

# Lessons to be learned in relation to the Australian bushfire season 2019-20

Submission to the Senate Finance and Public Administration Committees

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## Introduction

ReachOut is concerned and heartbroken for those impacted by bushfires over the 2019-20 summer and acknowledges the amazing work of our firefighters, frontline emergency workers and their support crews. With the nation, we mourned those who tragically lost their lives.

The Federal Government's quick action to develop a mental health package to support bushfire affected communities was very positive, including the community centred focus. However, in responding to future emergencies ReachOut is keen to see responses that:

- take into account the service needs and preferences of young people
- include a national coordinated digital response across online services.

Included in this submission is research and evidence on how we can better ensure mental health responses are tailored for young people and take into account their needs and preferences including for online services, support to understand their experiences and seek help, and their reluctance to seek help.

## Terms of reference

Lessons to be learned in relation to the preparation and planning for, response to and recovery efforts following the 2019-20 Australian bushfire season, with particular reference to:

- (a) advice provided to the Federal Government, prior to the bushfires, about the level of bushfire risk this fire season, how and why those risks differed from historical norms, and measures that should be taken to reduce that risk in the future;
- (b) the respective roles and responsibilities of different levels of government, and agencies within government, in relation to bushfire planning, mitigation, response, and recovery;
- (c) the Federal Government's response to recommendations from previous bushfire Royal Commissions and inquiries;
- (d) the adequacy of the Federal Government's existing measures and policies to reduce future bushfire risk, including in relation to assessing, mitigating and adapting to expected climate change impacts, land use planning and management, hazard reduction, Indigenous fire practices, support for firefighters and other disaster mitigation measures;
- (e) best practice funding models and policy measures to reduce future bushfire risk, both within Australia and internationally;
- (f) existing structures, measures and policies implemented by the Federal Government, charities and others to assist communities to recover from the 2019-20 bushfires, including the performance of the National Bushfire Recovery Agency;
- (g) the role and process of advising Government and the federal Parliament of scientific advice;
- (h) an examination of the physical and mental health impacts of bushfires on the population, and the Federal Government's response to those impacts; and
- (i) any related matters.

The focus of this submission is on the mental health impacts of bushfires and the Federal Government response to those impacts.

## About ReachOut

ReachOut is the most accessed online mental health service for young people and their parents in Australia.

ReachOut offers a range of options for young people aged 12-25 with a focus on everyday issues and tough times, and to support their mental health and wellbeing. This includes:

- Level 1: information and resources to be well and stay well
- Level 2: online peer support to connect, find hope and share their stories in a safe place
- Level 3: pathways through to professional help, if required.

As shown in our recently published Impact Study<sup>1</sup>, with 70 per cent of young people not seeking help for a mental health issue, ReachOut's online service addresses many of the barriers to help-seeking including stigma, embarrassment and a preference for self-reliance.

ReachOut also supports the people that young people turn to for support, including friends, parents, and schools and educators.

ReachOut Parents offers a range of support options to parents of teenagers (aged 12–18) with a focus on encouraging effective communication and relationships including:

- Level 1: digital information and resources on parenting teenagers
- Level 2: online peer support, providing a safe and supportive environment for parents to discuss the issues that are on their mind
- Level 3: free professional phone-based coaching with a parenting expert (up to 4 sessions) to build confidence, skills and a toolkit for parenting teenagers.

ReachOut Schools supports teachers to build young people's wellbeing and resilience.

ReachOut Australia has more than 20 years' experience delivering digital mental health and wellbeing programs, and has its own in-house digital team. Our data and research-driven delivery model combines analytics from our digital products with contextual quantitative and qualitative research to inform and direct our service. This enables us to accurately and responsively deliver a service that reflects current events and issues, and target specific audiences with the information that is most relevant to them.

ReachOut uses a strengths-based prevention and early intervention model, we are trusted and able to communicate and engage with young people (and parents) in ways and places that other mental health services can't.

Accessed by more than 2 million people in Australia each year, ReachOut is a free service that's available anytime and pretty much anywhere.

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<sup>1</sup> Kahl, B. L., Miller, H., Cairns, K., Giniunas, H., Welland, L., & Nicholas, M. (2020). A Measurable Impact: Helping Young People to Be and Stay Well. Sydney: ReachOut Australia.

## The Federal Government mental health response to the bushfire season

In January 2020, the Federal Government announced a mental health bushfire response of \$76 million in funding which focused on free counselling sessions, extra Medicare and telehealth consultations, an expansion of headspace services for young Australians, and community recovery initiatives.

As a high-level summary it included:

- *Immediate distress and trauma support*: including \$10.5 million for up to 10 free counselling sessions and \$3.2 million for bushfire mental health response coordinators.
- *Enhanced services through Medicare and telehealth*: \$29.6 million for additional Medicare-supported psychological treatment sessions and expanded access to telehealth.
- *Child and youth mental health*: up to an additional \$300,000 for headspace sites, and expansion of the Batemans Bay headspace, \$4.4 million
- *Support for Emergency Service Personnel*: including \$16 million for trauma care services, \$1 million for training for front line emergency service personnel in trauma-informed care and psychological first aid.
- *Community recovery and coordination*: including \$6.9 million for community wellbeing grants and locally tailored mental health services through Primary Health Networks.

The Federal Government also provided \$1.5 million to Lifeline for a dedicated bushfire recovery helpline.

The quick action to develop a mental health package to support bushfire affected communities was very positive, including the community centred focus.

However ReachOut is concerned that the package did not specifically take into account the service needs and preferences of young people; specifically, the important fact that even when young people know they need help, many are unwilling or unable to do so. This may be due to powerful attitudinal barriers like fear, embarrassment or stigma, or due to a negative prior experience with the service system. The Mission Australia youth survey consistently reports that friends, parents/caregivers, and the internet are the most commonly cited sources of support for young people when they are going through a tough time<sup>2</sup>. Additional information about young people's service needs and preferences is provided below (see 'Tailoring responses for young people').

A recent UNICEF survey report<sup>3</sup> highlighted young peoples' views that they should be better recognised as a stakeholder as part of the COVID-19 pandemic, and this may also be relevant for other emergency responses. In the same survey, one in four young people in Australia (25%) feel that children and young people are not considered to be equal stakeholders to other cohorts in society in the national pandemic and response. Two in five (40%) also believe that many of the discussions about children and young people (e.g. school closures) are more about the impact on parents and carers and believe that they should be included as a primary consideration. In future

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<sup>2</sup> E. Carlisle, J. Fildes., S. Hall, B. Perrrens, A. Perdriau and J. Plummer, 'Youth Survey Report 2019', Sydney, NSW, Mission Australia, 2019

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF, 'Living in Limbo, the views and experiences of young people in Australia at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and response', 2020, accessed 21 May 2020 at: <https://www.unicef.org.au/Upload/UNICEF/Media/Documents/UNICEF-COVID-19-Living-in-Limbo-2020.pdf>

emergency response approaches it's important to consider how children and young people can feed into discussions and responses, to ensure their specific needs and preferences are addressed.

Research continues to show that around 70 per cent of the population will not seek help for a mental health issue. Capacity issues and challenges in the current system are well documented; pressures have never been more intense following drought, bushfires and now COVID-19; and the need for greater collaboration has been reinforced through numerous reviews, inquiries and the Productivity Commission's Draft Report.

ReachOut is also concerned that a national coordinated digital response for bushfire affected communities was not prioritised. Specifically this response would be tailored for youth and adult populations and involve key online services (for example Beyond Blue, Lifeline, Kids Helpline, ReachOut, eheadspace), and work with Primary Health Networks and refer back to in-community services. At the centre of this response is a 'no wrong door' approach, which ensures direct linkages and pathways exist between services to ensure people get the help they need regardless of the service they connect with. The response would use geo-targeting via social media channels to communicate and direct people to a range of support options, from self-help, peer support, telephone, text and webchat support, and 1:1 services on the ground.

Further, ReachOut has learned valuable lessons in developing and delivering a digital service response as part of its work supporting young people, parents and schools in drought-affected communities, including:

- the importance of talking about the experience on the ground, not only the 'issue'. ReachOut's data showed that resources and promotion that specifically referenced the drought were not as valued as those that referenced everyday issues, like feeling down or managing stress (youth) or help talking to a teenager (parents)
- the need for national digital services to refer back to local services, wherever possible
- the importance of supporting those who young people turn to i.e. parents and carers, and schools.

See Attachment A, ReachOut Drought Response Case Study. We share these learnings as part of informing and improving service responses into the future.

## **ReachOut service response to the bushfire season**

Part of ReachOut's core service capability is to provide mental health and wellbeing support for young people (and their parents) in response to emerging issues, bad world news, natural disasters and emergencies. In anticipation of more severe weather events and a longer bushfire season, in September 2019 ReachOut created a number of resources, including

Youth: [How to deal with the stress of bushfires, floods, earthquakes and cyclones](#) and the collection <https://au.reachout.com/collections/natural-disasters>  
Parents: [Helping your teen deal with stress from a natural disaster](#)

ReachOut's service response focused on building resilience, coping, dealing with bad news, climate anxiety and accessing professional help, as part of the initial emergency and recovery phases of the bushfires. Young people and parents were geo-targeted through online advertising, content partnerships (spaces where they are), and owned channels (including email subscribers). These resources were accessed 11,829 times from mid-November 2019 to 13 May 2020.

ReachOut's peer support community, which provides a safe online space for young people, was accessed by 978 young people from mid-November 2019 to 13 May 2020. ReachOut proactively created discussions about how to cope with bushfires, and young people talked about their experiences, including having to evacuate, their anger, and feelings of hopelessness. Due to high distress, the peer support approach focused on wellbeing activities, and good news stories that talked about hope and communities supporting each other.

*Also I just saw that 3 people have been killed due to a firefighting plane crashed.. that was pretty distressing I think I'm going to take a break from social media while the fires are going on. It's become a really unhealthy place to me to be, seeing all the poor animals and this horrible news (ReachOut Forum User)*

*The weather is bad it is basically 40+ for the next 3 days and 0 rain. Here I am having not slept again at 5:15am shaking and crying, my stomach hurts and all I can smell is smoke from the fire. I am exhausted but I am scared to dream again and the smoke stinks and I just can't do this (ReachOut Forum User)*

To coincide with students returning to school, ReachOut Schools developed practical classroom resources for teachers and educators in secondary schools in bushfire-affected communities, accessible at <https://schools.au.reachout.com/natural-disasters>. These resources focused on building resilience, coping, dealing with bad news, climate anxiety and accessing professional help, and were accessed by 3390 teachers and educators from mid-November 2019 to 13 May 2020.

ReachOut's service response to the bushfire season was funded through existing Department of Health and Social Services contracts and corporate partnerships, including a grant from Facebook.

## Tailoring responses for young people

### Young people's preference for online

The Mission Australia Youth Survey illustrates young people's appetite for mental health support that can be provided online<sup>45</sup>. In their 2018 survey:

- 31 per cent of all young people, and 37 per cent of those with psychological distress, said they would use the internet to source **information about specific issues**
- 16.5 per cent of all young people, and 22.2 per cent of those with psychological distress, said they would use the internet to access **information about available services**
- 16.5 per cent of young people, and 23 per cent of young people with psychological distress, reported that they would use the internet **to chat one-on-one with someone who has had**

<sup>4</sup> S. Hall, J. Fildes, B. Perrens, J. Plummer, E. Carlisle, N. Cockayne and A. Werner-Seidler, 'Can we Talk? Seven Year Youth Mental Health Report - 2012-2018'. Sydney, NSW, Mission Australia, 2019.

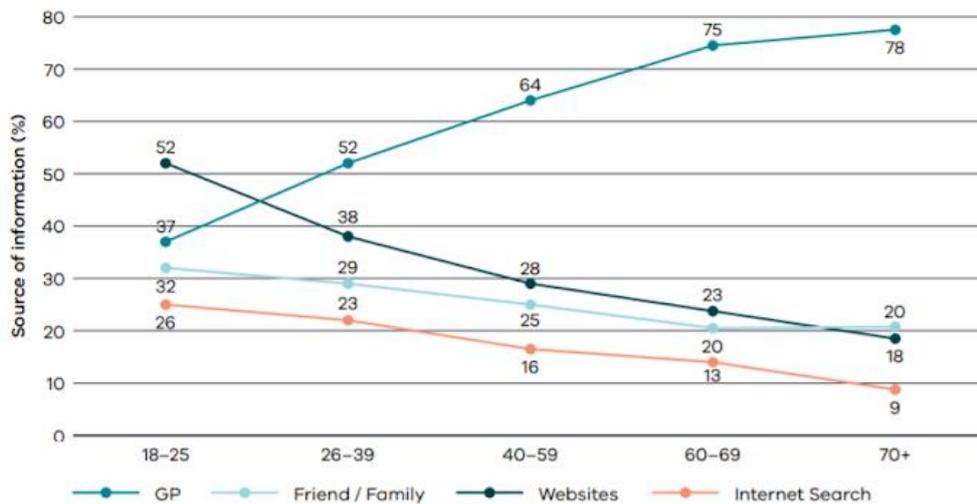
<sup>5</sup> E. Carlisle, J. Fildes., S. Hall, B. Perrens, A. Perdriau and J. Plummer, 'Youth Survey Report 2019', Sydney, NSW, Mission Australia, 2019.

**a similar experience** (notably young people valued this over online counselling with a professional)

- 19 per cent of young people, and 19.8 per cent of those with psychological distress, reported they would use the internet to access an **online quiz or assessment tool**
- 8.3 per cent of young people, and 11.8 per cent of those with psychological distress, said they would use an **online support group or forum**.

Further the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System noted that children and young people can be reluctant to seek help in person, and many prefer to access support and information online<sup>6</sup>. A survey conducted for the Commission found that, while older people are more likely to visit their GP about mental health concerns, young people are more likely to use the websites of specific mental health support services (see Figure 7.23 reproduced from the Interim Report).

**Figure 7.23:** Likely sources of information approach when facing a ‘mental health challenge’, by age group Victoria



Reference: RCVMHS, Community Sentiment Survey-Key findings, November 2019.

### Support to understand and seek help

Many mental health responses assume a level of self-awareness and acceptance of a developing mental health issue, which is something many young people do not possess and may prevent them from getting appropriate help. A question in ReachOut’s routine monitoring and evaluation, for both ReachOut users and non-ReachOut users, asks ‘What’s the one thing that stresses you out, but you don’t think is important or serious enough to tell anyone?’. While many young people report issues like study stress and worrying about the future, others report issues that signal fairly serious mental health symptoms which they are not conceptualising in this way, or seeing as helpworthy (see Table 1).

<sup>6</sup> State of Victoria, Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System, Interim Report, Parl Paper No. 87 (2018–19)

**Table 1: “What’s the one thing that stresses you out, but you don’t think is important or serious enough to tell anyone?”**

<i>Responses that may signal mental health symptoms</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Anxiety</li><li>● A feeling of hopelessness</li><li>● Being worthless</li><li>● Eating disorders</li><li>● I am worried too much about everything</li><li>● I feel extremely sad deep inside</li><li>● Just general negative feelings about myself and my life</li><li>● My social anxiety I feel like it’s silly and other people don’t get it like it’s just something I need to get over on my own</li></ul>

Young people need help to understand what they are going through and to get them ready to seek further support. Services like ReachOut provide this opportunity by:

- increasing awareness of symptoms and services
- providing a safe space to explore and discuss their situation
- clarifying expectations about what seeking help would look like, what would be required of them and how much it would cost
- building positive attitudes about the benefits of seeking help and decreasing stigma
- sharing other young people’s experiences of seeking help
- increasing a young person’s sense of agency and motivation in their own help-seeking journey.

Mental health responses need to support young people to become more self-aware in relation to their own mental health, and empower them to access the form of support that is right for them.

### The reluctant helpseeker

ReachOut’s research and work with young people has shown that a large proportion are unwilling to access face-to-face services, even if they know that they would benefit from doing so. A Mission Australia report showed that 36.5 per cent of the young people surveyed who were experiencing psychological distress agreed with the statement “I have had some problems but I did not get help even though I thought I needed it”<sup>7</sup>. ReachOut’s recent Impact Study<sup>8</sup> showed that 26.6 per cent of respondents (comprising young people with fairly significant mental health needs) agreed with the same statement.

*“I don’t think it is necessary [sic] to tell anyone because i know how to solve my problems and i dont need to bother anyone else about them” [ReachOut study participant]*

<sup>7</sup> S. Hall, J. Fildes, B. Perrens, J. Plummer, E. Carlisle, N. Cockayne and A. Werner-Seidler, ‘Can we Talk? Seven Year Youth Mental Health Report - 2012-2018’. Sydney, NSW, Mission Australia, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Kahl, B. L., Miller, H., Cairns, K., Giniunas, H., Welland, L., & Nicholas, M. (2020). A Measurable Impact: Helping Young People to Be and Stay Well. Sydney: ReachOut Australia.

It is well established that young people are often reluctant to seek help for mental health problems<sup>9</sup>, with the main barriers to help-seeking being stigma, embarrassment and a preference for self-reliance<sup>10</sup>.

ReachOut's Impact Study<sup>11</sup> of approximately 2000 service users showed the service attracted young people with fairly significant mental health needs, and that many had previously sought help from a mental health professional. Of concern is that many did not rate this experience as helpful. It was encouraging that this cohort of young people with unmet needs had experienced improvements in their mental health symptoms after engaging with ReachOut, and rated the support they received positively.

Further, ReachOut's impact study demonstrated that although many young people intended to seek help from a mental health professional, they more frequently relied on friends, parents and online resources. Mission Australia reports similar findings, with friends, parents/caregivers and the internet being the most commonly cited sources of support<sup>12</sup>. This highlights the reliance on online resources, but speaks to the importance of services like ReachOut which offer resources and support to people, such as friends or parents, who may find themselves providing informal support to a young person.

## Conclusion

ReachOut acknowledges the ongoing work of mental health services (including our own) in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of bushfire affected communities, in many cases compounded by drought and COVID-19. ReachOut also acknowledges the devastation and loss of these communities, and their frustrations, resilience and hope in the recovery process.

It commends the Federal Government in prioritising a mental health package to support bushfire affected communities, to address trauma and mental health needs.

This submission makes the case for future approaches to take into account the specific service needs and preferences of young people, and has shared evidence and research about the importance of online services, support to understand and seek help, and reluctance around help-seeking.

ReachOut also makes a case for a national coordinated digital response that involves key national online services, works with Primary Health Networks and refers back to in-community services. Central to this is a 'no wrong door' approach to help people get to the right support at the right time.

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<sup>9</sup> Rickwood, D. J., Deane, F. P., & Wilson, C. J. (2007). When and how do young people seek professional help for mental health problems? *Medical Journal of Australia*, 187(S7), S35–S39. <https://doi.org/10.5694/j.1326-5377.2007.tb01334.x>

<sup>10</sup> Gulliver, A., Griffiths, K. M., & Christensen, H. (2010). Perceived barriers and facilitators to mental health help-seeking in young people: A systematic review. *BMC Psychiatry*, 10(1), 113. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-244X-10-113>

<sup>11</sup> Kahl, B. L., Miller, H., Cairns, K., Giniunas, H., Welland, L., & Nicholas, M. (2020). *A Measurable Impact: Helping Young People to Be and Stay Well*. Sydney: ReachOut Australia.

<sup>12</sup> S. Hall, J. Fildes, B. Perrens, J. Plummer, E. Carlisle, N. Cockayne and A. Werner-Seidler, 'Can we Talk? Seven Year Youth Mental Health Report - 2012-2018'. Sydney, NSW, Mission Australia, 2019.

## Attachment A

### ReachOut Drought Response Case Study

More than 55,000 people accessed ReachOut's drought support during the period from October 2018 to May 2019 (funding of \$225,000 was received from the Australian Government to support ReachOut's response for this period, ReachOut's ongoing drought response is funded through philanthropy), with many more being engaged offline at events and in their local communities:

- ReachOut developed digital drought care packages for
  - youth (accessible at : <https://au.reachout.com/collections/dealing-with-stress-from-the-drought>)
  - and parents (accessible at: <https://parents.au.reachout.com/common-concerns/coping-with-the-drought>)
- 25,767 unique users (831 users per week) visited the digital drought care package for young people.
- 30,759 unique users (992 users per week) visited the digital drought care package for parents.
- Parents in drought-affected areas were targeted via email with a structured content package to help support their young person with the impacts of drought.
- 242 schools in drought affected areas subscribed and received dedicated resources.
- A digital advertising campaign reached 1.7 million young people, parents and educators, connecting them with information, tools and resources, and moderated peer support forums on ReachOut.

#### *Engagement*

ReachOut worked with the Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health who provided expert advice on resources developed for the digital drought care packages.

ReachOut participated in the Joint Agency Drought Taskforce, Mental Health Coordination Group working with mental health sector organisations and Primary Health Networks to ensure support was coordinated, targeted where most needed and to reduce duplication.

ReachOut attended the Bands Together Farmers event in Parkes, attended by 5,000+ people, to promote drought mental health and wellbeing support and resources, and interact with parents and young people in regional New South Wales. ReachOut distributed 500+ resources and also ran a live mindfulness session on stage, and in between band performances

Information distributed to the media promoting ReachOut's digital drought care package, part of the Australian Government's Drought Relief Package, resulted in 145 online mentions, 15 print articles, 10 TV and 3 radio segments with a potential audience reach of 893,000.

#### *Leveraging support*

ReachOut leveraged Government funding support with Australia Post, who distributed at no cost, postcards promoting ReachOut's digital drought care package to 290,000 households across New South Wales and Queensland, as well as displays in 200+ Australia Post outlets.

ReachOut partnered with the Naked Farmer, a 24-year-old young man raised on a farm and with first-hand experience of drought, and who works to raise awareness of mental health and encourage people to start conversations. The Naked Farmer was involved in producing resources, promoted ReachOut's digital drought care package to his 81,000+ Instagram followers, and hosted a Facebook live chat for young people in drought affected communities.

#### *Highlights of feedback on the digital drought care packages*

From young people:

- I really like the suggestions about what you can do to help a friend especially the part about taking care of yourself.
- I'd definitely share this! If a friend is ever feeling defeated or lacking in enthusiasm and energy, this could help them get back up...give them resilience.
- I think it's a powerful video and Ben [the Naked Farmer] is ... a usual everyday person and a perfect, relatable example.

From parents:

- I loved the candid testimonials. It's lovely to see what other people do and get an idea of their experience ... Rubey is an awesome role model for young women.
- It shows achievable methods of connecting. It's not about spending lots of money and getting away from the problems, it's putting value on the experience of working as a community to support each other.
- Nice to hear people 'in the know' talking about their experience, much better than an 'expert'.
- I liked the tips about being positive and realistic. They are a good reminder not to sugar coat things, but not to dwell on the negative side of things either.