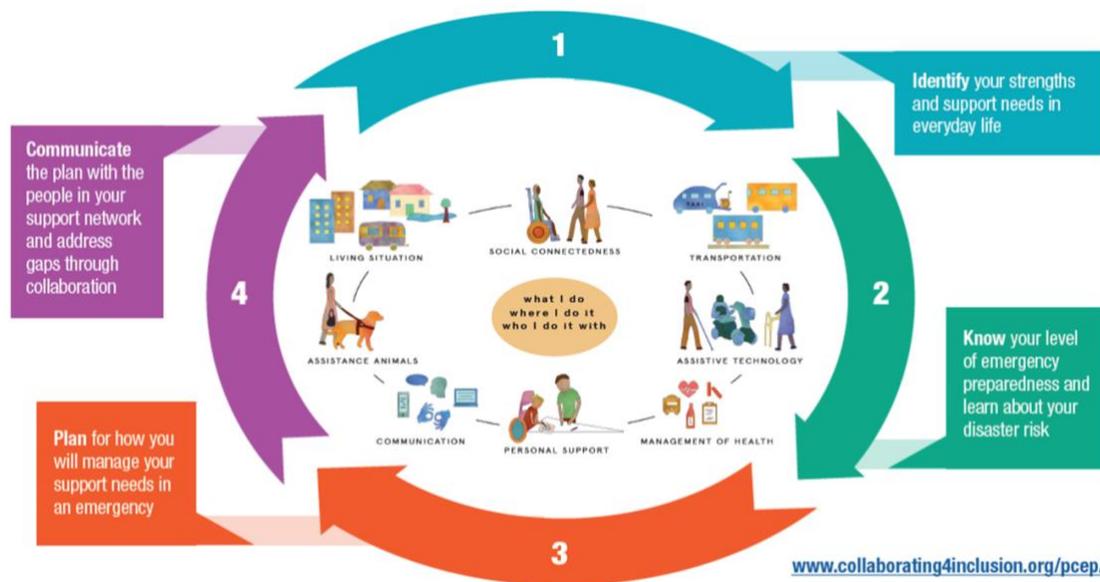


Figure 1. The P-CEP Framework and Process Steps. Printed with permission (collaborating4inclusion.org)

Purpose of paper

The purpose of this paper is to describe the key actions undertaken to develop and implement DIDRR in the Mackay region and share lessons learned.

Partnership Approach

The partnership enabled a program of capability development for people with disability and service providers, underpinned by strong community engagement. Initial training in P-CEP to over sixty service providers was followed by a forum a few months later, which featured a panel with emergency services. A campaign to promote P-CEP directly to people with disability and other at-risk groups included media advertising, events at libraries and a shopping centre, approached to community groups, and a mass mailout.

As part of the Disability Inclusive and Disaster Resilient Queensland Communities Project (2019 – 2021), The University of Sydney and QDN co-developed a P-CEP Peer Leadership Program involving 25 peer leaders with disability from across Queensland who learned to use the P-CEP to make their own preparedness plan and then enabled preparedness planning in others through peer support and mentoring. Peer Leaders also contributed to capacity development with service providers (community, health, disability) and emergency personnel through community events and forums on P-CEP.

This project engaged the P-CEP Peer Leader from Mackay as a co-instructor at the service provider training and in follow up forums.

Key actions

(a) Building person-centred emergency planning capability among services providers

In September 2020, two P-CEP education sessions were delivered in Mackay to a total of 64 staff from 31 different service organisations (Table 1). The training included introduction to the P-CEP and the role of service providers in enabling P-CEP with the people they support. Interactive learning activities supported providers to appraise both opportunities and challenges they might have with embedding P-CEP into their routine interactions with the people they support. The change in trainees' understanding of, and confidence, in emergency preparedness was collected via pre and post training surveys.

Table 1. Participating services in P-CEP training in September 2020 by type.

Service Type	Number of Participating Services	Number of Participating Staff
Disability	11	15
Housing & Homelessness	6	10
Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander	3	11

Aged Care	2	4
Domestic Violence	2	4
Child & Family	2	2
Local government	1	11
Community	1	4
Emergency Service	1	1
Veterans	1	1
Justice	1	1
Total	31	64



Figure 2. P-CEP Facilitators training for human service providers, Mackay, September 2020.

Following the training, the call to action was for service providers to embed P-CEP into their everyday practices. Council committed to learning alongside service providers and assisting by gathering strategies and tips for doing P-CEP in practice and sharing that information with all service providers via ebulletins. A follow-up forum was also held in November 2020, attended by 52 people from 26 different human services, emergency services, and government agencies. At the forum, small group discussions aimed at problem solving common challenges for people with disability in emergency and a panel with emergency services.

E-bulletins were distributed via service provider email networks and to councils throughout the state, to share what was being learned in Mackay. They included tips for implementing P-CEP through NDIS participants' plans.

(b) Sharing P-CEP widely throughout the community

The University of Sydney has made the P-CEP an open access tool available for free online (www.collaborating4inclusion.org). Mackay Regional Council provided links to the workbook on Council's website and printed and distributed over 4,000 copies of the P-CEP Workbook over nine months. Most were collected by service providers to give to their clients. Workbooks were also provided through the five Council Libraries and the Mobile Library.



Figure 3. (Left) The cover of the P-CEP Workbook. (Centre) Figure 4. Copies of the P-CEP Workbook ready for collection at the training. (Right) Figure 5. Boxes of P-CEP Workbooks being collected by a service volunteer.

A flyer advertising the P-CEP was distributed to 40,000 households via the Council rates notice and subsequent efforts to reach renters. Community engagement events were held at libraries and a major shopping centre. Access to resources was advertised via local radio, print and digital news, and social media. Councillors and community development officers spoke about P-CEP and distributed workbooks when they met with community groups.

In February 2021, QDN and The University of Sydney delivered a P-CEP event for people with disability, attracting members of a chronic health condition support group.



Figure 6. Forum attendees listen to a panel of representatives from emergency services.

(c) Building awareness among emergency managers

Key emergency services staff with roles in disaster management were engaged as co-instructors in the capability development activities for service providers and people with disability. This in turn built their knowledge and understanding of P-CEP and the lived experience of people with disability in preparing for disasters. In Queensland, Councils hold a particular leadership role in disaster management. So, Mackay created videos to capture the story of moving from an emergency-management approach to a person-centred approach to planning and responding to people with disability. Council presented to other councils and emergency services about the project via webinars, group presentations, and conferences.

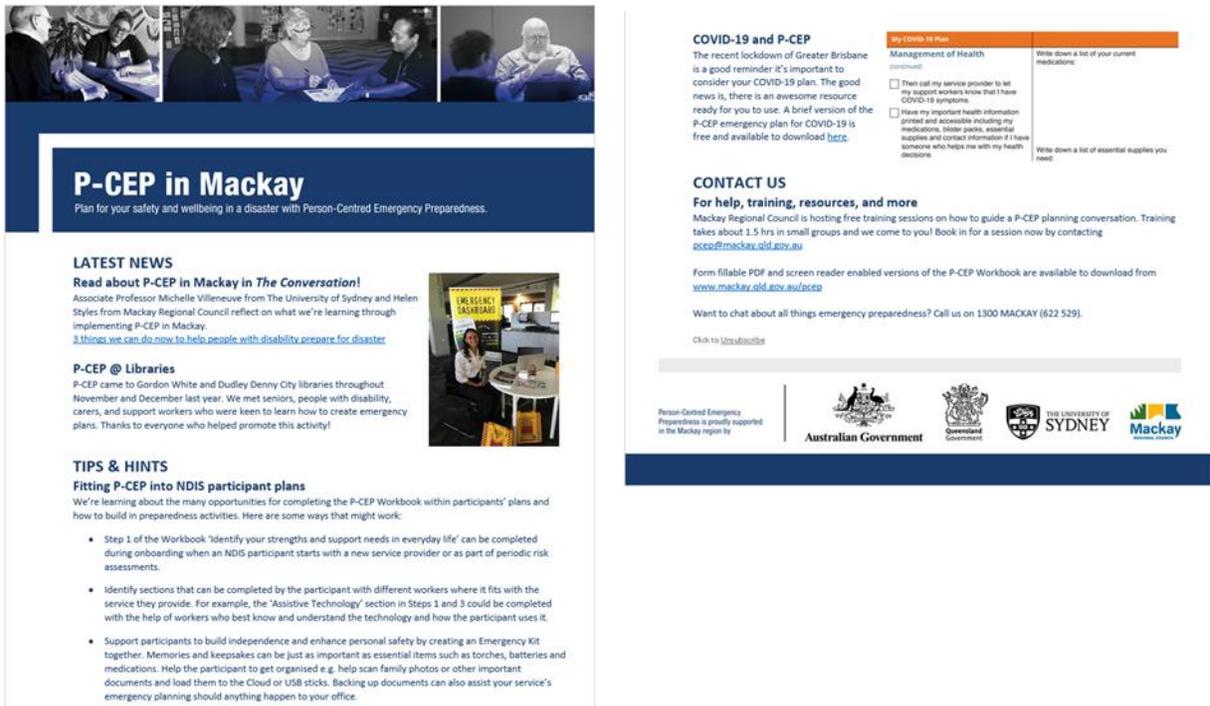
(d) Building capability among Council representatives and staff

Elected Councillors and broad range of community-facing Council staff were trained in P-CEP and became key ambassadors for promoting P-CEP in the communities they reach. They included staff from libraries, community development officers, emergency management officers, and arts officers. They

assisted in the delivery of all training and events, in turn building their capability in using the P-CEP tools and confidence to engagement with people with disability on the topic.

(e) Engaging Peer Leader

The Mackay Peer Leader was also engaged as a co-instructor on all training and events. For some emergency services personnel, it was the first time they had heard directly from people with disability about their experiences in disaster.



Figures 7. and 8. P-CEP in Mackay ebuletin.

Key findings

(a) Person-centred emergency planning enables more informed emergency plans for providers

72% of P-CEP Facilitator trainees already had a business continuity plan. But many told us they realised they had not considered the individual emergency plans of their staff that impacted organisational plans:

“The first thing I did when I went back to my organisation was gathered the team and ask each of them what their family plan would be in a cyclone. I learned nearly half the team wouldn’t be available to work because they need to care for their children or elderly parents.”

Service providers recognised they needed to start emergency planning from the point of view of their clients. For example,

“The clients need to talk about their needs with support service listening, not a tick and flick.

“Person-centred not service-centred.”

“It’s important to have a person-centred approach, tailored individually so that the client feels involved and empowered to actively prepare for a disaster.”

(b) Facilitating conversations between emergency services, people with disability, and their service providers builds shared understanding and responsibility

The interactions between providers and emergency services at the training increased their understanding of each others’ capacities and limitations in disasters.

Service providers told us:

“It is important to formulate an emergency plan now, ahead of time, before crisis happens.”

“Each person in our community has to have a plan of their own. There is not going to be anyone that will miraculously appear to save us.”

“Making people aware they should not be relying on emergency services, they need to put steps in place so they can depend on themselves.”



Figure 7. QDN Peer Leader presents at QFES Central Region Senior Leaders Forum

Emergency services told us:

“(I learned) How reliant on power some of the individuals are.”

“We need more places of refuge in heatwaves. They (people with disability) can’t afford air conditioning!”

“All the years I’ve been on the fireground, I never once thought what it would be like for someone in a wheelchair to have to evacuate.”

“Our agency has always said (to community), ‘This is how we do things. You need to change how you prepare.’ But maybe we need to recognise what the community is like and respond how they need?”

(c) People who are not connected to formal service providers can be missed

There were several disability service providers that were difficult to engage, despite multiple training offerings and invitations to gatherings. With the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) there are also many people with disability who self-manage their own supports and are not connected with traditional disability service providers. Additionally, there are many people with disability who do not have funded supports. Feedback was also received from multiple sources that we should reach people who were ageing or had some other support need but may not be reached via disability service providers. This led to activities such as ‘P-CEP@ Libraries’ information sessions and the related advertising. Libraries were chosen because of their high use by people with disability and seniors.

(d) Councils can play a vital role in leading DIDRR

Local government can use its role in leading, supporting, and coordinating community initiatives to successfully introduce DIDRR practices such as the P-CEP into their communities. Councils can convene the many and varied stakeholders for this work, and they have the authority to endorse DIDRR practices and tools. Critically, councils’ many touchpoints with their communities mean they can provide easy access to resources such as the P-CEP Workbook.

(e) DIDRR happens when people with disability are included

The involvement of the Peer Leader has enabled DIDRR practices to develop in the Mackay region and beyond. He was invited to represent people with disability on the Human and Social Recovery Group for the Mackay Disaster District, which includes Mackay, Isaac, and Whitsunday local government areas. Through GWC he is being engaged to facilitate P-CEP information sessions in Bowen.

Next Steps

There are implications from these findings for service providers and emergency managers, as well as the need for further research.

- Encouraging and enabling more service providers to move towards a person-centred approach.
- Continuing to provide opportunities for emergency managers to engage with people with disability living in their communities and considering the implications for emergency planning.
- Exploring pathways for service providers to find ways to facilitate P-CEP planning conversations with clients within the current NDIS planning environment and sharing them widely. A pilot is planned in the Mackay region with the NDIS Local Area Coordinator to test ways the P-CEP plan can be achieved so the learnings can be shared widely with service providers.

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