

VICTORIA

Victorian
Auditor-General

Audit summary
of
The Department of
Human Services' Role
in Emergency Recovery

Tabled in Parliament
5 October 2010

Audit summary

An emergency is an event that endangers personal safety or health, and may damage or destroy property or the environment. Emergencies include natural disasters, such as fire and flood, major disruptions to essential services, serious disease outbreaks and terrorist acts.

Government agencies try to prevent or minimise the impact of emergencies. However, when they occur, the state supports those affected and tries to restore normal conditions. This part of emergency management is the recovery phase and is defined in the *Emergency Management Act 1986* as 'assisting persons and communities affected by emergencies to achieve a proper and effective level of functioning'.

Recovery is a joint responsibility of all levels of government, as well as non-government organisations and the private sector. Together, they focus on restoring and rehabilitating the social, health and community, built, natural and economic environments of those affected, in partnership with the community.

The Department of Human Services (DHS) is responsible for coordinating recovery operations. This includes preparing recovery plans, working with other government agencies, non-government organisations and the private sector to deliver recovery services, and provide training and support systems.

DHS recently activated its recovery plans during the February 2009 Black Saturday bushfires and the severe storm that caused major damage in March 2010.

This audit examined the effectiveness of DHS's emergency recovery management, including whether:

- planning is comprehensive, current and supported by testing, evaluation and training
- recovery operations are coordinated, efficient and effective.

Conclusion

DHS is effectively coordinating recovery operations and delivering recovery services. Departmental staff respond well to the needs of affected individuals and communities through timely emergency grants, housing and psychosocial services, like counselling. Overall, DHS has developed effective relationships with other recovery partners.

The Black Saturday bushfires severely tested DHS's capacity to coordinate and deliver recovery services. Service demand, widespread trauma and devastation, and the direct impact on many departmental staff presented major challenges. While this event highlighted areas for improvement, DHS's commitment of staff and resources and its speedy response in meeting extraordinary requirements was admirable.

DHS needs to support the good efforts of its staff in coordinating recovery by providing systems and enhancements that make their work easier. In the future, DHS needs to address gaps in planning, evaluation, testing, training, information technology and communications. It also needs stronger leadership and strategic direction to promote a consistent recovery approach across the state, to build capacity and capability, and to make the best use of available resources.

Findings

Recovery planning

Planning in partnership

DHS's approach to recovery planning has not fostered shared ownership of recovery with partner agencies. This poses a risk to cooperation and clear understanding of roles and responsibilities during a recovery operation. The state recovery plan, called the *State Emergency Recovery Arrangements* (the arrangements), requires annual review by the State Emergency Recovery Planning Committee, using lessons from recent operations. To date, DHS has not actively involved committee members in reviewing the plan, though DHS plans to address this when it examines the arrangements in October 2010. At the regional level, plans are written for and revised by DHS staff, often without effective involvement of partner agencies.

Recovery plans

DHS's Emergency Management Branch (EMB)—a service shared by the Departments of Health and Human Services—developed the *State Emergency Recovery Operational Plan*, which aims to provide practical guidance on applying the arrangements. However, it does not meet this aim and merely restates information in the arrangements.

None of the audited regional recovery plans met all the requirements in the arrangements. Common gaps included lack of detail about the roles and responsibilities of regional stakeholders, guidelines for recovery operations that cross regional borders, financial arrangements, and working with a centralised body, such as a Ministerial Taskforce, in a state-level event.

The format for regional plans across the state is inconsistent, presenting a challenge to DHS staff and partner agencies working across DHS regions. This is despite EMB's attempts to create a consistent template. There is need for better coordination and cooperation between regional offices and the EMB.

Training and testing

DHS offers a good selection of recovery training programs to internal and external staff. Evaluations show participants are satisfied with training quality, and uptake is good. However, there is a gap in training at executive levels. Senior staff in decision-making roles in recovery operations often have not completed recovery training.

The arrangements require regular recovery plan testing. Only one of the four DHS regions audited complied. Testing should involve partner agencies and use hypothetical scenarios to assess whether DHS and its partners can deliver recovery services over an extended period. Existing testing only focuses on initial responses to emergencies and set up of emergency coordination and relief centres. DHS needs recovery plan testing to identify and resolve potential problems before an emergency happens.

Using evaluation to inform planning

Under the arrangements, state and regional recovery operations must be evaluated. While DHS generally meets this requirement, the EMB has not specified how to evaluate operations. Consequently, practices vary across the state, ranging from no evaluation, using only a multi-agency debrief, evaluations that focus on specific recovery services, through to extensive qualitative and quantitative studies. DHS has not always fed evaluation findings into recovery planning and needs a standardised approach to evaluation that includes links to planning.

Strategic direction

There is no DHS policy or set of strategic directions to guide the work of the EMB or DHS's regions in building recovery capability. This also means the EMB does not have a benchmark against which to monitor and report progress. This has created inconsistency, duplication and inefficiency in regional efforts to improve recovery capacity. The EMB is addressing this by developing a corporate plan and statement of strategic intent for emergency management across the organisation. DHS will need to use and monitor progress against the plan to promote a consistent approach to statewide recovery management and make sure resources are used effectively.

Recovery operations

Activating and coordinating recovery

Operations are timely and well coordinated. Policies and procedures, rapid staff deployment, and good relationships with partner agencies support the recovery services that DHS coordinates and provides.

Decision-making and issue resolution is done through clear committee structures that involve relevant recovery stakeholders. There is ongoing monitoring during recovery operations and reporting between regions and the EMB.

Recent recovery operations highlighted gaps in planning, training and support systems. Targets for numbers of trained staff ready to be deployed in a recovery operation are often unmet, and the actual targets are insufficient for some roles.

Communication and information management issues hamper recovery operations. During the Black Saturday bushfires recovery operation DHS did not have documented communication systems or staff in dedicated communication roles. There were also deficiencies in the DHS's emergency database and insufficient access to information technology equipment. DHS has since appointed a dedicated communications manager within the EMB and started mapping information management resources and needs. These are areas that warrant investment to streamline and enhance recovery operations.

Delivering recovery services

DHS effectively implemented its recovery plans after a severe storm in Victoria in March 2010. DHS regions responded quickly, organising staff to administer personal hardship grants, as well as working with councils to arrange temporary accommodation and the Red Cross to provide outreach services. DHS regions and the EMB maintained effective communication and reporting with each other and partner agencies throughout.

DHS was generally prepared and quickly activated a response to the Black Saturday bushfires. DHS deployed more than 550 staff in the first four months of the operation. Partner agency feedback praised DHS staff for their commitment and dedication throughout the operation.

In this event, the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBRRA) coordinated the overall recovery operation. VBRRA charged DHS with coordinating recovery of the social, health and community environment. DHS established services, such as the Victorian Bushfire Case Management Service, relatively quickly. More than 5 500 people have used the service. Feedback from the complaints and compliments systems was mostly positive. Overall, DHS has delivered and coordinated numerous bushfire recovery services, including the administration of more than \$39 million in grants, about 1 400 housing needs assessments, and coordination of community hubs, where average weekly visits peaked at more than 1 000.

However, DHS was unprepared for the size of the event and needed to find new ways to deliver recovery services. Moves to plan against a tiered model, recognising small, medium and catastrophic emergencies, will help future preparation.

Regions were not prepared to work with a central authority, i.e. VBRRA, in a state-level event. There were tensions between regions wanting local autonomy and flexibility, and the need to provide statewide equity in service delivery.

Other problems included:

- delays in clarifying responsibilities for certain recovery activities, especially around water and fencing
- deployment of untrained DHS staff
- high overheads for delivering personal hardship grants related to problems with information technology systems.

Recommendations

Number	Recommendation	Page
	The Department of Human Services should:	
1.	Develop practical, operational guidelines for implementing recovery at the state level.	14
2.	Improve regional recovery plans through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • developing a consistent format that meets <i>Emergency Management Manual Victoria</i> content requirements • revising plans biennially with recovery partners • routine review of regional plans by Emergency Management Branch. 	14
3.	Regularly test recovery plans with partner agencies.	14
4.	Create evaluation guidelines for recovery operations, including links to planning.	14
5.	Make sure relevant senior staff complete recovery training.	14
6.	Communicate strategic priorities to achieve state and regional level alignment in building recovery capacity and capability.	14
7.	Work with regions and partner agencies at the state level to create consistent, streamlined impact assessment processes and systems.	26
8.	Complete work on emergency communication and information management issues.	26
9.	Base targets for staff in emergency roles on regional needs and develop a staff deployment strategy.	26
10.	Work with the State Emergency Recovery Planning Committee, regions, and other partners to facilitate understanding and ownership of roles and responsibilities for common recovery services.	26

Submissions and comments received

In addition to progressive engagement during the course of the audit, in accordance with section 16(3) of the *Audit Act 1994* a copy of this report, or relevant extracts from the report, was provided to the Department of Human Services with a request for submissions or comments.

Agency views have been considered in reaching our audit conclusions and are represented to the extent relevant and warranted in preparing this report. Their full section 16(3) submissions and comments however, are included in Appendix C.