

Building Emergency Preparedness with the Karen Community: A BRMC Case Study

Introduction

This case study documents an emergency preparedness initiative undertaken in direct response to the Karen community's growing anxiety and trauma surrounding the Little Desert bushfires earlier this year. The program emerged from ongoing communication between the Ballarat Regional Multicultural Council (BRMC), local service providers and the Karen community in Nhill, demonstrating the importance of maintaining strong connections with multicultural communities during times of crisis.

The Karen people, originally from Myanmar (formerly Burma), have become an integral part of the Nhill community. Having fled persecution and conflict in their homeland, many Karen refugees have found safety and new beginnings in regional Victoria. Their journey from refugee camps to establishing lives in rural Australia represents a remarkable story of resilience and community integration. However, their experience with Australian natural disasters, particularly bushfires, was limited, creating unique vulnerabilities during emergency situations.



Identifying and Responding to Community Needs

Through check-ins by BRMC's Emergency Management Coordinator, it became increasingly clear that the Karen community was struggling with emergency preparedness. These ongoing consultations revealed two critical gaps: community members were unable to fully comprehend

emergency messages, and many were unaware of support and tools available including the VicEmergency app - a vital tool for accessing real-time emergency information. The situation became particularly urgent as bushfires near Little Desert National Park intensified, causing significant distress within the community. Their previous experiences of displacement and trauma heightened their anxiety about the potential threat, making immediate intervention essential.

BRMC's established relationships with local organisations proved invaluable in mounting a rapid response. Leveraging their partnership with the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria (ECCV), and working closely with the Nhill Community Learning Centre, Country Fire Authority (CFA), and the Wimmera Southern Mallee Development, BRMC was able to implement a timely and comprehensive emergency preparedness program. This collaborative approach ensured that the initiative would address both the immediate concerns of the Karen community and build long-term resilience.

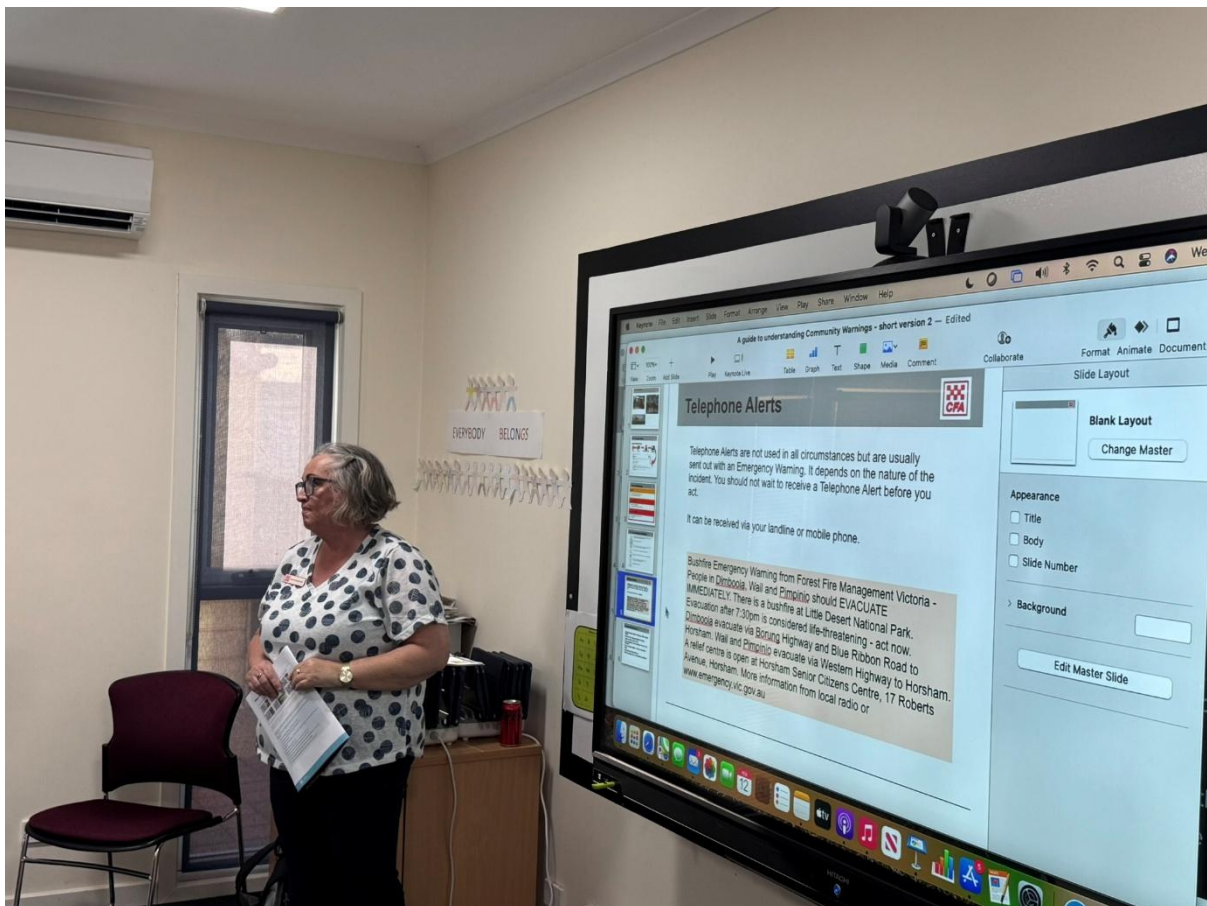


Comprehensive Fire Safety Education

The workshop was designed to be both practical and empowering, focusing on building the community's capacity to respond to emergencies. The CFA's resource personnel played a crucial role in delivering comprehensive fire safety education to the Karen community. Their expert instructors provided detailed guidance across three critical phases of fire safety, with the essential support of a professional Karen language interpreter. The interpreter's expertise was instrumental in ensuring that complex emergency management concepts, technical terminology, and nuanced safety instructions were accurately conveyed in culturally appropriate ways. Rather than simply translating words, the interpreter provided cultural context and clarification, allowing the Karen community to truly engage with and internalize the critical information being shared. This linguistic bridge was fundamental to the session's

success, as it enabled direct, clear communication between CFA experts and community members who could ask questions, seek clarification, and share their specific concerns in their native language.

In addressing preparation before a fire, the CFA team worked with families to develop personalized bushfire survival plans. This included property preparation and maintenance, creating defensible spaces around homes, identifying trigger points for leaving, preparing emergency kits with essential items, understanding Fire Danger Ratings, establishing multiple evacuation routes, and maintaining clear access to water sources. These practical steps helped community members take concrete actions to increase their safety.



For responding during a fire emergency, participants learned vital response strategies, including interpreting emergency warnings and alerts, making informed decisions about when to leave, understanding the dangers of last-minute evacuation, identifying designated safe areas, following emergency radio broadcasts, maintaining communication with family members, and responding to changing conditions. BRMC coordinator provided step-by-step assistance to help participants navigate and master the VicEmergency app. This hands-on guidance ensured that every community member could successfully download the app, create accounts, set up watch zones around their homes, understand the different alert levels, and configure notifications. Throughout this process, the Karen language interpreter played a crucial role, carefully translating technical terminology and complex emergency concepts to ensure all participants fully understood how to utilise this vital tool.

The session also covered important post-fire safety measures, addressing what to do after a fire. This included assessing when it's safe to return home, checking for hazards like fallen power lines, monitoring for spot fires, accessing recovery support services, connecting with

community support networks, documenting damage for insurance purposes, and participating in community debriefings.

A significant portion of the session focused on collaborative planning approaches. CFA personnel guided participants through creating family communication plans, establishing neighbourhood support networks, identifying vulnerable community members who may need additional assistance, developing community phone trees for emergency communication, planning meeting points and safe gathering locations, organising shared transport options, and creating backup plans for various scenarios. The distribution of Karen-language emergency resources further supported these efforts, ensuring information remained accessible after the session.

Community Impact and Looking Forward



The session produced immediate positive results, as reflected in participant feedback:

- K'nyaw Yo reported mastering the VicEmergency app, a crucial tool for emergency preparedness.
- Paw Meit gained confidence in emergency planning and evacuation preparation.
- Say Paw developed a clear understanding of emergency warning systems.

Beyond these individual outcomes, the workshop strengthened the entire community's resilience and emergency preparedness. The Karen community now has better access to emergency information and a clearer understanding of how to protect their families during bushfire seasons.

The success of this initiative has reinforced the importance of maintaining strong connections with multicultural communities and responding quickly to their needs. BRMC continues to monitor community wellbeing through regular check-ins, maintain close partnerships with emergency services and local organisations, advocate for improved emergency communication systems for multicultural communities, and support ongoing emergency preparedness education.

This case study demonstrates how targeted, culturally appropriate emergency education, delivered through strong community partnerships, can effectively address the unique needs of multicultural communities during times of crisis. The program's success relied heavily on

BRMC's established community relationships, rapid response capabilities, and the collaborative support of local partners. Through this initiative, we've created a model for emergency preparedness that recognises and responds to the specific needs of multicultural communities, ensuring that vital safety information reaches all members of our diverse society.