

# Summary of Flood Recovery Needs Assessment 2022



**In the three years that followed the 2019 Black Summer Bushfires, the Nepean Blue Mountains region experienced heavy and persistent rain resulting in more than five flooding and extreme weather events. Compounded by the effects of COVID-19, the region's residents have been left devastated by the physical, social, and psychological destruction.**



## Funding

The Department of Health and Aged Care (DoHAC) and the NSW Ministry of Health (MoH) have delivered funding packages to PHNs to support communities through their recovery process, to build resilience and to commission local mental health services.



## Consultation

In response to receiving these funding packages, Wentworth Healthcare, the provider of the Nepean Blue Mountains Primary Health Network (NBMPHN), conducted extensive stakeholder consultations and background research to identify areas of need and opportunity. These included over 50 informal and formal consultations with local government, not-for-profit organisations, community centres, charities providing recovery services, schools, community groups and recovery interagencies.



## Themes and Issues

There are several reoccurring themes for residents of flood affected areas. Issues can be split into three overarching themes, each underpinned by social determinants of health, that require addressing in order to improve overall health outcomes and reduction of potential health inequities.

- 1. Physical:** the impact floods have had on local infrastructure, access to health services, housing, and basic amenities; and how this impacts residents and flood victims' wellbeing.
- 2. Social:** how external factors and community response, both inclusive and discriminatory, are impacting residents and flood victims' wellbeing and recovery process.
- 3. Psychological:** the impact floods have on residents' psychological state and the consequential impacts on job security and education.



## Impact

Between 2019 and 2022 approximately 1500 homes in the Nepean Blue Mountains region, primarily the Hawkesbury Local Government Area, were damaged by flood waters. Some residents have experienced long periods of displacement from their homes, work, and schools. Separation from family members and regular life has left many residents with increased anxiety levels, heightened by the impacts of COVID-19 and continual bad weather.

Residents that have been able to return home, report that the extensive damage to their homes and the debris on their property and surrounding areas are a constant reminder. Widespread damage has left residents with long delays for services such as curbside pickup and trades, resulting in residents undertaking their own repairs. Water damage to homes has caused increased mould growth and subsequently residents are concerned about mould exposure.

The increased need has been felt by local charities, with supplies and donations difficult to obtain for both residents and charities themselves. Residents are reporting difficulty with service navigation and accessing the available support.

The cumulative effects of multiple disasters of drought, bushfires, COVID-19, numerous floods have been particularly difficult for rural communities including Upper Colo, MacDonald Valley and Wolgan Valley, who were cut off for considerable periods of time not only due to flood waters but devastated roads.

Increased anxiety surrounding weather and enduring mental health issues relating to the effects of flooding has seen an increase in the uptake of Wentworth Healthcare's Psychological Therapy Services. However anecdotal evidence suggests that this service is still underutilised, and rates of mental health issues are a lot higher as trauma affected individuals don't always identify with having 'traditional' mental health issues, so do not seek out 'traditional' support.

The Hawkesbury region has a high number of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) agricultural workers, and current mental health support is only provided through a translator. Further, teachers are reporting increased mental health issues and absenteeism in students.



## Health and Service Focus Areas

The Flood Recovery Needs Assessment provides a systematic analysis of the health and service needs of our local flood affected population resulting in identified gaps and relative themes. Key focus areas identified throughout the analysis include:

- Purpose built and community led mental health supports and recovery events.
- Building capacity in informal community leaders and volunteers.
- Extension for Outreach Wellbeing Practitioners program.
- The need for CALD Mental Health practitioners and supports.
- Youth mental health supports.
- Increased awareness of formal and informal mental health supports available.

# Wentworth Healthcare's response

## Community Grants

Funding from MoH and DoHAC was provided to establish a community Wellbeing and Resilience Grants Program for non-government organisations or other community organisations. We have awarded 45 grants worth more than \$250,000 for community activities that support the wellbeing of flood affected communities. The grants allow residents to choose their own way to respond to the losses, anxiety and distress they have experienced during the flood events, as well as actively participate in their recovery.

The activities focus on social cohesion and connectedness, support mental health healing, and build on existing community resilience by encouraging post-trauma growth. Research shows the importance of people coming together, socialising and providing informal support to each other.

The list of organisations and activities is provided on the Wentworth Healthcare website – up to \$5000 in Round One and \$10,000 in Round Two.

## headspace

The DoHAC flood funding has enabled us to fund headspace to provide an outreach service into the Hawkesbury.

During the last 6 months 3 outreach/drop in services were in place regularly at North Richmond Flood Hub, Londonderry Flood Hub and Hawkesbury Youth Interagency (with a further two co-locations planned for early 2023). Several school visits were conducted throughout Term 3 and 4 of 2022 to promote outreach clinics and enhance mental health literacy. Local step-up pathways have been identified for young people who require this with the Nepean Blue Mountains Local Health District services.

## Psychological Therapies

Psychological Therapy Services provide short-term support to people who have mild to moderate mental health concerns. Under this service, individuals can access up to 10 sessions in a calendar year. This service is available to anyone in our region experiencing high levels of distress resulting from the 2019/20 bushfires or 2021/2022 floods. GP referrals are not required.

## Service Navigation Support

Commissioned provider of the Head to Health Service, Neami National, has been funded to provide outreach service navigation to flood affected communities in Hawkesbury and other areas in our region to assist people with accessing appropriate mental health services. Head to Health staff attend community events and network with other disaster recovery services to ensure that they are reaching people most at need.

## Wellbeing Workers

We funded Peppercorn Services Inc to engage Wellbeing Workers to provide outreach mental health support and referral into other mental health services and programs if required. As the designated local recovery support service, Peppercorn Services, can provide wellbeing support to people directly impacted by the floods by having a one-off conversation or ongoing counselling sessions.