



Australian Red Cross Supplementary Submission to the Senate Select Committee on Disaster Resilience

May 2024

About us

Established in 1914 and by [Royal Charter](#) in 1941, Australian Red Cross is auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field. We have a unique humanitarian mandate to respond to disasters and emergencies. This partnership means governments can benefit from a trusted, credible, independent and non-political partner with local to global networks, who will work to implement humanitarian goals in a way that maintains the trust of government and Australian society.

Australian Red Cross is one of 191 Red Cross or Red Crescent National Societies that, together with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), make up the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) – the world’s largest and most experienced humanitarian network.

The Movement is guided at all times and in all places by seven [Fundamental Principles](#): Humanity, Impartiality, Neutrality, Independence, Voluntary Service, Unity and Universality. These principles sum up our ethics and the way we work, and they are at the core of our mission to prevent and alleviate suffering.

We remain neutral, and don’t take sides, including in politics; enabling us to maintain the trust of all and to provide assistance in locations others are unable to go. Volunteering is in our DNA, and thousands of volunteers and members support us every day, helping solve social issues in their own communities. All our work is inspired and framed by the principle of Humanity: we seek always to act where there is humanitarian need.

Core areas of expertise for Australian Red Cross include Emergency Services, Migration, International Humanitarian Law (IHL), International Programs, Community Activities and Programs.

Highlights from our [2022-23 Annual Report](#):



18,000+

members and volunteers
acting for humanity



324,000+

Australians supported during
33 emergency activations



216,000+

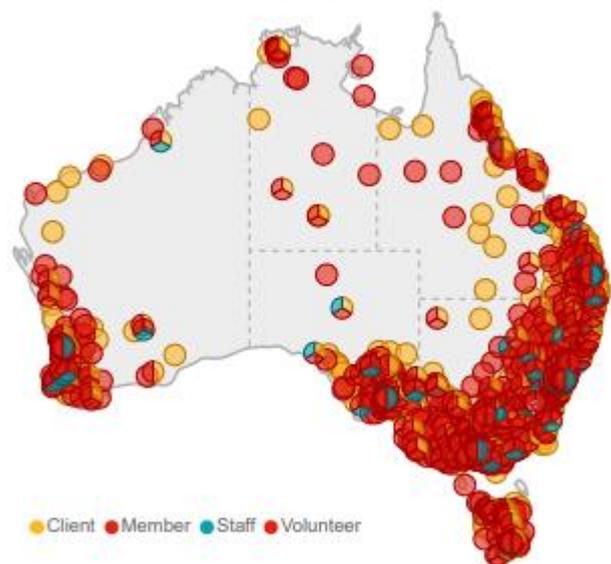
social support hours
delivered



19,700+

people from 125 countries
supported through migration
programs

Location of Red Cross people and clients



Purpose

The **Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience** is inquiring into Australia's preparedness, response and recovery workforce models, as well as alternative models to support disaster recovery.

Australian Red Cross provided a submission to the inquiry in February 2023. This submission urged the Committee's consideration of the following in any future model:

- appropriate investment in pre-disaster resilience,
- a focus on the psychosocial wellbeing of people and communities,
- increased streamlining and coordination at the national level, including through mechanisms that reduce trauma by enabling people who are affected to tell their stories only once,
- systematically inclusive approaches, and
- recognition of the longer-term impacts of disasters, with appropriate investment and sector-wide recovery training.

This **supplementary submission** offers further detail about the proposed role of Australian Red Cross, leveraging our auxiliary relationship with the Australian Government and people.

Our proposal has been presented in the **2024-25 pre-budget submission** context and in our response to the [National Adaptation Plan Issues Paper](#).

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Australian Red Cross recommends strengthening disaster recovery by embedding and sustainably resourcing psychosocial support before, during and after disasters across the disaster management sector, focusing on high-risk Local Government Areas and vulnerable population groups.

With government support, we stand ready to respond to every significant disaster event in Australia through a workforce of trusted and trained Australian Red Cross volunteers, who know and understand their communities and provide culturally appropriate psychosocial support.

*Indicative costs are provided in our pre-budget submission (**enclosed**).*

Recommendation 2

We recommend prioritising social resilience and social capital (alongside physical infrastructure) in disaster management – **strengthening the disaster resilience** of people across Australia, especially those living in the most at-risk Local Government Areas and population groups most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

With government support, Australian Red Cross EmergencyRedi and RediCommunities workshops, and other preparedness programs could be rolled out nationally to strengthen individual, family, community and sector-wide resilience to disasters.

Indicative costs are available upon request.

Key definitions used throughout this submission:

Social capital: the value derived from positive connections between people.

Social capital' refers to the connections, reciprocity and trust among people and groups. There are three types of social capital: bonding (strong ties between similar people, e.g. family and friends), bridging (looser ties between a broader range of people, often cutting across race, gender and class) and linking (ties connecting people with those in power, such as decision-makers).

Szreter S, Woolcock M, 'Social Capital, social theory, and the political economy of public health', International Journal of Epidemiology, 2004, 33 (4): 650-67.

Psychosocial wellbeing: the mental, emotional and relational components of health.

What would it look like if you partnered with Australian Red Cross during a crisis?

By partnering with Australian Red Cross, for every significant disaster event, people in Australia can expect a consistent level of wellbeing relief and recovery support.

Australian Defence Force, Disaster Relief Australia and emergency services personnel are well placed to focus on operational response – undertaking damage and physical infrastructure impact assessments, debris clean-up, restoring access routes and undertaking emergency structural repairs.

For communities to recover well, this cannot be done in isolation of providing psychosocial support which includes welfare checks, assessing people's wellbeing needs and making sure that people can access the services they need. This is evidenced in the [National Health and Climate Strategy](#), which calls on greater action to support community wellbeing before, during and after disasters.

A partnership approach would allow military and emergency personnel to focus on what they do best, while we stand alongside them – providing the mental and social wellbeing support that takes time and training to do well. Under our proposal, Australian Red Cross would provide:

- **7,500 trusted and trained volunteers**, who know and understand their communities, at evacuation and recovery centres, working in and alongside their communities
- **door-to-door and telephone wellbeing checks**
- the **Register.Find.Reunite** service to help people locate and reunite with their loved ones
- **psychological first aid**, delivered at the event and in the weeks that follow
- **one-to-one support for people with complex needs** – helping them to access what they need in a culturally and psychologically safe way
- **technical advice and training** to community leaders and members, so that they are equipped and empowered to lead recovery over the long term.

Between disasters, Australian Red Cross would work with community organisations to define roles and responsibilities and ways of working before, during and after an event.

Our proposal would reduce the expectations on military and emergency personnel to support the psychological wellbeing of people who are impacted by trauma. It would also fulfill the Government's commitments under the National Health and Climate Strategy.

We recommend strengthening disaster recovery by embedding and sustainably resourcing psychosocial support before, during and after disasters across the disaster management sector, focusing on high-risk Local Government Areas and vulnerable population groups.

With government support, we stand ready to respond to every significant disaster event in Australia through a workforce of trusted and trained Australian Red Cross volunteers, who know and understand their communities and provide culturally appropriate psychosocial support.

What would it look like if you partnered with Australian Red Cross before a crisis?

A well-adapted and resilient Australia is one in which individuals, households and communities understand their climate and disaster risk, have plans in place to mitigate and adapt to that risk, and have the networks and resources to act upon those plans.

Resilience is a process of positive adaptation before, during and after adversity. It is strengthened by bringing community members together to understand their collective risk, existing networks, strengths and resources.

The [National Health and Climate Strategy](#) emphasises the need to build community psychological resilience in preparation for the ongoing climate crisis. The Strategy presents evidence of the need to build skills for people to support one another in community settings to manage climate distress and the need to increase social connectedness. And, the Australian Government has committed to act – improving and promoting initiatives that increase community connectedness and build longer-term resilience (Action 6.4).

Resilience cannot be developed for, or on behalf of, communities (AIDR, 2020). Communities must be enabled and empowered to build resilience themselves, and this requires sharing of information and resources within and between communities and partners.

In this context, governments must establish the environment for communities to succeed. This involves providing communities with reliable data, tools and expertise to develop their own evidence-based plans, and supporting communities to build the connections, networks and partnerships necessary to achieve resilience outcomes.

Australian Red Cross has been responding to disasters for over 100 years. In that time, we've seen the importance of proactive adaptation time and time again, especially community-led approaches which are known to increase active participation, buy-in, and sustainability.

Australian Red Cross has experience working with and for communities to build resilience, through project like RediCommunities and EmergencyRedi, which provide some of the most at-risk communities in Australia with pre-disaster preparedness support.

As a result of these programs, people are better informed and empowered to make decisions, they have increased physical and emotional preparedness, and they take action to reduce risk at the community, household and individual level (refer to supporting information, page 8 – 9).

With government support, we stand ready to extend the reach and impact of these programs, to help realise the commitments made under the National Health and Climate Strategy, and ensure that people in Australia feel empowered and ready to act.

We recommend prioritising social resilience and social capital (alongside physical infrastructure) in disaster management – strengthening the disaster resilience of people across Australia, especially those living in the most at-risk Local Government Areas and population groups most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

With government support, Australian Red Cross EmergencyRedi and RediCommunities workshops, and other preparedness programs could be rolled out nationally to strengthen individual, family, community and sector-wide resilience to disasters.

Invitation for action

Communities know their strengths and needs better than anyone else. They are best placed to develop meaningful solutions for strengthening resilience locally.

With the right skills, resources, and support, they can better withstand shocks, solve problems collectively and emerge stronger after disasters.

We believe it is important to acknowledge that the current model is not fit for purpose, and we ask the committee to recommend a model that empowers communities to take collective, local action.

We welcome the opportunity to partner with the Australian Government to make this vision a reality.

An important end note...

Australian Red Cross is established under a Royal Charter for the purpose of providing assistance to the Australian people in any public disaster, calamity or need.

We can only be recognised in this way because Australia is a party to the Geneva Conventions and has enacted legislation to grant authority for the National Society to be constituted.

Our auxiliary role means that we have a unique relationship with commonwealth, state, and local public authorities, working in accordance with seven Fundamental Principles which include neutrality, impartiality and independence.

The emblem of the Red Cross is internationally recognised. It is not a 'logo'. Rather, it is legally regulated under international and domestic law and can only be used in very specific circumstances.

Our auxiliary status is not merely a designation; it is a force multiplier that allows a more nuanced, collaborative, and holistic approach to tackling the challenges that lie ahead.

Supporting information

What we deliver

Community resilience

Our RediCommunities program puts local communities in the driver seat, in a way you don't typically see if the disaster management field.

RediCommunities strengthens and unites communities, preparing them to face future uncertainties with confidence. Australian Red Cross facilitates guided workshops to support the community in identifying community strengths, needs and priorities, leading to the development of a disaster resilience action plan for the community. We then provide ongoing support to implement that plan, with a focus on localised, community owned initiatives.

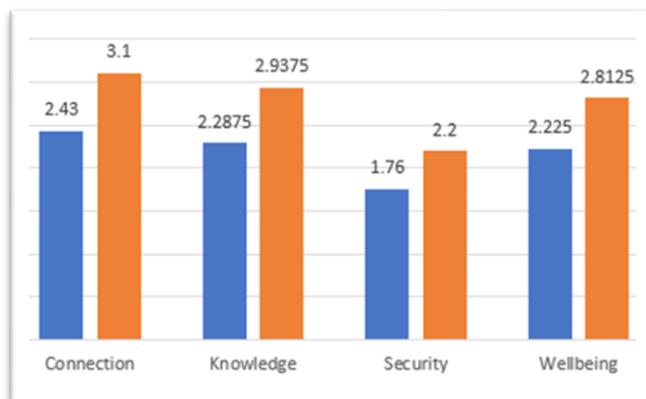
Examples of successful community initiatives include:

- community events,
- notice boards,
- awareness networks,
- training courses or preparedness workshops like Pillowcase, and
- local education campaigns.

This process can take up to two years in some communities, but through it, we are able to foster and promote community leadership, connections, ownership, inclusivity, and enduring partnerships. We recognise that every community is different, so our approach is flexible and responsive to community needs and priorities as they evolve and emerge.

Case study: RediCommunities measurably raises disaster readiness

In the Victorian community of Dargo, a baseline assessment identified some gaps in the community's resilience – particularly around the wellbeing of at-risk community members (54% of residents have a long-term health condition and many are elderly).



In partnership with the council, the health network, local organisations, business and community members, Australian Red Cross delivered our RediCommunities program over the course of several months. This included risk mapping, development of a local incident management plan, technical workshops, panel discussions and wellbeing training workshops.

Increased resilience between March 23 and March 24, on a scale from 0 to 4.

The community showed measurably improved resilience across all adaptive capacities (improved connection, knowledge, security and wellbeing), and community members report benefiting from the social cohesion and skill building that was cultivated.

Individual resilience

Our EmergencyRedi workshops and Pillowcase workshops improve individual and household resilience by helping people develop emergency plans.

Our approach is unique, with a focus on the psychosocial impacts of disasters – the practical, social and psychological actions any person can take to prepare for the short, medium and long term impacts of disasters, such as:

- making plans for reuniting with family,
- finding temporary housing,
- managing changes in income,
- protecting sentimental items, and
- planning for the care of pets.

Case study: Pillowcases prepare children

Aimed at students in aged 8-10, the Pillowcase program is a one-hour workshop delivered by Red Cross volunteers and staff. It involves engaging discussions and interactive activities to help students:

- understand and discuss the importance of being prepared,
- prepare their mind for the thoughts and feelings that may arise before, during and after an emergency, and
- know what to pack in an emergency kit

Each student is given a pillowcase to decorate and take home, to start their own personal emergency kit.

The program is considered by community members to be an important and valuable resource for increasing knowledge and preparedness skills among children, improving psychosocial readiness, and supporting social connections.

Parents, teachers and school staff all reported a deep appreciation for the program, and recognised its tremendous value in preparing children for emergencies ([Newnham et al., 2023](#)).

'All of the teachers that have participated, students that have participated, really enjoyed the program. They seemed to get a lot out of it. It stays with the children long after the actual event which is really good' (School staff member).



Sector-wide resilience

We actively work at all stages of disaster (before, during and after) across Australia. Because of this, we see a persistent lack of awareness and preparedness in Australian households and communities ([Australian Red Cross, 2021](#)). But there is an opportunity here for a nation-wide uplift. Until every person in Australia has an emergency plan, we will continue to advocate for policy change, funding changes, attitude changes and behaviour changes.

We will continue to work with and complement other disaster and emergency management agencies – moving to fill gaps and address humanitarian needs as they emerge and strive for collaboration over competition.

Humanitarian thought leadership

Because climate change is intensifying the frequency, severity and damage wrought by disasters, we are pursuing research to understand the humanitarian impacts future events will have on people and communities in Australia. So far, these impacts are not well understood in Australia, and we look forward to sharing the findings of this research with the wider sector when the research is complete.

While at a community level, there is a deep appreciation that social capital has a significant benefit to communities, it can be challenging to quantify and properly value that benefit. We are participating in new research to better understand and further quantify the economic value of social connectedness and will share our findings broadly once they become available later this year.

Australian Red Cross helps people at the individual, community and sector level come up with disaster plans for themselves to better prepare for the impacts of disaster – specific to their personal wellbeing and relationships with others. We take the hard learnt lessons of people with lived experience of disasters ('I wish I would have...') and share it with people who can now take those actions.

Why it matters

Meeting the Australian Government's commitments under the National Health and Climate Strategy

Under the [National Health and Climate Strategy](#), the Australian Government has committed to improve and promote mental health initiatives aimed at increasing social community connectedness to help build longer-term resilience in communities before, during, and after, climate-related disasters and extreme weather events (Action 6.4).

The Strategy cites evidence of the need to build community resilience in preparation for the ongoing climate crisis, including building skills for people to support each other in community settings to manage climate distress and actions to increase social connectedness.

Australian Red Cross has proven experience in delivering programs that result in people and communities being better informed and empowered to make decisions, having increased physical and emotional preparedness, and coming together to take action to reduce climate related hazard risk.

Demonstrating the Australian Government's support for the Resolution for addressing mental health and psychosocial needs of people affected by natural disasters

In December 2019, the Australian Government – as a party of the Geneva Conventions – and Australian Red Cross, auxiliary partner to the Government, agreed to a [resolution](#) aimed at addressing the mental health and psychosocial needs of people affected by armed conflicts, natural disasters and other emergencies.

The resolution recognises that unmet mental health and psychosocial need has a far-reaching and long-term negative human, social and economic impacts that affects individuals and communities. It recognises the complementary and supportive role of National Societies like Australian Red Cross in addressing this need, working alongside government to ensure that mental health and psychosocial support is an integral component in domestic emergency response systems.

Reduced cost for governments

Consistent with the evidence cited in the National Health and Climate Strategy, other research shows the long-term economic impacts of disasters on people's mental health and wellbeing, including that it is equivalent to the costs of replacing personal assets ([Australian Business Roundtable, 2021](#)).

Improving preparedness, mental health and social connection has cost savings for governments.

- When people are supported to take personal responsibility for their lives, livelihoods and properties, the result is less physical damage when disasters strike. For example, our preparedness programs encourage people to take proactive action (such as securing appropriate insurance) and take measures around the home (for example, clearing gutters ahead of the high risk weather season) to prevent damage ([Curtin University, 2022](#)). **This results in fewer claims for reimbursements, lower inflation, less strain on local economies and better outcomes for communities.**

- Mental health issues related to social isolation, such as depression, cost up to \$60 billion each year ([KPMG, 2022](#)). Our interventions (both in resilience building and recovery programs) connect people with resources and refer people to supports, reducing trauma at the moment of crisis, and redirecting people away from harmful behaviours and actions. **This results in fewer people needing access to costly supports throughout their recovery in particular** ([Australian Business Roundtable, 2017](#)).

Reduced burden on government services

Our work encourages people to take localised, preventative action, meaning fewer people will require social safety net supports.

- Properly done preparedness action **alleviates the need for response services and promotes faster recovery** because we empower individuals, households and communities by fostering resilience and collective action, reducing reliance on external assistance ([AJEM, 2013](#)).
- More pre-disaster preparedness actions mean people are better equipped for disasters. People who attend our training know when to stay with friends and when to come to an evacuation centre. They know where to access critical information, which will likely mean **fewer calls into council emergency lines**. They feel empowered to address problems on their own, which will likely mean **fewer callouts for State Emergency Services**. They know they can rely on their neighbours, which will likely mean **fewer callouts for police, ambulances, rescue crews, and the Australian Defence Force**. Ultimately, there is less coordination required by governments because the groundwork has been laid for communities to help themselves.

Solving problems before they arise:

Governments have an opportunity to be future-focused by addressing problems before they escalate, and reducing costs before they spiral.

- It can be challenging to find and implement solutions that support working *with* communities. Local communities often resent agencies that don't have a local presence 'parachuting in' with services then disappear as soon as the funding dries up. Government can leverage the embedded presence Australian Red Cross already has in communities across Australia, and ensure best practices are being implemented where they're needed most.
- Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, government can have a role in ensuring that solutions are tailored and inclusive and promote sustainable outcomes across the country.
- The opportunity to leverage international best practice drawing on evidence and expertise from the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent and the 191 other national societies where organisations like ours do similar work, can be a useful tool for governments.

Strong association with successful community initiatives

Although many people are aware of the traditionally defined prevention, preparedness, response, recovery (PPRR) disaster cycle, most do not realise that few supports are available outside of the initial response period.

Communities know that disasters are becoming more complex, more expensive and more frequent. They also know more than one type of hazard is likely. Some communities we've been working in have been struck by five significant, compounding disasters in a few short years.

Communities are calling for initiatives that are not specific to one disaster but that build their resilience across any crisis or hazard.

The work of the Australian Red Cross does this in a way that is:

- **Long-term** – leveraging the role of volunteers to enhance sustainability,
- **Informed by international best practice** – we have access to global emergency management expertise including the Global Disaster Preparedness Centre, the Climate Centre and Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support,
- **Mindful to do no harm** – we have a strong focus on avoiding maladaptation and prioritising community wellbeing,
- **Consequence informed** – focusing on the impact on people rather than the cause,
- **People-centred** – respecting the dignity and autonomy of communities,
- **Strengths-based** – recognising and building upon inherent resilience,
- **Evidence informed** – incorporating research, expertise, and community experience,
- **Trauma informed** – being mindful of potential trauma and ensuring safety.
- **Culturally respectful** – inclusive, and accessible.
- **Community led** – we empower communities to determine and implement local solutions to local challenges.

Contact Details

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