The Victorian bush fires of 7 February 2009, commonly referred to as The Black Saturday Bushfires, tragically claimed 173 lives.

People and communities suffering the losses and experiences – past, present and still to come – of the tragic events of Black Saturday are sincerely and respectfully acknowledged.

The 173 people who perished in this catastrophic national disaster are remembered and honoured.

In response to this national disaster, out of the ashes of traumatic bereavement, complex trauma, devastation and destruction, late in 2009 a small group of bushfire bereaved individuals were drawn together by the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBRRA), via an expression of interest process, to form the Black Saturday Bushfire Bereaved Advisory Group (BBAG).

BBAG members volunteer their time and services for the common and shared purposes of advocating for the needs of people bereaved by the bushfires and formally providing input and advice on issues affecting Black Saturday bereaved people in relation to reconstruction, recovery and memorials. After the last formal meeting in July 2013, the group has continued to informally meet to compile this document.
CONTAINING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAGE 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PREAMBLE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE EXPERIENTIAL VOICE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Black Saturday Bereaved Cohort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The BBAG Members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Legacy Document</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before Black Saturday Bushfire Bereaved Advisory Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPERATION BBAG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formation and Structural Evolution of BBAG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Agendas ...BBAG Number One Priorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational Structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBAG Meetings – who, when, where</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of Telling...Importance of Listening...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of Being Heard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAJOR CHAPTERS IN THE WORK OF BBAG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telling the Coroner Things that Hurt and Damaged – Processes and Communication Styles that Cry for Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bushfire Awareness Consultations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Management – a Case of Hit and Miss Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What’s the Story with Grants and Vouchers? – Well may you ask, as so many did, so often!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Pillar to Post ... Lost in Transit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Tree that Grew – Reaching out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAKING A DIFFERENCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>..... INFLUENCES AND ACHIEVEMENTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Agency Consultation and Influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBAG’s Own Perspective on its Achievements and Key Areas of Influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEARNINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgement and Recognition of a Bereaved Cohort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coronal and Forensic Processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Assistance – Grants, Gifts, Vouchers and Respite Opportunities Following Disaster Bereavement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appointment, Governance, Admin Support and Closure of a State Government Advisory Group such as BBAG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTE OF THANKYOU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE BBAG RECORDS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minutes of BBAG Meetings from Dec 2009 – July 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASSORTED DOCUMENTS OF INTEREST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABBREVIATIONS LIST</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CONTRIBUTORS

The content of this Legacy document is a composite of input and construct from current BBAG members, and input from former members with administrative assistance from EACH (Social and Community Health)

At the time of writing, approximately half of the original BBAG remain as participating members.

The contribution and generosity of time and effort of all BBAG members, current and past, and agency administrative support is acknowledged and profoundly appreciated.

Major contributors to this document: Rhonda Abotomey and Elizabeth Savage Kooroonya, Mary Avola and Karen Howell, being part of a larger group of contributors which included Pauline Zealley, Jill Scherman, Jeni Nathanielz, Denis Spooner, Vicki Evans, Carol Matthews, Gary Brown, Rob Whittington, Dale A’Hern and Ray Scherman.

The authors of this document are Rhonda Abotomey and Elizabeth Savage Kooroonya

Artwork: Elizabeth Savage Kooroonya

Poem: “….We Speak…. ” Rhonda Abotomey

Poem: “Let the voices of learning...” Rhonda Abotomey

Poem: “How does the mind resolve...” Jeni Nathanielz

Paper: “when resilience and recovery are naughty words” Elizabeth Savage Kooroonya

Footnote: in 2011 BBAG members identified the creation of a legacy document as important BBAG work – a record of what we had achieved, and what we would recommend. BBAG sought government support to achieve this outcome. The Victorian Department of Health acknowledged this BBAG request and EACH was commissioned to support the work of BBAG in creating a legacy document.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To the Victorian Government

We are thankful that the Government of Victoria invited Black Saturday bereaved people into the Government disaster recovery operating space to provide advice and constructive critique.

Asking fire bereaved people to participate in Government process by sharing their truth and reality was, and is, a valued and important initiative.

The courage and wisdom of Government to be inclusive and actively seek exposure of systemic failures and deficits in the landscape of a complex and traumatic disaster, is acknowledged and sincerely applauded.

Such action is made more significant given the scale and longevity of this disaster. Black Saturday tested Government systems and resources as never before, exposed weaknesses, and revealed the Government’s capacity to recognise and own its strengths and its inadequacies. Government openness to seek constructive criticism about systemic issues in order to make solution focused changes at policy, procedural and practical levels was evident.

In setting up the BBAG the Victorian Government also demonstrated a recognition of the unique, particular and complex experiences and requirements of people bereaved in a national disaster context.

Following the Government example, without fear or favour, this BBAG Legacy document honors and follows the constructive critique partnership initiated by the Government. BBAG demonstrates the same courage, conviction and ethos of inquiring into, and utilizing, the invaluable resource of the lived reality of the Black Saturday bushfire bereavement experience. This document reflects our experience of being on BBAG – experience we share for the express purpose of making reality based, solution focused, positive and enduring difference.
BLACK SATURDAY

7 February 2009

173 People Died

cardboard

cardboard

their families still grieve
their families still struggle
their families still inform
THE BLACK SATURDAY BEREAVED COHORT

People bereaved by the Black Saturday Bushfires, are as a matter of reality and principal, a distinct and significant cohort within the larger group of people recognised as being affected by these fires. These bereaved people are spread far and wide across our state, our country and beyond. There are no geographic boundaries, or defined community groups to make them easily identifiable. As such, it is an unfortunate consequence that, at times, many, or all, bereaved people were, and have been, invisible in the Black Saturday aftermath of recovery.

BBAG has recognised from the beginning that there are innumerable, very complex layers and relativities of bereavement. These complexities have meant difficult and challenging conversations.

The ‘Bereaved Cohort’ referred to in this document is primarily the immediate family members and/or next-of-kin of the people who died in the Black Saturday bushfires.

These grieving and bereft people are the wives and husbands and partners; they are the children, and the parents, and they are the sisters and brothers, the aunties and uncles and grandparents of the 173 people who died.

For some people, multiple family members died; for others, a whole family. Some Black Saturday bereaved people also lost their homes and there was nothing left for them to have and to hold. For some there was no certainty for their own future.

Every single one of these bereaved people experienced the horrendous trauma of waiting for news of their loved one/s, for confirmation of death and body retrievals, of DVI procedures, Coronial determinations, and finally the release of their family member/s remains so they could have a funeral.

These are the people who have been questioned by police and given evidence for police briefs. Some of these people have had the dreadful experience of sitting through an arson trial. Some gave evidence to the Royal Commission, and some at Class Action trials. They have had months and years of interaction with the Coroner.

Every single one of these people has had to negotiate complex, daunting and seemingly impossible estate issues where documents were burnt, and/or when they did not have an intimate knowledge of their family member/s affairs. The many months without a Death Certificate exacerbated these issues for many people.

Every single one of these people has had extraordinary financial burden – ranging from total loss of income and/or financial support and security as they knew it, to the expenses of funerals, accountants and solicitors, and for some, building or adjusting to a new home.

In spite of such catastrophic and traumatic bereavement, Black Saturday bereaved people have displayed enormous courage and dignity in rebuilding their lives. Many will say ‘I have had no choice’.

THE EXPERIENTIAL VOICE
I have to honour my [family member] ... [their] life and their death mean I have to live mine ... it could have been me ...

People think we will `get over it` and `move on`, instead we have to learn to live with grief; we have to realize our family members have died, are gone forever... we have just had to deal with the traumatic circumstances.

While BBAG has coined the term ‘Bereaved Cohort’ to primarily describe those people at the very heart of the bushfire deaths – immediate individuals, families and next of kin – there is of course a broader application, which includes people who also feel great loss, sadness and devastation. These are the friends, colleagues and neighbors, the teachers and classmates, CFA and SES volunteers, and many others. BBAG has been at pains to be inclusive in the recognition of these people – symbolically and sincerely, and through inclusion in advocacy conversations and many BBAG initiated events.
THE BBAG MEMBERS

The BBAG members are the wives, husbands, mothers, fathers, sons and daughters, sisters, brothers, aunts and uncles of loved family members who died in the fires.

All lost an immediate family member. Some lost multiple family members, and some lost an entire family.

Some BBAG members have also lost their friends, neighbors, work colleagues and acquaintances.

Additionally some BBAG members also lost their home, much loved pets, community, livelihoods and financial security, as well as valued and cared for environments (personal, social, physical landscape and material).

Some BBAG members experienced the terror of the fires and feared for their own life.

All of the members lost their sense of being, and certainty, as they knew it before Black Saturday.

Over four years the members of BBAG have volunteered their time, energy and intensely painful personal and traumatic stories to contribute the invaluable resource of information, feedback, insight and ideas; primary knowledge. This group of people drew upon, and shared their diverse experience and perspectives with insight and wisdom into the actual lived reality of people bereaved on Black Saturday, for the explicit purpose of informing disaster response authorities.

It is important to also understand that many BBAG members were privy to the stories and circumstances of many other Black Saturday bereaved people and scores of other fire affected people. These stories also inform the work of BBAG.

In a landscape of incredible pain, complex trauma and vulnerability the BBAG members have demonstrated resolve, commitment, passion and herculean personal strength, character and stamina. They took up their voices to care, contribute, foster change, facilitate improved recovery practices, formally participate in government and agency processes and make a positive difference.

The work of the BBAG reflects member’s desire to honour the people who died so that their deaths, and the member’s experiences, are not in vain; ensuring that some legacy of good comes out of the tragedy of the 2009 Victorian Black Saturday Bushfires.
THE LEGACY DOCUMENT

This Legacy document is an acknowledgement of the 173 lives lost on Black Saturday, and the subsequent suffering and struggles of their grieving family members, some of which was compounded by inadequate or inappropriate disaster response.

It is a record – at this time – of the Black Saturday Bushfire Bereaved Advisory Group’s experiences, reflections, achievements, learnings and recommendations almost five years post-Black Saturday bushfire disaster.

But this Legacy document is not merely an historical record; it is also a living document, meaning that much can be learned from it. It is a narrative of the group’s experience as the Bushfire Bereaved Advisory Group. This narrative seeks to encapsulate how the profoundness of each person’s Black Saturday bereavement experiences, including trauma, pain, courage and determination, in turn contributed to the work and achievements of the BBAG.

This Legacy document is a record of the bereaved members’ particular knowing and insights. These have informed government, agencies and others involved in disaster response, of where there is need for change in policies and practices in disaster events when deaths have occurred; it includes key recommendations.

The BBAG Legacy document is intended to be a dynamic document, and a resource that will continue to inform and raise awareness in those who are involved in disaster response when people have experienced traumatic bereavement.

Since insight and understanding is necessarily an evolving process, this document is, in a sense, unfinished. The work of improving disaster response where there are deaths, not only goes on, but is incumbent on all of us who are in a position to work for, and/or implement, better policies and practices for disaster bereaved people.
BEFORE BLACK SATURDAY BUSHFIRE BEREAVED ADVISORY GROUP

The most shocking thing that occurred on Saturday 7 February 2009 was that 173 people died.

It was the shocked and grieving families, who, at the very core of this catastrophe, were left behind – in the most traumatic circumstances – to comprehend a tangle of loss and grief, coronial and forensic processes, isolation, disempowerment, media intrusions, financial hardship, legal issues, and a lack of recognition, sensitivity and support from the disaster recovery activities which focused on material and practical needs, and were specific to the burnt locations.

Whilst the appalling number of deaths, and to some extent, the people who had died were acknowledged, their family members became invisible, unknown, isolated and largely unsupported as catastrophically and traumatised bereaved people.

Initially most support and recognition given to Black Saturday bereaved people, via the Case management system, Relief Centres and agencies was incidental, and largely came about because of material loss, and geographic proximity to flame affected areas, not bereavement.

Bereaved families struggled through a haze of grief, trauma and anxiety for weeks and months as they waited on the coroner to release the remains of their loved ones. Without a Death Certificate, many people were unable to access funds, or did not know how they could do this. Nor were they able to deal with estate issues. Many had difficulty with the tasks of daily living such as eating, sleeping, working, driving, paying bills, answering the telephone and opening mail. Many experienced increasing isolation as their personal networks dropped away. The pressure on relationships, at every level, was profound.

Months after the initial trauma and shock, after the funerals, after the Interim Report of the Royal Commission (August 2009), Black Saturday Bushfire Bereaved families were still largely unacknowledged as a particular cohort or subset of Black Saturday impacted people requiring particular disaster responses. No co-ordinated, systematic or dedicated disaster response for these families had been put in place.

To be fair, there were some difficulties for Government via VBRRA, local councils and recovery organisations in identifying bereaved family members. This was especially so when family members lived outside of the fire impacted areas, including the Melbourne urban area, regional Victoria, interstate and overseas. Issues of Coronial confidentiality and senior next of kin policies, and privacy laws compounded some of these difficulties.

As these months passed, bereaved people themselves began to question the lack of recognition for their devastating loss; however very few could find a way to describe their needs and advocate for themselves or demand a coordinated support program for the bereaved subset. If they had gone to Relief centres, they quickly worked out that they didn’t fit.
I felt so alone, there was no-one to turn to so I went to a Relief Centre, but it was only for people who had lost their homes. I felt guilty, that I was in the wrong, that I shouldn’t have been there.

when I went to a Relief centre, it was chaotic and I couldn’t cope. There was no privacy.

I was asked if I wanted baked beans

around May I was told I did not meet the criteria of a directly bushfire affected person – even though three of my family were dead, the house was gone and their small business was destroyed

In these early months there was little opportunity for Black Saturday bereaved people to speak up as part of a group. The few opportunities were regional Coroner’s meetings, which were closed to other members of the public, and at the first round of Royal Commission submissions.

I told the Coroner how distressed I was by the questions I had been asked about my [family member’s] body, about their pubic hair

my daughter asked “but where is your pen and paper? You are not writing any of this down. Does that mean you are not going to take any notice of what we have been saying? That it will not be any different in the future for other people?”

The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement (ACGB) had also established a number of Black Saturday Bereavement Grief Groups. These provided an anchor for some of the people bereaved, but not for all

at first, all I could do was say my name, but later I could tell my story

the grief group meant a lot to me. For the first time I was able to meet other people who had lost their family

the grief group I was offered was in North Melbourne. I couldn’t get there

It was also in the latter part of 2009 that VBRRA and the State Government began to realize that there had been no coordinated disaster response specifically for bereaved individuals and families. In effect these people had not been identified or acknowledged as a particular cohort, with particular needs; the need for practical, material and emotional support to the wider bushfire affected population had taken priority and focus.

Towards the end of 2009, Christine Nixon, in her role as chair of VBRRA initiated a meeting for people who had been Black Saturday bereaved. This meeting took place on 10 December 2009 and it was the first official acknowledgement of the bereaved families as a particular group of bushfire people, with different, and particular, profound, and complex, traumas and consequent needs.

From this beginning, ten long months after the fires, the BBAG was formed.
"….. We Speak...."

The cavernous voids and chaotic vacuum
created by catastrophe
echo loudly with voices of deep learning and wisdom

With courage and faith
these voices reverberate
beyond the walls of catastrophe

Providing knowledge and value
from that which has gone before
reaching deep into that which is yet to come

The positive distilled from the negative
crafted into a powerful resource
used for the benefit of all

Learning and wisdom shared
hope for an enhanced way forward
A legacy of learning and life
OPERATION BBAG

FORMATION AND STRUCTURAL EVOLUTION OF BBAG

SNAPSHOT

- Late 2009, via an expression of interest process, VBRRRA established and sought input from an advisory group to be drawn from the community of bushfire bereaved people
- December 2009 BBAG formation meeting
- 2010 onwards – monthly meetings conducted with VBRRRA staff, ACGB staff, invited guests, government and recovery agency representatives and BBAG members.
- 2010 -2013 BBAG meetings continue. Various government organisational, structural configurations and group membership changes occur.
- Three tier VBRRRA structure
  - Bushfire Bereaved Advisory Group
  - Bereaved Community Recovery and Memorials Reference Group
  - Bereaved Community Recovery and Memorials Project Committee
- Entities responsible for the management and administration of the BBAG have included VBRRRA, ACGB, the Victorian Department of Health, EACH.

PROCESS TO CREATE THE ADVISORY GROUP

Very late in 2009 VBRRRA initiated the formation of the BBAG. The group was established via an expression of interest process with invitation extended by VBRRRA to bushfire bereaved people.

The expression of interest invitation identified that the BBAG’s purpose would be advocating for the needs of people bereaved by the bushfires and formally providing input and advice on issues affecting Black Saturday bereaved people in relation to reconstruction, recovery and memorials.

Four years on from the Group’s formation, recollections of BBAG members include the understanding that some bereaved people received an expression of interest flyer, some an email and some a phone call or personal conversation alerting them to this initiative. The exact mechanism VBRRRA used for circulating the expression of interest invitation to bushfire bereaved people is, from the perspective of the BBAG members, to a large degree either unknown, lost in the passage of time or is now unclear.

VBRRRA conducted the first meeting, which was the expression of interest meeting, in December 2009 in Eltham. The meeting included the circulation of a draft terms of reference (T.O.R.) for a BBAG. The T.O.R. were constructed and proposed by VBRRRA.

Eight bereaved people attended the inaugural meeting in addition to staff from VBRRRA, Department of Human Services and ACGB.
REFLECTIONS ABOUT THE EXPRESSION OF INTEREST/FORMATION PROCESS

BBAG member recollections indicate that some invitees were clear about the process while some invitees felt they were not initially informed regarding the purpose of the meeting, or how or why they had been selected to receive an invitation. Some invitees attended “out of curiosity regarding what the meeting was all about.”

At the initial meeting, people were invited to share their different experiences regarding the loss of family, friends, property, and community. It was evident that there existed a lack of information and understanding regarding the particular and profound needs and experiences of the disaster-affected bereaved individuals, families and groups.

An initial concern of some participants was that the proposed body – as a group established by the Government – should not function as part of a “bureaucratic” response. Participants were also eager to ensure that the group should not be viewed as a collocation of “yes”/“no” people serving Governmental authorities; nor should it participate in any “tokenistic” consultation processes. Some expressed their view that “we didn’t want the group to be part of the bureaucracy.”

It was generally felt that the proposed BBAG should retain a high degree of autonomy, and focus principally on addressing the issues relating to the people who were bereaved adopting a strongly consultative role, whereby the Government would act upon the group’s recommendations, advice and consultations. Some individuals entered into full BBAG participation upon receiving surety from Ms Christine Nixon (VBRRA Chair) that the BBAG would indeed function within those parameters.
It would be fair to say that the members of BBAG had three pressing desires – honouring the deaths, telling story, and advocating change.

From the outset, the bereaved members of BBAG wanted an honouring of the people who died on Black Saturday; that their deaths, and the member’s post fire bereavement experiences, were not to be in vain. The intense wish was that some good could come out of the terrible tragedy of 173 lost lives and countless grieving family members.

The members wanted positive outcomes.

Thus BBAG members all wanted to be visible, to speak out, and to be heard. It was felt these things were critical before meaningful and substantive changes could be implemented in any future disaster where deaths occurred.

Additionally, and importantly, the members also wanted to improve the responses to Black Saturday bereaved people.

For members of the group, most changes would came too late; however given the experience of being bereaved on Black Saturday, members were determined that response processes and protocols for bereaved people in disaster must be examined for the failings. The members sought opportunity for frank, respectful telling of difficult material; equally, they sought unconditional listening in the painful process that informed discussions with those in disaster response management and authority.

BBAG members wanted to initiate meetings with various tiers and departments of government, so their insider and subjective knowledge would be the informing element for more positive outcomes in policies and procedures where there are disaster deaths. Members particularly wanted to address the issue of immediate recognition of, and support for, bereaved families as well as changes in Coronial processes.

Throughout this painful time, members of BBAG were mindful of all Black Saturday bereaved families, and therefore wanted to initiate inclusive activities, especially activities which enabled networking, and gave pleasurable time out for all age groups.

THE TWO–WAY PROCESS

Clearly for BBAG to be successful, dialogue was critical. As BBAG members wished to be informants, so too, did they want to be informed.

There was great benefit in being kept up to date, by various bodies, with new information in the changing post-fire landscape. Further, to be assured that BBAG members had indeed been heard, was a critical wellbeing and validating factor.

Members noted that when communications from authorities and agencies were compassionate and timely, there was a lowering of individual anxiety and pain in the circumstances of complex trauma and disaster bereavement.
MEMBERS MOTIVATION FOR JOINING BBAG

In general, people’s motivations for joining the BBAG were altruistic, and in many cases they related to their own need to take some form of action in the face of the impact of the Black Saturday disaster.

Individual Motivations for joining included:

To ensure that people are not powerless in the future.

To fill the gap

To encourage others to talk with the bereaved, and to educate people by breaking misconceptions regarding how to engage in such discussions.

We were conscious that no such group existed at that time to support the bereaved.

I joined the group after raising some issues, and being invited to discuss the issues further.

I heard an interview on the radio, and developed a connection. I was invited to the group to help make a difference. I was feeling disconnected and sad, and things were bad at the time, including difficulties I was having with Case Managers.

The gravity of the loss was such there was a sense that there was nothing else left to lose. And that feeling was either a driving force to do something to help, or to not keep on living.

The Government were more concerned with the living...they probably never even thought about the bereaved group. And that was possibly their biggest mistake. They had an urgent need to get people housed, and get power and water back on, but the bereaved were overlooked.

The BBAG allowed me to contribute – to be connected to key people.

Contributing gave me a focus to keep on living.

The BBAG was a way of keeping touch with people, and also a way to continue having a voice with the people who could make a difference...which proved really fruitful.
THE GROUP FORMED

Subsequent to the expression of interest meeting, BBAG formed consisting of 10-12 bereaved people working in collaboration with VBRRRA staff, various response and recovery agency representatives and ACGB staff.

At the January 2010 meeting, with the newly formed group now in place, the previously circulated draft terms of reference were adopted. The VBRRRA Chair, Christine Nixon, also sought a preferred minimum 12 month commitment by the bereaved members to attend monthly meetings.

Members in general, honoured the initial 12 month minimum personal attendance commitment; most continued to participate in advisory group meetings for much longer and approximately half of the original members have remained for the entire time from December 2009 through to the present date of this document, being late 2013.

SHORT AND LONG TERM BBAG TENURE

A valuable lesson of the BBAG experience is that the flexible structure of the group has provided an important space for bereaved individual’s to participate over both shorter and longer term periods of membership. Moreover, the flexibility to accommodate a range of tenures has been important to the success and continuity of the group.

Beyond the initial preferred 12 month commitment, BBAG members participated voluntarily for whatever period of time they felt they could make a contribution. This approach provided an important forum and validation for people at all levels of contribution.
ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

VBRR A 3 TIER BEREAVED RESPONSE STRUCTURE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMMITTEE</th>
<th>FUNCTION</th>
<th>DIRECTIONAL RELATIONSHIP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project Committee</td>
<td>&gt; Oversee Project</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt; System response</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference Group</td>
<td>&gt; Consult</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt; Problem solve</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bereaved Community Advisory Group</td>
<td>&gt; Advocate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt; Advice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is important to note that the BBAG was one component in a tiered structure established during 2010 by VBRR A to specifically address and manage bereaved issues and recovery.

The three tier structure was:

- BBAG was the first tier in a three tiered VBRR A suite of bereaved management structures. The Advisory Group met monthly.
- A Bereaved Community Recovery and Memorials Reference Group was formed January 2010 as a second tier resource and included BBAG representation from February 2010 (4 BBAG members represented the BBAG in the Bereaved Reference Group). The Reference Group met monthly.
- The third tier was the Bereaved Community Recovery and Memorials Project Committee. Two BBAG representatives were sought by VBRR A in June 2010 to join the Project Committee. The two BBAG representatives were elected to participate on behalf of the BBAG. The Project Committee met two monthly.

Extracted from 2010 document VBRR A Bereaved Community Recovery and Memorials Project Committee Terms of Reference
ORGANISATIONAL/AGENCY ALIGNMENTS

Late in 2009 VBRRA appointed a team specifically dedicated to bushfire bereaved matters. This team included a Manager – Bereaved Community Recovery and Memorials, two Senior Project Officers – Bereaved Community Recovery and Memorials, and possibly other dedicated staff. Further, for some period during the life of VBRRA, staff from BBAG formed an integral part of, and alliance with, the VBRRA Bushfire Bereaved Community Recovery and Memorials team.

During 2010, ACGB were appointed by VBRRA (with very limited consultation with the BBAG) as the agency to take over management of the bushfire bereaved recovery program as the transitioning arrangement as VBBRA approached its wind down.

VBRRA wound up June 2011. During the preceding period of time the management of, and government responsibility for, the bushfire bereaved program administered by ACGB (which included the work of BBAG) was transitioned from VBRRA to the Victorian Department of Health (DoH) – Palliative Care. Recollection by members is that at that same time ACGB’s reporting and functional responsibility for the bushfire bereaved recovery response program also transferred from ACGB being accountability to VBRRA to ACGB having accountability to DoH – Palliative Care. The Advisory Group were not privy to or part of these transition arrangements.

In 2012, DoH made further structural changes to the Bushfire Bereaved recovery program separating the Bushfire Bereaved program into two distinct components: counselling/support groups (ACGB) and community support work Eastern Access Community Health (EACH). EACH became the new body providing administrative support for BBAG. The BBAG were consulted by the DoH during this period of change.
BBAG MEETINGS – WHO, WHEN, WHERE

BEREAVED MEMBERS

- Up to ten bereaved people attended meetings, however generally between five and seven members attended meetings at any one time.
- Four elected BBAG members attended the Bereaved Community Reference Group meetings in the city at the VBRRRA office.
- Two elected BBAG members (and two substitutes) attended the bi-monthly Bereaved Community Project Committee meetings at the VBRRRA office.

VBRRRA

Christine Nixon, as VBRRRA Chair, periodically attended and at one point also took up the role of BBAG chairperson.

The Manager Bereaved Community Recovery and Memorials and the Senior Project Officers and other VBRRRA bereaved unit team members regularly attended whilst their roles and contracts existed. However, of note, due to VBRRRA staff contractual arrangements, after only a few months, there were several changes of personnel in some VBRRRA positions. This resulted in significant negative continuity implications for the work and dynamics of BBAG.

Various other VBRRRA staff attended from time to time.

ACGB

Consistently two staff members, and frequently more, regularly attended until late 2010 and into 2011 when ACGB organisational and BBAG administrative changes occurred.

OTHER

Periodic and one-off attendees included invited guests and staff from various government and non-government agencies including representatives from:

- Department of Human Services
- Department of Health
- Department of Justice
- Fire Services Commissioner and staff
- Fire Recovery Unit staff
- Coroner, CEO and staff
- Royal Commission Community Liaison Manager
- Members of Parliament (Federal and State)
- Victorian Red Cross
- Victorian Police Chaplain
- For a period, a former VBRRRA Bereaved Project staff member attended BBAG meetings in a voluntary administrative capacity to take minutes.
WHEN – MEETING FREQUENCY AND DURATION

BBAG meetings were held monthly, on a week night, from December 2009 through to the end of 2011. The usual meeting length was between two and three hours with most meetings commencing around 6:30pm and concluding around 9:30pm. Throughout the life of BBAG, one meeting was held in 2009, twelve meetings in 2010, twelve in 2011, eight in 2012 and three meeting in 2013.

Some meetings such as strategic planning days or sessions were conducted on weekends and for longer periods of time. Meetings in the VBRRA CBD office were held on weekdays.

In 2011, the Bushfire Bereaved Program funding arrangement changes, government and agency organisational issues, and changes (including transitions and closures) in the administering agencies of VBRRA, ACGB and DoH, contributed significant disruption to the consistent and regular conduct, mood and flow of the BBAG’s work and meetings.

This period of turmoil also coincided with the staff changes and internal disruption at the ACGB which directly impacted BBAG members and BBAG function.

The scale of changes and the loss of key long term ACGB trauma specialist support staff from the function of the BBAG meetings proved very detrimental to the harmony, operation and tone of the BBAG meetings and function and to the relationships between members and admin support agencies. Loss of confidence, concerns about the level of government support for the group and for bushfire bereaved people and concerns over effective use of available funding to support the recovery of the bereaved weighed very heavily on the advisory group members.

All of the above factors, in combination with the consequential and other changes in the internal dynamics of BBAG, negatively impacted the group’s ability to function at the level it had previously been able to function at. From around the middle of 2011 meeting frequency and attendance became less consistent. Going forward, the group continues to operate with fewer members however it never fully recovered its operational flow, level of attendance and meeting regularity.

WHERE – MEETING LOCATION

The BBAG meetings have been held at eight locations ranging from the Eltham region, to the central business district in Melbourne, to Ringwood.

Locations include The Eltham Gateway Motel, The Eltham Hotel, VBRRA CBD offices, Glen Katherine Primary School, Doncaster Hotel, EACH’s Ringwood Office, Ringwood Federation Centre Gallery and a private residence in Panton Hill.

Having a suitable location provided by authorities for BBAG has been consistently problematic for the members, and for the optimal functioning of the group, throughout the life of the BBAG.

Most members travelled significant distances adding around two plus hours of round trip travel time to already lengthy meetings. No provision for travel costs, or any form of expense reimbursement was extended to the volunteer BBAG members.
ADMINISTRATION AND RECORD KEEPING

As has been mentioned, traumatically bereaved people are vulnerable people; they are exhausted people. They are people with little reserve for extra responsibilities.

However, the twists of fate meant that these very people were necessarily the people who volunteered for BBAG. To attend meetings, to just be present, was often an exhausting effort, and BBAG members frequently had to dig very deep into their personal resources of courage and commitment.

Agencies (VBRRA, ACGB, DoH and EACH) throughout the life of BBAG, provided administrative and organisational support, including meeting Chairperson, venue co-ordination, funded or supplied food and refreshments, organized and maintained agendas and minutes.

Initially administrative support was made available by the Government, via VBRRA. Given the intensity of personal experiences, and the complexities of issues raised and managed by BBAG, it was vital for the effective functioning of meetings, and subsequent initiatives, that the group had this administration support, including chair, minutes, agendas, communications and archival of documents.

With frequent changes of staff and admin support agencies, administrative support and facilitation deficits were problematic, and placed considerable, and unnecessary, added burden and anxiety on bereaved members.

It is a sad legacy of BBAG’s journey that the important and historically valuable records of the work of the group, in the form of minutes, agendas, letters and other documents, has not been adequately or successfully transitioned from one agency and government body to the next, as the bureaucratic organisational arrangements altered. It is exceedingly unfortunate, and reflects enormous loss of value, that much documentation of the work of the BBAG has been lost as a consequence. In the construction of this document countless hours, over months, have been spent tracing documents from multiple sources.

An imperative lesson is the essential rigor required, from ‘day one’, by responsible agencies to record in detail, maintain and securely archive the work of a group, such as the BBAG, to ensure the enduring benefits, learning’s and legacy of the work is preserved and available for use and benefit now and into the future.

PRACTICAL AND WELLBEING SUPPORT OF MEMBERS

BBAG participation has come with considerable effort and substantial cost to the members, including energy, time, transport, organizing family to cope with the member’s absence from home, or returning late at night to a now empty house; add associated material costs all these things have had an impact.
The salient wellbeing issues and struggles of the members may well have been a reflection of how the larger subset of people bereaved on Black Saturday were (and are) travelling at any given time. As such the group, as an entity, became an informant and monitor of wellbeing for Government and other agencies.

Ensuring wellbeing for members attending meetings was critical. The working of BBAG was, and still is, by its very nature, emotionally taxing and draining. Not only are group members dealing with their own significant bereavement and loss, they have also experienced significant and complex trauma from the wider disaster experience as well as vicarious trauma. The telling and sharing of the horrendous truth of each other’s experiences generated deep emotional echoes within the group. Frequently there was silence after such sharing.

Consequently it is critical that appropriate care is given. From the very beginning, although there was recognition of this need by VBRRRA which ensured ACGB staff were present during meetings, no arrangement for follow-up psychological debriefing was put in place. Informal, de facto debriefing and support occurred after, and between, meetings by the members themselves. These processes occurred naturally as members came to know and care about each other.

However, feedback from BBAG members indicates there was a strong need for more active and formalized psychological support for the group at meetings, and for the individual members following meetings. This may have been as simple as skilled meeting facilitation, and follow-up phone calls, or the offer of an independent professional debriefing session.

I had to leave the BBAG meeting and take a walk before I could return and continue

I just couldn’t come to some meetings... it was just too much

BBAG acknowledges that members could avail themselves of the various psychological counselling programs offered through VBRRRA/VAF, ACGB, Community Health Services and the Medicare Mental Health schedule. However, these are not specific to BBAG meetings, and additionally, appointments with psychological care providers may not be available for some time after the BBAG meeting because such appointments typically require advance booking. Additionally, in this circumstance there would be/is has been considerable personal expense.

The recommendation is that whenever an Advisory Group is set up by Government or agencies, where the members have suffered, and are still suffering profound stress, distress and complex trauma, formal debriefing opportunity should be provided throughout the existence of such a group.
In terms of the wellbeing of BBAG members it must be noted that some members, having been bereaved, and having lost their homes and communities, were also contributing significantly to Black Saturday recovery programs in their own localities. Others were carrying the enormous load of maintaining and supporting their extended families when there had been multiple deaths in the family.

Almost four years after BBAG was set up, the group has never been offered respite, enrichment and/or strengthening experiences.

When all members have volunteered their services and have experienced significant financial hardship because of their Black Saturday experience, fuel vouchers would have been appreciated, not just in monetary terms, but because it would have been a gesture of recognition of the genuine burden of volunteering and contributing.

From the very beginning, nourishment has been recognised as an important element for people who are experiencing physical, mental, emotional and spiritual exhaustion. Food has always been provided for meetings at no cost to the members. Although the type and quality has varied from venue to venue, the value of talking over food is invaluable socially as well as nutritionally.

Venues and ambience have varied greatly. Good ambience is critical to relaxed feelings. Auditory qualities, appropriate heating, cooling, and comfortable chairs all contribute to good ambience. Meeting rooms need to be large enough for movement and comfort, but not so large that the members feel lost. Generally, good ambience allows for good meetings. Good auditory quality is essential, and unfortunately this was a significant issue in some of the venues.

It is important that when the group meets, they can, for the duration, feel an ownership of the space. This means no external interruptions.

Lastly, ambience contributes to the most vital element of all – the provision of a feeling of trust, safety and comfort.

While trust, feelings of safety, comfort, support and wellbeing are intertwined with all of the above, the fundamental underpinning of BBAG has been respect and care for each other. This extends to, and includes, invited guests as well as support agency staff.
IMPORTANCE OF TELLING...IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING...
IMPORTANCE OF BEING HEARD

From the very beginning, it was the experiences of Black Saturday bereaved people that underpinned the purpose of the BBAG. These experiences included the actual fires, the circumstances around realization of the deaths, and also the ensuing days, months and years as a bushfire bereaved person.

Members of the group were determined that many of these experiences would be used to force changes in practices and policies for the Black Saturday bereaved people and, importantly, for future disaster responses where deaths occur.

BBAG meetings were therefore fundamentally grounded by members telling their stories as the primary source of information for advocating activities. It is important to note that these stories were not merely accounts of the experiences, but were narratives of how it felt to have had the experience. They were, unfortunately, frequently collaborating stories of harrowing experiences.

The process of being heard enabled intensely personal, emotionally sensitive and difficult information to be shared, and discussed in a safe, objective manner. To have feelings unconditionally respected, understood and appreciated brought meaning and healing to many BBAG members.

Importantly, primary, qualitative information was elicited through the telling of stories; the insights and understandings that came from this process led to the identification of critical issues that needed addressing.

INVITING GUESTS INTO PRIVILEGED SPACE;
SHARING STORIES FOR CHANGE

Initially VBRRA invited a number of guests to meetings; these were representatives from Government departments and organisations such as Red Cross and ACGB. Later it was BBAG members who initiated requests to meet with representatives from particular departments and organisations. Both VBRRA and BBAG believed that departments and agencies would be best informed by directly hearing perspectives of Black Saturday bereaved people, from those affected people themselves.

In practice, the invited guests were able to hear and experience the conversations and tones – stories and feelings – at BBAG meetings; they were able take away insights and data they obtained, and utilize these to identify issues, and inform response planning and processes.
It is critical to note that what worked well for the group was (and is) the telling of stories, and the talking through these stories for the insights they offer. BBAG members have been able to provide qualitative data from a unique and profound perspective of bereavement in traumatic and disaster circumstances. It is this verbal work that has effectively informed and assisted external agencies in their disaster management and response processes.

As a synchronicity, and for good reason, this Legacy document is presented in narrative style; just as our personal and collective narratives became the argument for change, so it is hoped this Legacy narrative will, in a similar way continue to inform all who are involved in disaster response and management where there are deaths.

THE EXCHANGE PROCESSES

Whilst BBAG provided rich informing for Government and agencies, this process was an exchange of knowledge and understanding in order to make change for the better.

It was not the role of BBAG to determine the agendas, practices or policies of bushfire recovery response entities. Rather, BBAG functioned to identify and highlight real (and often hidden or invisible) needs and issues that had compounded the trauma of the Black Saturday bereavement experience. Whilst not determining the agendas, including processes, and practices of response entities, BBAG significantly informed these agendas.

This process of exchange was diverse in nature. Significantly, as BBAG raised specific issues for discussion, VBRRRA, Government and agencies sought to elucidate more information, or to explore and provide possible solutions. Some of these entities requested further meetings and opportunity to explore more fully a particular issue.

Sometimes relevant guests were invited into the BBAG space to broaden perspectives, provide critical information, and to strengthen the relationship and resources of BBAG. Guests were also invited to strengthen and lift the reserves of BBAG members.
MAJOR CHAPTERS IN THE WORK OF BBAG

TELLING THE CORONER THINGS THAT HURT AND DAMAGED – PROCESSES AND COMMUNICATION STYLES THAT CRY FOR CHANGE

Some of the most raw, and painful meetings involved individual stories of coronial processes. These individual stories were in fact a body of collective and collaborative evidence of hurtful, distressing, disempowering and stressful Coronial procedures and practices.

The Coronial processes have had several distinct phases, and have taken years to conclusion and resolution. It must be understood, that for some members, there are matters that are still ongoing at the time of writing this document (ie late 2013).

Some of these processes have added layers of trauma to trauma for many people, while others say that although the processes have necessarily been distressing, they did not feel unsupported by the Coroner.

It is acknowledged:

- this was the first time the Victorian Coroner has experienced a disaster of such magnitude
- the Coroners Court operates under international as well as local protocols and legislations

At the outset BBAG would like to pay tribute to the forensic people who retrieved the remains of our loved ones. Their task was a truly awful and difficult one. It was a task Victoria, and indeed Australia, has not previously had to undertake, and consequently the Victorian Government via its Coronial arm was confronted by an unprecedented retrieval, and forensic task of mammoth proportions. Many of the forensic staff, including detectives, were seconded from other areas to enable the task to be undertaken and completed. We wish to sincerely thank them.

From the very beginning, families experienced complex grief, anguish and trauma, and without exception, BBAG members wanted to do everything possible to make change for future disaster events where there are deaths.

... it was never about the deaths, the loss ... it was always about the experiences ... the journey we had .... With the whole Coronial process

I never wanted what happened to my family [after we found out] to ever happen to another family

At first BBAG members wished to raise their various experiences in order to inform the Coroner of how it felt

- to only have hearsay confirmation of the death/s. To have no-one officially come and communicate to families about the death/s.
- to have as the first official contact, often after many days or longer, and without families having had any previous official informing of the death/s, forensic police seeking DVI information
- to not be kept informed regarding the retrieval of their family member’s body/bodies, especially in instances where family members were the ones who reported the death and whereabouts of the family member’s body
to experience confusion and conflicting advice regarding identification processes

to be denied access to their own properties, or their family member’s property until all forensic examination and removal of remains had been done, yet see media footage of their properties, and in some cases, footage of body bags

to hear reports on media, purported to have come from the Coroner, and which were then contradicted by coronial staff when families contacted the Coroner

being made to feel a nuisance

to attend what was meant to be a closed meeting with the Coroner and find voyeuristic members of the general public attending, and these people not being asked to leave

to be asked, in the bushfire context, and after the Coroner had pronounced that all identifications would be made via a DNA analysis, inappropriate questions about the family members body for identification purposes
  - this was especially so when remains were burnt
  - when a daughter was asked about her father’s pubic hair

to have DNA swabs taken, which were then not used

to have discarded rubbish left on the property eg drink bottles

Again, BBAG acknowledges the overwhelming retrieval and forensic tasks, however members felt that some of these processes needed to be changed in the immediate aftermath period

Prompt and pro-active communication with the family to confirm the death/s, or probability of death

Communication regarding the retrieval of the family member’s remains

Consistent public and private information regarding identification processes and requirements

Press and media be prevented entry to properties, and intrusion before, and at the time of body retrieval

Some people were told the Coroner had made decisions on their behalf without consultation

Some people were not told of their rights

Some people were given evasive answers, rather than the truth

  When I asked a question, I didn’t get an answer, instead I was told “it would be better if I got the drift”. This was worse than the truth, it was as if I shouldn’t want to know, as if it was too terrible to know. This was my [family member] who had died’

As time moved on, many of the bereaved cohort experienced distress because of how communications were made.

Many people received Coronial phone calls in the evening, including Friday evenings

The timing and context of some phone calls indicated that the Coronial staff member was not cognizant of the family’s narrative, thus exacerbating distress
Formal interviews for the Police Brief, to be presented to the Coroner had, for some people been conducted on inappropriate days, times and premises, and without a support person present. Some questions seemed to be irrelevant and inappropriate, and therefore distressing – for example about life insurance policies.

There were issues in extended and/or blended families re who could be regarded as ‘senior next of kin’, and therefore the recipient of official correspondence and phone calls.

Privacy and confidentiality laws and policies made it impossible for some families to communicate information.

To sum up, many of the issues were to do with identification procedures, disempowerment, conflicting, and/or insufficient information, inadequate, untimely or poorly executed, and insensitive, communications, and a lack of ‘reading the particular narrative’ of a particular family.

These issues, identified by so many Black Saturday bereaved people, in so many different settings, form an undeniable body of collaborative evidence.

The Coroner was therefore invited to BBAG meetings on two occasions. The first meeting was to inform, and the second occasion was to restate the issues and request that notes be taken in order to make sure that the Coroner had really heard what BBAG members had to say.

In July 2012, a BBAG Feedback Forum was organized. Unfortunately many BBAG members were unable to attend due the timing and distance issues, however a representative from the Coroners Court did attend and gave the following feedback re changes implemented as a result of discussions with BBAG:

- Five counsellors are now employed at the Coroners Court
- A counsellor must be present during a DVI interview including when the ID form is completed
- There are requirements for anyone who is not next of kin to complete Form 45, (to receive information) and conversely, the ‘senior’ next of kin can advise the Coroner of people they do not want contact with, or having access to information

In regards to this last point, the issue for BBAG remains – how to ensure that Privacy laws do not result in some people ‘falling through the cracks’?

BBAG members recognise that some things cannot be changed; that traumatic bereavement necessarily causes acute distress. However, given the above feedback from the Coroner in July 2012, it is noted that as late as Christmas 2012, and indeed into 2013, BBAG members have experienced some of the very same issues listed above – particularly in relation to evening phone calls and family narrative; it would appear some of the BBAG identified systemic issues remain unaddressed or not satisfactorily resolved.

BBAG seeks confirmation that the issues raised have indeed been heard, and policies and procedures examined, to ensure that where there are multiple disaster bereavements, there will be improved, more sensitive processes for traumatically disaster bereaved families, particularly in communication practices.
**BUSHFIRE AWARENESS CONSULTATIONS**

It almost goes without saying: BBAG members expressed raw emotion in discussions with Government regarding bushfire awareness and bushfire preparedness. We were people who had experienced profoundly tragic and traumatic bushfire bereavement/s. At the forefront was a profound anger at the *Stay and Defend* policy, followed by intense feelings about the lack of accurate and up to date information and communications on Black Saturday 7 February 2009.

Critical to the *Stay and Defend* policy is the idea of ‘houses save people and people save houses’, however it was the view of many BBAG members that there is an implied ‘property before people’ message because of the emphasis on ‘preparing your property’, with little or no emphasis on the potential for loss of life if you do ‘stay and defend’.

This issue was extensively covered by the Royal Commission, which recommended scrap it; some BBAG members had themselves made formal submissions to the Commission on this subject. Never-the-less, the subjective voice of BBAG members, heard by the Fire Services Commissioner, was extremely important to BBAG as a *telling* and thus having an advisory role.

In the context of this Legacy document, it should be noted that several BBAG members, not to mention countless other people, had attended multiple ‘Fireguard groups’ where CFA educators explained the concepts of *Stay and Defend*. These BBAG members again stated that warnings about the potential for loss of life, in *Stay and Defend* awareness education, was not given – rather it was ‘houses save people, and after the fire front, people save houses’.

Towards the end of the first year of BBAG, members began to express their concerns regarding the coming bushfire season. Coinciding with this, some members had received, in their mail, the first of the new seasons fire awareness pamphlet *Prepare, Act, Survive*. To receive this pamphlet, without prior warning, shocked and distressed some members, some thought the graphics were sensationalist, and unrepresentative of reality, and some thought there was still an implied message of property before people.

BBAG resolved to advise the Premier of these concerns, and to offer our perspectives as well as our first hand experience and knowledge regarding bushfire awareness campaigns. A letter was sent in October 2010.

In January 2011, the Department of Justice (DoJ) attended a BBAG meeting and presented pamphlets and DVDs of television advertisements for BBAG comment. DoJ specifically wanted the opinions and advice of BBAG members regarding the impact (of the deaths) in the context of the *Stay and Defend* policies, as well as our comments regarding the proposed advertising campaign.

There was a raw, and frank discussion about the *Stay and Defend* policy. BBAG members were adamant the policy was flawed, and that people’s lives must receive priority before the saving of property in any fire awareness campaign. Discussions emphasized

- lives were lost as a direct consequence of the ‘Stay and Defend’ policy
- advertising must not ‘skirt’ around the possibility of death; it must directly address the issue of the potential for, and possibility of, death
- information must be direct, not inferred
- holiday makers must be targeted and included in all bushfire awareness campaigns
At the end of this meeting, DoJ indicated they would like to consult further with BBAG, and would like to include the newly appointed Fire Services Commissioner Craig Lapsley in the discussions.

BBAG was only too happy with this suggestion for this reason: there had been 173 deaths on Black Saturday. BBAG members were adamant that everything possible to prevent loss of life in bushfire disaster must be done.

In June 2011, the Fire Services Commissioner, Mr Craig Lapsley, attended BBAG. He presented the proposed fire awareness pamphlet *Survival Options* for BBAG comment. This pamphlet represented a new way of thinking about bushfire awareness, with the priority now being people before property.

‘the imperative is, lives are paramount’
Craig Lapsley 1 June 2011

Mr Lapsley requested further meetings with BBAG for discussion and input on future publications and fire awareness campaigns; he also invited members to make contact with him on issues members thought were important to these campaigns.

Following this meeting with frank and open discussions, BBAG and the Fire Services Commissioner formed a productive and ongoing relationship. Mr Lapsley returned over several months for BBAG advice, comment and ideas including:

- Role of local radio, and roadside signage re local radio bands
- Roadside signage showing the new categories of fire risk on any given day
- Awareness campaigns to educate and inform people about the new categories
- Apps for iPhones for real time information
- Fire simulator bus concept for fire awareness and education discussed, including psychological sensitivities
- Proposed sms mobile telephone service for real time warnings

Fire Services Commissioner Craig Lapsley and Tony O’Day (DoJ) presented the 2011/12 summer fire awareness television campaign advertisements. Following previous discussions with BBAG (and others), these ads focused on what could be heard in a bushfire, rather than what could be seen. They were confronting, and certainly informing. They placed safety and the protection of life as the primary message.

BBAG strongly urged that arrangements be made to ensure as many as possible bereaved people be warned of the confronting nature of the advertisements, before they were screened. The warnings were to be via a personal letter to adult persons registered on the Bereavement data base, [held by VBRLA and agencies] on the website, the bereavement newsletter, and through relevant agencies eg ACOB.

BBAG members, although confronted by the ads, eventually agreed the ads would/could be effective in saving lives should there be serious life-threatening bushfires in the coming summer. The ads went to air in December 2011.

BBAG was again consulted about the fire awareness campaign in October 2012 and is gratified to have been given the opportunity for meaningful discussion and contribution.
CASE MANAGEMENT – A CASE OF HIT AND MISS MANAGEMENT

For months, flowing into years, many Black Saturday bereaved people have not known what assistance was/is available to them, and have not been in a practical or psychological position to source and process available information regarding assistance options.

While material assistance was needed for some bereaved people, assistance and support specifically related to managing the many complex bereavement matters was seriously deficient. As has been mentioned, the Black Saturday bereaved individuals and families are vulnerable people: they are exhausted people, and grieving people. But, what has been overlooked is that in the days, weeks and months following the fires, these bereft individuals and families were overwhelmed by their own loss/es, as well as by the scale of the disaster; and frequently, their own place within this disaster. These bereaved people, who were so vulnerable, were simply unable to advocate or articulate their needs for themselves.

BBAG believes that targeted, immediate and consistent Case Management Service provision for people bereaved on Black Saturday could have saved bereaved families and individuals immense stress and preventable secondary trauma.

Case Management issues have been identified by so many Black Saturday bereaved people, in so many different settings, including repeatedly at BBAG meetings, that they also form an undeniable body of collaborative evidence of systemic deficits.

Case management deficits identified by the bereaved include, but are not limited to, the following shortfalls, or complete lack of:-

- Support and/or assistance with daily living tasks such as nutrition and food shopping, medications and health, self care
- Support in dealing with, and negotiating other issues such as budgeting, banks and payment of bills, Telstra problems, Schools and universities, Centrelink, Legal and estate, Bushfire forms and bureaucratic requirements, Relief centres for material aid, Opening mail
For some people, a lack of accurate and up to date information regarding grants, counselling and other forms of assistance available to the cohort of bereaved people

Some case workers did not have training and skills to navigate the complex emotional landscape of disaster bereaved clients

case managers were unable to assist in the many bereavement tasks confronting bereft individuals and families because they were focused primarily on material matters

inconsistent provision of practical assistance eg phone calls and finding out information

inconsistent monitoring of general wellbeing

inconsistency in case management service provision, including multiple changes of case managers, resulting in compromised outcomes

From this range of identified issues, there appear to have been several critical issues:

many management contracts were for short periods (ie three months) meaning disrupted and disjointed process resulting in more loss, changes and adjustments for people already extremely vulnerable

I had five different case managers... only one of them had any understanding of what it was like to be bereaved as well as homeless

I repeatedly asked for a case manager who could help me with estate issues. I was bereft, and I was homeless and without financial support. Nothing was left and I had to somehow manage everything to do with (partners) estate. Everything was burnt and on top of everything I could not face it.

We were given the wrong information about available financial assistance with funerals and as a result we unnecessarily compromised our arrangements – regret that cannot be undone.

some case managers seconded from other jobs and professions did not have appropriate skills and understanding of the impact of bereavement in disaster, issues in multiple deaths and/or losses, and in a complex bereavement trauma landscape.

my case manager said to me that I would end up with ’a better house than she had’...I was going to have a new house with no family to live in it
It is a salient point that an immediate disaster bereavement specific case management service could have been the feedback conduit to inter-Departmental, Local Councils and other agencies forums specific to the observable and stated needs of Black Saturday bereaved individuals and families. This would have contributed to opening up space for recognition and acknowledgement of the cohort, and thus better systems of recovery support for Black Saturday bereaved people.

The closure of the Case Management service coincided with the second Anniversary of Black Saturday – a peak trauma spike for all Black Saturday affected people, and particularly people who had suffered deaths. For some this was another loss, another lack of awareness and sensitivity; it contributed additional, or re-activated trauma that was preventable with compassionate, sensitive and insightful planning.

To the credit of VBRRRA, DHS and the Case Management Service, BBAG members were consulted, and their advice sought, about case management issues that had negatively impacted on Black Saturday bereaved people.

It is our hope that this informing will make positive and practical change for the future, such as legislating to fund case management to ensure closure does not coincide with significant periods such as Christmas and the disaster anniversary period.

It is also our hope that the practice of short-term case management contracts is examined and changed to prevent the trauma of loss and disruption.
WHAT’S THE STORY WITH GRANTS AND VOUCHERS?
– Well may you ask, as so many did, so often!

At numerous BBAG meetings, concerns about availability of, and access to, financial grants, recovery assistance vouchers and other recovery offerings were repeatedly raised.

What’s the story with such and such grant or voucher?

Did you know xxx is available?

I received xxx, didn’t you?

...became familiar and disheartening discussion items.

Much advocacy by BBAG occurred in this area, with VBRRA and the admin/support agencies feeding BBAG input back into the governments disaster recovery and response information loop. However at no stage did VBAF consult with BBAG or the Bushfire bereaved people as a discrete cohort of people with particular needs and issues.

From very early on in the life of BBAG, it was evident some bereaved people knew what grants and offerings were available, some people did not, some found themselves eligible whilst inexplicably others similarly affected were told they were not eligible, some people with more personal capacity to achieve access to assistance were able to, yet this left other people with equal entitlement, but less voice, seemingly unaware, or much less aware, of their available options. Some fire bereaved people found out information in a timely and useful manner, others once it was too late to be helpful or after the offering was no longer available.

In reference to accessing grants, vouchers and other programs, it is critical to recognise, and accommodate timing issues and the reduced capacity of bereaved people to be ready, and able, to navigate and/or take up offered grants, gifts and programs. To put it plainly, and succinctly, bereaved people were generally not ready at the same time as non-bereaved people. This fact has meant many bereaved people have missed out because the offers had expired. They have not been re-offered to bereaved people at a time more fitting to the circumstances of the disaster bereavement experience.

The BBAG members personal experiences, in addition to members’ knowledge of the experiences of other fire affected people, provide a very informing “sample plate” for agencies to see what the “lived reality at the coalface” was like for disaster bereaved people with regard to grants, vouchers and recovery offerings.

From the BBAG meetings, it was also evident that this is an area of post disaster experience that caused confusion, frustration and secondary trauma for many fire bereaved people. For some people the problems also translated into significant financial disadvantage.
Sentiments shared at BBAQ meetings and by members include:

...when we were organizing the memorial service and funeral the case manager advised me I wasn’t eligible for the TAC funding for funerals because my (family member/s) didn’t die in the car. We limited the funeral and service plans because of financial constraints. I later found out the advice was not correct... I had been eligible for the funding, but it was all too late by the time I found out...it’s really upsetting and adds to my trauma ...

... my bushfire brain has been so debilitating. I needed to rely on the case management support and knowledge, then I realized the case managers were sometimes really confused and unsure about grants and funding too. Some case managers were better equipped than others....

...the bereaved youth do not have targeted recovery offerings and vouchers, yet have unique and specific needs...

... I received $50,000 for my house and $25,000 for the loss of my partner who was also the income provider. A life measured by a grant as worth less than a house...

... in the years since the fires there have not been any respite getaways just for the bushfire bereaved, even though there have been getaways and respite offerings for many other groups of fire affected people...something is very wrong about this. This situation tells a big story ...

...my relatives died.... I was exhausted sorting it all out... I saw holiday offerings for respite for fire affected people... I called... they told me I wasn’t eligible because I didn’t have a blue referral card... I felt hurt and embarrassed and withdrew even more...

... Despite the deaths of my family and crawling through the rubble and cleaning up the house site etc. the case manager told me I wasn’t entitled to a blue card... I felt devastated and invisible... I felt like material loss was considered more important than the loss of life. The inference was that I didn’t belong and wasn’t viewed as a fire affected person...

...every time I applied for another round of psychological counselling vouchers I had to go to the police station, or somewhere, to get a statutory declaration signed.. I was still me ... no details or circumstances had changed ... my family were still dead and my trauma ongoing.... Repeatedly getting statutory declarations for the same thing was degrading and embarrassing....I understand needing the proper forms the first time, but why was it needed every time a new round of counselling vouchers was released?... it’s not like you go to counselling for fun....

... I had to keep validating my identity, repeating my story every time I applied for some of the offered assistance. Some of the requests for personal details were totally intrusive. I felt stripped bare by Black Saturday and the process took even more away...

...the forms I had to fill in required me to demonstrate hardship.... What could be harder than losing my loved one/s and my home... who measures ‘hardship’?
An analysis of the minutes alone reveals that concerns were fundamentally in relation to inconsistent and inequitable access to bushfire recovery grants, vouchers and assistance, untimely information, misinformation, missing information, repetitive data collection, burdensome application process and added layers of stress and trauma from the process and definitions/criteria used.

However there is something very important missing – the minutes don’t capture and reflect important information that was shared – information held within the depth and tone of the sadness, despair, frustration, sense of disrespect and anger the many BBAG conversations captured and transmitted to the agencies who sought BBAG input on these matters.

Conveying the tone and the human face of the experience to agencies was one of BBAG’s greatest offerings and strengths.

As identified, the importance, and paucity, of clear, timely, respectful and equitable communication of information about recovery offerings of grants and vouchers formed the core of many discussions and concerns about this matter (and similarly, communication problems were at the root of many other matters).

During the BBAG meetings the discussions nearly always included reference to the consequential additional trauma and damage arising from poor and preventable negative experiences around the matters of financial assistance and recovery offerings.

Whilst the importance of access to financial and practical assistance cannot be underestimated, on many occasions a dominant point made by BBAG members was that the angst was “not so much about the money” per se, but rather that the concerns ran so much deeper, being as much about the symbolism, acknowledgement and respect (or disrespect) reflected in the offerings and the process.

In recognition of the important need for balance; the struggle and challenges faced by government to manage the logistics of making grants and voucher offerings available to the disparate, dispersed and sometimes dis-located cohort of people bereaved by these bushfires was respected and acknowledged by the BBAG. Yet BBAG knew that only by raising awareness of the deficits could real change be affected, yet again affirming the important and unique role and value of the BBAG.

With regard to financial grants, vouchers and offerings, a snapshot of the BBAG meetings in the first year of operation, as detailed below, is quite revealing:

**December 2009**

Formation meeting – disrespect and inequity between material grants and loss of life grants. In principle how can lives be worth less than material loss? Monetary acknowledgements provided under work care and motor accidents are higher and incompatible with fire bereavement pecuniary acknowledgements.

**January 2010**

Exclusion of bereaved people from accessing grants/recovery initiatives/assistance because some bereaved – [e.g. those who did not suffer personal material loss] were deemed not to have satisfied the definition and criteria to designate them as a bushfire affected person. How much more fire affected can a person be, than having their loved one(s) die in the bushfires?
Difficulties of bereaved people accessing the Blue Referral card were highlighted. It is tragic to know that in some instances special permission had to be sought for bereaved people without a referral card to allow them to be granted entitlement to services other, non-bereaved, fire affected people were accessing.

The contact database for bereaved is inadequate, this negatively impacted the dissemination of information about grants etc. The Staying in Touch Newsletter was developed, in part, to help support communication of information, including about grants and psychological support offerings.

**Feb 2010** salient inadequacy of the allocation of 6 counselling vouchers, advocacy for policy change. Issues of needing statutory declarations and people repeatedly having to validate their circumstances fed into discussions about the unsatisfactory situation that, on multiple occasions, bereaved people had to repeatedly provide personal data and repeat their story of loss.

**May 2010**

Men’s getaway offerings welcomed and applauded but also highlighted the deficiency that at no point has there been any funding or grants for respite recovery getaways exclusively for the bushfire bereaved, a cohort with unique and particular complex trauma and disaster recovery and respite needs.

**June 2010**

Discussion about VBAF funding and grants, advice to VBRRFA that many bereaved are not aware of entitlements, that access to information and grants appeared hit and miss and inequitable. Flavours of ‘some people being in the know’ but many not. VBRRFA undertook to review matter with VBAF

Case management advice to clients inconsistent, sometimes wrong, confusing and incomplete. Dialogue about the complexity and burden of application forms, the incessant repetitiveness of data gathering and the need for statutory declarations every time despite repeated validation of bona fides.

**July 2010**

Women’s leadership grants discussed

**August 2010**

Problems experienced accessing financial and emotional hardship grants, definition problems, exclusion issues, hit and miss eligibility, squeaky wheel syndrome apparent – i.e. those that squeak the loudest get oiled and those that don’t – don’t get anything. Equity and inequity issues were tabled. Issues of location targeted recovery and rebuild continuing to take precedence over loss of life issues.

**October 2010**

Advocacy for expansion and extension of psychological counselling support funding and vouchers undertaken by BBAG. Inequitable access for non flame-zone fire affected people to access ATAPS funding for bushfire psychological recovery was expressed;
VBRR to liaise with appropriate government agencies and VBAF

Skills Victoria bushfire assistance targeted to geography not to all fire affected people in need, including the bereaved.

Concerns about long term trauma recovery needs and funding inequities raised.

The Black Saturday bereaved people are geographically dispersed and un-coordinated as a cohort and hence poorly placed to have presence and advocacy in the funding consideration landscape

December 2010

Meeting with Federal and State MP included discussion about psychosocial recovery needs, funding, longevity and definitional concerns.

As can be seen, the matter of grants and vouchers came up time and time again during BBAG meetings. The repetitive nature of this matter speaks volumes. This was an area of repeated advocacy by the BBAG.

BEREAVED RECOVERY PROGRAM FUNDING

Separate to advocacy about the offerings and entitlements for individual people, BBAG also devoted substantial time voicing, and attempting to address, concerns about the allocation, application, adequacy and administration of government and donated funding targeted specifically for Black Saturday Bushfire Bereaved Recovery, and held in the Bereaved Recovery Program managed by government.

Issues regarding the:-
  > adequacy of the amount of funding
  > process transparency and accountability,
  > administration
  > level of consultation and opportunity for direct input/influence by bereaved people
  > longevity of emerging traumatic bereavement consequences

...were vigorously aired during BBAG meetings in an effort to modify practices which were frequently viewed by BBAG as alarming and lacking transparency, accountability and connection with people actually bereaved by the fires, particularly the bereaved families.

Unlike fire affected localities, where fire impacted people generally had co-ordinated, formal and often strong and influential representation with high levels of government and agency recognition and influence, the cohort of fire bereaved people have no formal central place for strong united voice and were indeed essentially, and comparatively, voiceless and significantly under-represented in much of the funding consideration and process.

Advocacy by BBAG and representations to government and VBAF to increase the level of attention and consideration of the medium to long term needs of people bereaved from Black Saturday was considerable.
FROM PILLAR TO POST ... LOST IN TRANSIT

The impact on the BBAG’s outcomes and existence, resulting from the amount of staffing, administrative and organization change, demands elaboration and appreciation.

The muddled changes had negative consequences.

In principle, the repeated, and often rambling, changes produced problems which included:-

- Over time, diminished government and agency understanding of BBAG purpose and the function and role of BBAG members
- contributed erosion to the effectiveness of, and within, the Group
- Impeded and reduced government use of BBAG’s knowledge and advisory capacity.
- In the absence of government closure of the group, left the group asking government on several occasions, via the administrating agency, to affirm if the BBAG’s services continued to be sought by government (the group continued to feel issues remained).
- Resulted in quite a number of BBAG members feeling frustrated, disrespected, disengaged and/or discouraged contributing to some members leaving the group.

At its most basic: as a consequence of too many changes and chaotic change,

- BBAG work got lost or wasn’t completed
- Momentum stalled
- Understanding of purpose was lost or distorted
- Acquired knowledge was lost
- Opportunity for more informed government and policy was lost
- Inherently important relationships and support structures became damaged
- The valuable resource of survivor knowledge was underutilized

There are significant lessons from this experience to apply to the formation and operation of similar future Advisory Groups.

Previous sections of this Legacy document have detailed the many staffing, administrative and organisational structural changes that BBAG have endured over four years.

Key changes, in summary, included

- Within months of the groups formation VBRRA BBAG staff changes were occurring causing knowledge, relationship and continuity issues
- Within months VBRRA planning was underway to transition BBAG administration from VBRRA to ACGB
- The three tier VBBRA bereaved program structure lasted a relatively short time and closure/transition of the other two tiers was minimally communicated and incomplete
- In terms of administrative and support function, ACGB staff continuity, knowledge and professionalism was critical to the function of the group. When all ACGB staff left BBAG (due to internal ACGB turmoil unrelated to BBAG), the negative impact on BBAG members and operation was profound
> With VBRRA’s closure BBAG was organisationally placed under Department of Health – Palliative Care – this Department appeared to have very little understanding of the role and purpose of BBAG and no relationship transition processes had occurred. BBAG members found placement in Palliative care particularly offensive.

> BBAG was chaired by no less than eight administrating agency chairs – continuity issues were significant.

> DoH engaged a consultant to consider BBAG’s work. This process and the outcome was generally received very negatively by BBAG members who primarily found it damaging to BBAG’s work, membership and the continuity of the group.

> The removal, by the DoH, of the full bereaved support program from ACGB followed by the allocation of a split program administered separately by ACGB and EACH left BBAG members to deal with further fragmentation, reduced support and increased loss of prior knowledge and increased lack of administering agency understanding of the BBAG and its work.

For balance and context, the BBAG acknowledge and respect that as a group of people they too were ingredients in the changing landscape. The above mentioned changes occurred in conjunction with change that inherently also occurs within any tasked group of people. Working relationships, tensions and support also existed between BBAG members, administrative and government staff – with the added overlay of very complex traumatic bereavement and disaster trauma. As a group of individuals, with inherently incredibly demanding circumstances, navigating normal group dynamics and personalities would have been challenging enough let alone having to navigate the minefield of added and imposed significant administrative and organisational instability.

In concluding this section: the salient bottom line is that members joined BBAG, by Government invitation, to provide government and associated disaster recovery agencies with input and advice and advocacy about matters affecting people bereaved by the catastrophic disaster event of the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires.

This purpose of BBAG was clear to the bereaved members and to VBRRA who established the group’s terms of reference. It was also clear to the ACGB staff who worked closely with the BBAG throughout 2010 and in early 2011.

However, with the many, and often chaotic, organisational and staff changes that occurred, over time

> it became painfully evident to BBAG members that government and agency staff who became involved with BBAG along the way had an increasingly less clear understanding of the role and function of BBAG and this made it much harder for BBAG to do its’ work.

> By late 2011 and into 2012/2013 the toll of chaotic change was significant. The diminished relationships and structures at every level compromised BBAG by impeding the volunteer bereaved members from providing government and associated disaster recovery agencies with input and advice and advocacy about matters affecting people bereaved by Black Saturday, despite the fact these bushfire bereaved people had been invited by Government to act, and continued to act, in this advisory capacity.
A TREE THAT GREW – REACHING OUT

ESTABLISHING CONTACT WITH THE BEREAVED COHORT

A pressing need became apparent in the first meetings – who, and where, are the family members of people who died in the fires. How could we possibly set up a Black Saturday contact database for sending out useful information, event invitations, the BBAG Staying in Touch newsletter? The one agency which was privy to a complete list, at least of senior next of kin, was the Coroners Court. However Privacy laws did not allow the Coroner to share this information. VBRRA, other agencies, local councils, Red Cross and the ACGB to name a few had incomplete data bases of bereaved family members, but similarly, the Privacy laws prevented BBAG access, as well as inter agency sharing of such information.

It was a fair guess that there were many people in the Bereaved Cohort who did not live in the fire zones; they may not have even lived in Victoria or Australia. We could not know where people were.

Initially, with the assistance of VBRRA, the disaster response agencies, local government and ACGB were asked to send BBAG information through their networks. Often this resulted in cross postings for some people, while others did not get any communications. However it was a start.

From the very first, BBAG wanted a gathering event for the Black Saturday core bereaved cohort. This event was to:

- be held as soon as possible
- in an emotionally ‘safe’ place
- be accessible in terms of transport and location
- nourishing food, preferably served at dining tables, so people did not have to be left ‘standing in a crowd’
- a panel of compassionate, informative and inspirational speakers
- a time be made available for questions, issues, stories addressed to the main speakers

Invitations to the event were sent out via VBRRA and other organisations to as many bereaved people as possible. The forum was held in the Marriot Hotel Melbourne on 16 January 16 2010. Eighty-eight people attended.

From this beginning BBAG requested VBBRA and later other administrative support agencies, to establish and grow a voluntary contact details data-base of bereaved individuals/families. The success of this first event showed the need for future events, requiring future communications.

Two more forums were organized during 2010. Both were held at Etihad Stadium. The first was specifically about memorials and very much focused on the process of communities coming together to find agreement about a lasting memorial in their area. Invitations were sent out via the bereaved specific database, VBRRA’s general bushfire data base, local councils, agencies, Community Recovery committees and the ACGB.
The second forum was again specifically for bereaved individuals and family members to come together; however this forum was also inclusive of a wider network of people who grieved for friends, neighbors, and work colleagues who had died. BBAG members welcomed people as they arrived. Again there were guest speakers and opportunity to ask questions, including anonymously. ACGB grief counsellors were also present.

And more people added their details to the bereaved data base.

**THE TREE GROWS – BRANCHES OF INCLUSIVENESS**

Necessarily, the first meetings (and many others) were particularly focused on the issues confronting the bereft families. It was this very specific group of people who were facing the most profound challenges of disaster bereavement and the post disaster experience of trying to negotiate grief, shock and trauma in totally changed personal life landscapes.

However, all BBAG members were conscious of the need to give recognition to, and acknowledgement of, a much wider group of people affected by the Black Saturday deaths. This group included the friends, neighbors and work colleagues of people who had died: as well there were those who lived in communities where there had been a large number of deaths including schools – teachers and class mates, and the many small and larger, formal and informal, community organisations. This acknowledgement also included the many CFA and SES volunteer fire fighters. Another group recognised were those who had been intimately involved in recovery processes and support roles.

From about mid 2010, all of these people were recognised as ‘touched by Black Saturday bereavement’ and were included in, and invited to subsequent activities covered by VBAF Bereavement funding administered by ACGB and EACH.

While this inclusiveness certainly extended much needed recovery opportunities to a much broader population – and rightly recognised this group of people, the unintentional flip side was that the core Bereaved cohort somehow became integrated into ‘touched by Black Saturday bereavement’ with the negative and damaging consequence that the cohort of people at the very centre of horrific, traumatic bereavement again became invisible as a discrete cohort.

A salient consequence has been a complete lack of discrete respite and gathering opportunity for those who are the Bereaved Cohort as described at the very beginning of this document. ‘Bereavement’ activities organized by agencies and funded by VBAF bereavement monies were designed and promoted to reach the broader group of people ‘touched by Black Saturday bereavement’.

These are difficult conversations. Of course BBAG wanted to both recognise, and to be inclusive of, anyone affected by the deaths. BBAG members themselves knew many friends, neighbors and colleagues who had died, were members of the CFA, or knew people in this broader group of grieving and shocked people; BBAG members empathized with their pain. But this did not mean that the core Bereaved cohort, as described, no longer had the particular issues that could only be specific to their experience.
MEDIA INITIATIVES

One of the most pressing early tasks identified by BBAG was to make contact with families bereaved by the bushfires. BBAG felt it was imperative to find ways of communicating recognition, comfort, information and sharing. A newsletter was initiated – *Staying in Touch*; this was sent snail mail, email, via agencies and local councils in the hope many bereaved families would receive either hard copy or an on-line copy. Later a web site was set up to enable people to network and share stories, feelings and inspirations, and importantly to find information. Flyers advertising social events, forums and anniversary events were also sent out and displayed at bushfire support centres, council bushfire hubs and agencies.

CRC STATUS – FOR A WEEKEND

Some BBAG members were also members of their local CRC (community recovery committee), and knew VBRRA was offering a residential weekend of workshops and information sessions designed to assist the CRCs in capacity building.

BBAG lobbied to be able to attend this weekend. Although BBAG was an advisory group, not an incorporated organization, and although we were not elected representatives of the bereaved cohort, BBAG successfully argued that

- the bereaved cohort could be regarded as a ‘community’, albeit not a geographical community
- and that although BBAG members were not elected representatives for the bereaved cohort, we were representative of the bereaved cohort
- as BBAG we would also benefit in receiving information from VBRRA, disaster psychologists, disaster response experts and other specialists to build our own capacity
- that a BBAG presence could serve as consciousness raising in the wider recovery landscape

Five BBAG members attended the weekend. While our fragility and vulnerability took a toll, we were able to bring the bereaved cohort into visibility and increase awareness. We were also able to gain insight into the magnitude of Black Saturday recovery challenges.
BBAG recognises itself as but one resource in a complex, inter-connected resource pool used by government and agencies in the Black Saturday Disaster Response.

BBAG acknowledge that it can be impossible to pinpoint the specific conversations that created or influenced critical changes; understanding that it is often the weight of a whole collection of conversations – as well as the diversity of voices – that creates and influences change.

It is, therefore, not straightforward or easy to capture the achievements of BBAG.

Accordingly, this section is written with the goal of reflecting the flavor of BBAG’s capacity to contribute, to interact broadly and to foster many forms of change. A sample of some of the specific outcomes achieved by BBAG, as viewed through a variety of lenses, by a variety of people and organizations, is provided. This section is in no way intended to be exhaustive; it simply strives to be indicative.

BBAG contributed positively in ways which are diverse and multifaceted, which reflect as themes and principles flowing through many things. The group also contributed in more direct, specific and identifiable ways.

**KEY AGENCY CONSULTATION AND INFLUENCE**

To reflect some of the key areas of influence one can start by looking at the range of people and organizations BBAG met in person and/or interacted with in their work. The people and organizations included:

- VBRRA
- Christine Nixon, Chair VBRRA
- ACGB
- Coroners Office CEO
- The Coroner
- The Premier of Victoria, the Hon. John Brumby
- State and Federal Bushfire Recovery Departments
- Federal Parliamentary Secretary for Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction (Mr Bill Shorten)
- Commonwealth Minister responsible for the Commonwealth Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction effort (Ms. Jenny Macklin)
- VBRRA Principal Policy Adviser
- Department of Emergency Management
- Victorian Department of Premier & Cabinet
- DoH
- DoH Palliative Care
- Victorian Fire Recovery Unit (FRU)
Feedback from some of these stakeholders showcases the depth of the BBAG’s role and influence. As summarized in one report,

…the advisory group was able to represent the needs of the bereaved to the Minister, funding bodies, government agencies such as the police, and coroner’s office, case management services, the media, and the community. It provided input to the arrangement of memorial anniversary services and support gatherings for the bereaved and advocated for changes in legislation. Regular bulletins go out to the wider communities providing information about grants, support systems, meetings and activities...

At the BBAG Feedback Forum in 2012 various government stakeholders and agency representatives shared reflections on the value of BBAG’s work and gave voice to the impact of BBAG on their bushfire disaster recovery work. Comments included:

DoH

…Stakeholders note that working with BBAG was rewarding and their advice had significant impact e.g. providing information for newsletters, informing government processes, advising on social gatherings, suggestions for funding allocation etc…

… Services are more aware of the different communication approaches required when working with bereaved people...

… There is now a precedent that stakeholders cannot ignore i.e. the Bereaved should be consulted and involved early...

… The approach to disaster recovery has changed, for example following the Victorian floods every person who was affected was contacted by a service provider...

… BBAG helped to demonstrate how broadly the fires had caused emotional damage... it was terrific to have the knowledge provided from BBAG to help the broader community and a lot of time was spent documenting changes needed and made...
... Agencies learnt about communication with the bereaved...

... Influence came in a range of ways including filtering through VBRRRA to influencing where funding was spent...

... one of the extraordinary changes for me from the group is about the cultural and thinking change. None of the previous documentation was about psychosocial impact...

The Coroners court

... It is important to hear personal stories ... one counsellor was employed now five ... a change to DVI is that a counsellor must be present...

Case Management Service

... There is greater understanding and appreciation now that people affected by the bushfires [emotionally and practically] are from a much broader geographical area and not just the immediately affected area...

... Significant cultural changes have resulted in a greater appreciation of the “human element” required in disaster recovery services e.g. documentation now refers to psychosocial impact of disasters ...

VBRRRA

... My work with BBAG was the most rewarding part of my work... the benefits I saw having BBAG involved include newsletters, government processes, advice on social gatherings...

... Since the fires and feedback the case management approach during the floods has definitely been changed...

... [Exposure to BBAG] it gave me and others the confidence to talk about the bereaved but more importantly to talk to the bereaved. Before this group it was an abstract concept...

Consulting Psychologist

... BBAG made the emotional connection with the stakeholders ... helped to start conversations... were able to answer questions... they contributed to disaster bereaved people gaining political power helping to set the precedent that the bereaved will never again be ignored, they raised the issue of the need to extend the boundary of who is affected...

Australian Red Cross

...BBAG was a direct link to the bereaved and helped as nothing had been done on this scale before. Exposure and contact was very important...

Fire Services Commission

...It’s about getting the human side right ...
Further, the DoH, who conducted the Feedback Forum, documented additional stakeholder feedback and highlighted that a number of stakeholders spoke about how spending time with the BBAG members, hearing their stories and receiving their advocacy influenced them...

... Put personal faces on the work that they were doing – it informed the way they saw the work

Reminded them that people’s lives were really changed as a result of the fires and that the changes would be long lasting and that this needed to be held in the forefront of thinking always.

Gave them access to understanding the complexity and multilayered nature of the impacts on individuals

Motivated them to address the deficits in response strategies, and extract and use all of the learning’s that had been so painfully gained by the BBAG members

Moved them at a personal level – they spoke of being privileged to have been able to receive people’s stories and experience the vulnerability of people very closely...

While recruiting, in September 2010, for additional BBAG members the VBRRA advertised a snapshot of BBAG’s achievements nine months after the group’s formation, stating that some of the achievements of the BBAG included:

> Provided advice on the contents and focus of the Staying in Touch newsletter
> Improvement of the visibility, recognition and acknowledgement of individuals and the bereaved community through:
>  - Contribution to the Remembrance planning day, participation and engagement of the bereaved community in the 2010 service at St Paul’s Cathedral
>  - Contributed to the planning of the bereaved community recovery forums held 16 January and 10 July 2010, October 2010
>  - Involvement in providing background information and on-record interviews with the media outlets (tv, radio and print media) prior to the release of the Bushfire Royal Commission report
>  - Provided individual face to face feedback to the Premier of Victoria on the recommendations of the Bushfire Royal Commission report

VBRRA invited a number of guests – often representatives from government departments – to BBAG meetings, because they believed the departments would be better informed by directly hearing the perspectives of bereaved people. Invitees were able to hear the conversation at BBAG meetings, and utilize the insights and data they obtained to identify issues and inform response planning and processes.

Federal Minister Jenny Macklin also reflected on BBAG’s work as shown in the following extract from the Ministerial Statements Document ‘Commemoration of the 2nd Anniversary of the Black Saturday Bushfires’
Ms Macklin [Jagajaga—Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs] [4.34 pm]—by leave—

'Mr Speaker, I rise to speak as the Commonwealth minister responsible for the Commonwealth Victorian bushfire reconstruction effort.

(Extract) …The human spirit of strength and unity continues to underpin the reconstruction effort. I know that this spirit is widespread across bushfire affected communities. At the end of last year, I met with the Victorian Bushfires Bereaved Community Advisory Group. They are an incredible group who support and advocate for the bereaved community. They provide advice to government and community leaders and, most importantly, provide a voice for those who lost loved ones on Black Saturday. They, like many others, are adamant that their journey of healing can help support people affected by the bushfire tragedy but also people affected by the latest disasters in Queensland…'

It is satisfying to note that the BBAG was able to respond to meeting invitations from State and Federal Government and were also able to request meetings with specific government departments and agencies at State and Federal levels.

Meeting the Queen – The members of BBAG were delighted to be acknowledged for their work when accorded the tribute and honor of being invited by His Excellency the Governor of Victoria to a reception at Government House on 26 October 2011 to meet Her Majesty The Queen and His Royal Highness The Duke of Edinburgh. Most BBAG members attended the reception and a number shared a personal conversation with The Queen.

BBAG’S OWN PERSPECTIVE ON ITS ACHIEVEMENTS AND KEY AREAS OF INFLUENCE

BBAG informed Government and disaster response agencies through the process of input and advice from the first-hand perspective of a diverse group of Black Saturday bereaved individuals.

The group provided the valuable resource of primary and direct knowledge informing Government, agencies, and the wider community regarding the broader experiences and needs of bushfire bereaved people.

A primary goal was influencing necessary changes in the systems and approaches being adopted by those providing a response to the Black Saturday disaster.

BBAG input, advice and advocacy successfully explored core matters of principle involving the importance and need for Black Saturday bereaved people to experience

> Appropriate, adequate and timely acknowledgement
> Recognition as part of the disaster affected cohort
> Respect
> Definition accuracy
> Inclusive language and practices
> Minimization and mitigation of secondary trauma
Communication improvement
Equitable access to recovery assistance
Adequate knowledge of disaster traumatic bereavement
Recovery systems able to manage complex trauma arising from disaster situations

In telling their stories and informing Government processes, the BBAG successfully contributed to a range of conversations, specific issues, and activities, including:

- Bereavement advocacy and advice to ensure
  - Proper acknowledgement of disaster bereavement
  - That definitions of bereavement are improved to ensure they are adequate, appropriate and inclusive
  - The inclusion of “disaster bereavement” in definitions of disaster loss.
  - A greater understanding, appreciation and recognition that bushfire bereaved people were from many localities, including from non-flame affected areas
  - Recognition that the complex traumatic bereavement experience arising from a disaster has unique and particular characteristics differentiating it other forms of bereavement and requiring different types of response and assistance.

- Advocacy for improved processes for communicating with and informing the community and the people who are disaster bereaved regarding Coronial processes.

- Feeding back issues and problems experienced with the coronial process and Coroner’s Court of Victoria, including:
  - Privacy and communications issues.
  - Adequacy and inadequacy of emotional and psychological support.
  - Next of kin issues

- Contributing to the understanding of issues regarding the Disaster Victim Identification process and form.

- Providing feedback to agencies regarding the need for Bushfire Bereavement support groups.

- Providing input to Government on Fire Awareness campaigns, across multiple years.

- Contributing to the changed ethos from Property to People First Fire Safety Strategy and Campaign.

- Encouraged urgent review of the disaster referral card system “Blue Card” to ensure all fire affected people were included in this disaster response identification system.

- Social/forum events construct and participation

- Providing input to anniversary events, including input into the formation of the 1st Year Anniversary Event, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th year events.
> Contributed to Government cultural change by expecting response systems to look beyond material and locational loss and recognise all types of loss and disaster impact including psycho-social impact

> Advocacy for bereaved people to have easier and more equitable access to disaster support and recovery grants and offerings; also for improved transparency of grants.

> Advocacy for adequate funding of recovery initiatives and programs for bushfire bereaved people with a 5 year plus horizon.

> Advising on key future learning’s for Case Management services

> Encouraged standardization of forms and data gathering into one format to improve communication, minimize secondary trauma and prevent people bushfire bereaved people from having to tell their story and give information time and time again.

> Advising at the State and Federal Government levels for deeper understanding of the longevity of the disaster trauma journey, and the need for enduring levels of psych-social support beyond 1 and 2 years.

> Contributing to discussions on the continuing availability of Access To Allied Psychological Services (ATAPS). Including identifying definitional problems and geographic discrimination and exclusion.

> Advocacy for extension of the Psychological Recovery and Wellness Vouchers (2 year extension granted)

> Supporting and informing invitees to BBAG meetings (including Governmental and Agency representatives).

> Creation of, and contributing to, the Staying in Touch Newsletter (in collaboration with VBRRRA, ACGB, EACH) originating from conversations about communication and contact data base deficits and inadequate systems to contact and inform bushfire bereaved people.

> Bushfires Royal Commission process feedback

> The group contributed input to Arts Victoria about the creation of enduring memorials.

> A Bushfire Bereaved Reference Group was created seeking advice from people about memorials, anniversary projects, and memorial gestures

> Conversations were undertaken with other bodies (eg., Fire Recovery Unit) about the creation of a State memorial gesture. This work is an enduring matter of BBAG advocacy.

> Fire Simulator Bus discussion

> Input into the Nillimbuk Acknowledgement of Bushfire Bereaved and Bushfire Impacted Residents

> Advocacy regarding issues with telecommunications problems.

> Advocacy about issues of fallen trees on private properties

> BBAG members contributed content to the Surviving Traumatic Grief book
LEARNINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Early in this document is the statement that this Legacy document is not just an historical record, but a living document from which insight can be gained from the specific knowing that Black Saturday bereaved people hold and have shared. It is a fact that there can be no-one else who has the particular knowledge or experience: only those who were bereaved on Black Saturday.

These post-bushfire accounts and experiences of disaster response are not just what happened ‘then’; they are stories of the impact of a delayed post-fire disaster response to bereaved people. Since disaster recovery is a lengthy process of years, these responses still impact on lives, and the stories continue to unfold.

From the collective stories and insights of BBAG members is a collaborating body of evidence of how Black Saturday disaster response, for those who were bereaved, failed to adequately acknowledge, support and/or address the needs of traumatically bereaved people in an equitable and timely manner.

There is also enough collaborative story which informs others what it is like to be bereaved in disaster; what it is like to feel alone, unsupported, bewildered, distressed, rebuffed, ignored, hungry, cold, and overwhelmed. Unfortunately many of these experiences have been common to many Black Saturday bereaved people.

BBAG was able to address and inform government about some of these issues and suggest change. Other issues at this point are left as unfinished business, or will only be seen in the evolving journey of disaster bereavement and post-disaster experience.

Some issues are immediately salient; obvious, and we wonder why they were not addressed or rectified so much sooner. Others have become apparent only in retrospect, with the advantage of hindsight, and the advantage of first person story.

In documenting the Learnings and Recommendations, BBAG sincerely acknowledges the awful and mammoth task of implementing the disaster response to the Black Saturday bushfires: for obvious reasons there was no previous learning model or roadmap for this scale of disaster.

Hindsight and experience, when examined, can provide powerful learning and insights. BBAG hopes these Learnings and Recommendations will be viewed in the spirit in which they are offered; a legacy of learning for better outcomes for people bereaved in disaster.

We hope this Legacy document engages individuals, government departments, agencies, policy makers and all manner of other groups. We hope the story and experiences of BBAG continues to inform, and continues to stimulate changes in policy, procedure and practice for positive responses to people bereaved in disaster.
1. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND RECOGNITION OF A BEREAVED COHORT

Without recognition there can be no action. Because Black Saturday bereaved people were not recognised as a specific cohort within the larger fire affected population, discrete targeted support systems were not in place, nor implemented in the critical first weeks and months

> Little or no immediate or early formal recognition of the cohort
> Disaster bereavement supports were not implemented for at best some months, at worst even longer – in direct contrast to the immediate material, financial and social support offered to the non-bereaved group
> Disaster relief agencies, local councils, professional and other volunteers were generally not aware, or trained, even in basic ways, of disaster bereavement – for example: privacy, a chair, comfort and time in relief centres, or outreach contact with those bereaved, but living outside the disaster areas
> There was little or no support for the Black Saturday bereaved families who faced the dreadful tasks of attending to burnt properties, and dealing with estates and financial matters when all records were destroyed

RECOMMENDATIONS

> Immediate recognition of a bereaved cohort be factored in all disaster response management as policy and practice
> Disaster bereavement support services to be implemented as soon as, and parallel with, material support services;
> Support services and recognition to be inclusive of the disaster bereaved people living outside fire affected areas;
> Support and assistance be offered to disaster bereaved people when they have to deal with burnt or otherwise destroyed properties, including for some, their own home.
2. CORONIAL AND FORENSIC PROCESSES

The experiences of Black Saturday bereaved people form a collaborating evidence of additional distress caused by some of the coronial processes. In part this was because of the unprecedented scale of disaster and deaths. However there are some processes and practices which BBAG consider need examination and change.

- Bereaved individuals and families were not kept informed regarding the retrieval of their family members body, yet in some cases the media was clearly present (and reporting)
- Public statements to the media were not consistent with what was told to bereaved individuals and families privately
- Public announcements were made before bereaved individuals were informed (eg the Coroner had decided that the first four bodies would be released back to the families was announced in news broadcasts)
- DVI procedures must be completed with sensitivity to the particular death when dealing with bereaved individuals; (in a number of deaths, some ID questions on the international ID form were asked of young adult children or when the bodies were badly burnt or deteriorated)
- Trained trauma bereaved counsellors were not always present during DVI interviews
- DNA swabs were taken and families informed that this method of ID was the only form of ID which would be used to identify the Black Saturday dead. Families later found out that the swabs were discarded and not tested.
- Advice (from family) about personal effects such as clothing was not sought, nor was an offer made to return items. For many people, these effects would have been the only material, tangible reminders left of the family member
- In the weeks, months and years there were a number of communication issues where phone calls were made to bereaved people at night including Friday night without consideration for the individual narrative.
- Confidentiality laws sometimes compounded difficulties particularly where there were multiple deaths in a blended family
- Similarly, these laws placed a burden on ‘senior next of kin’ to become the informant to other family members
RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recognised the Coroner must follow laws and enshrined protocols, however BBAG urges the Government and the Coroner to consider BBAG recommendations. In regards to the first four points, it would be helpful if a disaster bereavement counsellor was included in the discussions.

> Bereaved people are entitled to information regarding the retrieval of their family member/s remains – especially when family members have reported the death and whereabouts of the deceased person
> Bereaved people should be entitled to the truth about the death of their loved one [ie location, state of body etc] as they feel when and if they would like to know more details
> Bereaved people should be entitled to self determine what information they want [ie state of body, photos, etc]
> Disaster bereaved people should be entitled to have all personal effects, including clothing, returned to them if they so request. These items should not be automatically discarded in disaster bereavement without discussion
> Sensitivity in communications – ‘reading the narrative’ of each family to minimize shock and distress
> Forensic and DVI interviews must be conducted appropriately, truthfully and sensitively to the circumstances – eg DNA samples taken, but not tested, when asking intimate questions
> Public and media announcements must be consistent with what bereaved families are being told
> The difficult issues of next of kin and confidentiality need to be examined for solutions, particularly when there are blended and/or extended families involved
3. CASE MANAGEMENT

For people traumatically bereaved in a disaster (often with multiple, complex and catastrophic losses), effective case management would have alleviated a great deal of additional trauma, stress and distress. Effective case management could have greatly assisted these people to navigate the mountains they now faced in a landscape of bewilderment and grief.

- Case management was needed for a lengthy period; short term case management contracts were at best disruptive, and at worst re-traumatising and/or compounding the feelings of loss, and compromised the quality of assistance including trust
- Information was inconsistent, and inaccurate between case managers; as well, it was sometimes inconsistent with public announcements
- Some bereaved people did not know they could have a case manager
- Many case managers did not have experience, or understanding of disaster bereavement, particularly issues of grief and the psycho-social effects of catastrophic trauma

RECOMMENDATIONS

- One dedicated disaster bereavement response case manager for a minimum of twelve month case management contract per family
- A system be developed for all case managers to be cognizant of consistent and accurate information relevant to the bereaved cohort
- Case managers assigned to disaster bereaved families must be experienced and have training and understanding of traumatic grief in a disaster context.
- They must have relevant psycho-social understandings of the impact of bereavement in disaster recovery contexts.
- That case management is viewed, and incorporated as a valuable resource to inform authorities of observed and articulated needs and issues confronting disaster bereaved families
4. FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE – GRANTS, GIFTS, VOUCHERS AND RESPITE OPPORTUNITIES FOLLOWING DISASTER BEREAVEMENT

The inconsistent information regarding financial and other recovery grants, gifts and vouchers had consequences such as ’hit and miss’ application and unjust outcomes, frustration, anger, and feelings of being overwhelmed by the sheer difficulty of making application. The perceived, and actual disparity of financial grants/gifts to the bereaved cohort for their loss, particularly a life compared to material loss caused great offense.

This was not about money per se; it was about recognition of the most fundamental loss – the death of an immediate family member. Again it should be noted that disaster bereaved people are vulnerable, and therefore essentially disadvantaged when advocating for equity in the distributions of monetary and other forms of in-kind assistance.

- Information about grants, gifts and voucher systems was inconsistent across the Black Saturday bereaved cohort
- There was an salient (and offensive) disparity between the value of a life, and the value of a home in the grant system
- The requirement to constantly repeat personal details, show ’hardship’, and get a Statutory Declaration for every grant and voucher application form was intrusive, degrading, and onerous
- The bereaved cohort has never been offered ’get-away’ respite and recovery opportunities that are only for bereaved people, in recognition of their unique and specific situation. ‘Bereaved only’ events were repeatedly requested by BBAG, and would have provided critical safe space; blended events do not provide this safe space.
- VBAF seek any advice or input from BBAG (in direct contrast to CRC’s)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- When there are deaths caused by a disaster, Bereaved individuals and families should be accorded recognition as a specific disaster affected cohort requiring specific and equitable disaster responses.
- Disparity in opportunities, grants and other assistance must be addressed for a fairer and just outcome for disaster bereaved people
- Grant and voucher application systems must be streamlined after the first contact
  - transparent and equitable; and eligibility and availability properly communicated
  - once a bereaved person’s details are registered, there should be no further requirements for ’proving hardship’, or repetition of personal details and provision of statutory declarations.
- When grants/ gifts and other offerings are being distributed from a publicly donated and/or government disaster relief funds, the bereaved cohort should also, and must, be included in consultations as to the needs of disaster bereaved people.
5. APPOINTMENT, GOVERNANCE, ADMIN SUPPORT AND CLOSURE OF A STATE GOVERNMENT ADVISORY GROUP SUCH AS BBAG

The appointment of a Black Saturday Bereaved Advisory group for the specific purpose of informing Government about Black Saturday disaster bereavement has enabled a valuable informing and dialogue with disaster response management departments and agencies.

With the benefit of hindsight and evaluation, there are some issues that should be addressed in the case of any future Advisory Group where vulnerable people make up the Advisory Group membership

- The many changes in admin support personnel, Departments and agencies affected the role, potential and achievements of BBAG
  - numerous chair persons, some without an understanding of BBAG
  - inconsistent minute taking methodology
  - in transfers between admin agencies, minutes and other documents were lost resulting in ‘hit and miss’ follow up work on some issues
  - time was lost and energy dissipated in the transfer processes
  - the multiple changes in admin support staff and agencies created confusion for members, and motivation diminished in ‘settling’ periods
  - the changes sometimes represented an experience of more loss for people already vulnerable to loss
- Multiple venues, some of which have not been conducive to productive meetings
- There was no established practice for debriefing opportunities for members
- There was no consideration of the personal financial costs to BBAG eg travel expenses
- There has been no ‘closure’ of BBAG; rather it has been left to just dwindle away

RECOMMENDATIONS

- These matters be considered when/if similar Advisory groups are established in the future
- All documents, minutes and records must be gathered, maintained and securely, and accessibly archived;
- Minimum changes in admin support agencies and staff turnovers
- A formal closure of an Advisory Group such as BBAG be implemented as a matter of courtesy as well as a ‘finish’.
The word *resilience* comes from science – physics in fact, and it is applied particularly in the various fields of engineering, where resilience measures are critical. Resilience literally means the ability to bounce back; in engineering, this means the degree of stress metals, timbers and other materials can have before fatigue, fraying and fracture are too great for the ‘bounce back’ to the original state. One can imagine simplistically for instance, that a tall building has a factor of *resilience* calculated in order for the building to survive high winds or earthquakes.

So much for the precise meaning of *resilience* because the term is now appropriated across many disciplines including economics, psychology, nationhood, socio-political spheres, environmental, personal and community life, and now in natural disaster recovery. In these applications of the word *resilience*, I suspect there is an unexamined understanding that attributes such as *strength* and *rectitude* are somehow part of *resilience*.

It would be fair to say that the term ‘resilience’ is frequently aligned with the term ‘recovery’. For Black Saturday survivors, it seems to be a word used *ad nauseum*, without reflection of its true meaning, or of the effect of the implied expectation (to be *resilient*) on an individual. Thus Black Saturday survivors are constantly under a sometimes subtle, and sometimes quite overt pressure to be ‘bouncing back’ to what we once were; to what once was.

Tagged with *resilience* is the word *recovery*: a word which we Bushfire people are all so familiar. This also implies a returning to what was psychically and materially. Hence we have community ‘Bushfire Recovery Associations’ and ‘Bushfire Recovery Centres’. A new garden is seen as a *recovery* – ‘she’s recovered her garden’. Money in the bank is *recovery* – ‘they have recovered financially’; returning to work is both *resilience and recovery* and a positive mood is *resilience* and *recovery*. Building a new house is described as *resilience* in action, and living in the new house is *recovery*.

Like *resilience*, the word *recovery* also has precise definitions, and implied expectations which we should not lose sight of – the restoration of something that was lost and the return to a former state or condition. But for we Bushfire affected people, what we have lost cannot be restored or returned. We have lost family members, friends and neighbors; our homes and everything in and around them are ash and rubble.

We have lost our innocence. We have lost our former sense of self, our certainty of future, our sense of heritage and roots. We have lost our jobs and incomes, our routines and life styles. Nothing is the same as before.
A loss that is rarely recognised, and can only be felt by the Black Saturday bereaved – those people who lost family members in the fires, is the lack of opportunity to see our loved ones, after death and have opportunity to say goodbye in profoundly personal ways. For some of us, this is an enormous grief, and, in its own way, continues as unfinished business. The words Recovery and Resilience seem hardly appropriate to these circumstances.

The sheer scale of trauma and loss means that some of our former abilities and interests, our attachments, health and fitness, our mental and spiritual and psychological states are so changed recovery is quite likely an inapt, inaccurate word because like resilience, it is loaded with particular expectations.

The implicit expectations of resilience and recovery may well be damaging in several ways; denial of how an individual may be experiencing their post fire life; the pressure of outsider perceptions interfering with the possibility of other processes in personal lives, and in community endeavours to assist people affected by Black Saturday. These words are tossed around far too casually and generically.

There is another word, rarely used, but which may be helpful in the context of this discussion. It is a closely related word, and again it comes from physics. It is the word transilience, meaning the ability, or necessity, to leap over or find a path around the trauma and to begin again, or carry on, in a changed state. In science, this phenomena has been noted and used to advantage.

In the context of Black Saturday Bushfire survivors, I wonder if the notion of transilience may not only be more accurate, but less harmful in the sense this concept offers new understandings of the post-bushfire, post trauma life journey.

We cannot ‘bounce back to what was’ and we cannot ‘recover what no longer is’. Instead, perhaps in a transient way, we learn to live around the pain and emptiness of our loss, and the scars of our trauma, and in doing so, we begin again or carry on in a new state. Perhaps the notion of transilience would allow each person permission to do things in their own way and their own time.

I think it is useful to go back to the essence of words, because when words become jargon, euphemism or short cut words, they become generic and meaningless except in the broadest sense. At worst, and most frequently, these words become embedded with unexamined assumptions, loaded meanings and judgements and impositions.

In reference to Black Saturday, or any other personal or community catastrophe, this is not to say these words do not have a place in the common discourse of support agencies – or indeed in our own personal belief systems. It just means let us understand what we are saying, what we are meaning; let us understand what judgements and assumptions are being made. Let us understand how words can be an imposition on the very people we wish to support.

Thanks to my son David (a bio-mathematician) who alerted me to the word transilience in one of our many conversations.

Paper given at the Nillumbik Shire Bushfire Alliance meeting held on the slab of my destroyed home 24th November 2011, and included in this document at the request of BBAG members.

Copyright November 2011 – may be used with permission
Elizabeth Savage Kooroonya
There have been many valued, and valuable, associations throughout the life of BBAG’s four years of work.

Whilst too many to individually acknowledge, the following tributes are made:

To the Bereaved Members: Many hearts are with you and your circumstances are sincerely acknowledged. Deepest sympathy and condolences are extended for the tragic and shocking losses suffered. There seems no way to adequately express the gratitude felt for the selfless contribution of BBAG members over a period of many years. Please know that your efforts are valued and deeply appreciated and that you have made a difference in profound ways.

To the dedicated and caring people from the VBRRA, ACGB, the Fire Services Commissioner, the Fire Recovery Unit, the various and many government departments at State and Federal levels and to the people from other agencies, we thank you sincerely and with much gratitude for the opportunity and support to work in partnership for the greater good of all.

To the other people whom BBAG have engaged with, we also thank you and acknowledge your contribution.

Finally, a special mention and thank-you to the EACH staff members for their contribution to and support of this legacy document, including the provision of facilities resources and technical assistance. This partnership was invaluable to the creation and production of this legacy work.
BBAG offered real opportunity to the members for personal and collective empowerment in an otherwise disempowering, traumatic and catastrophic bereavement experience.

Although not representatives for the bereaved cohort, as members of that inner bereaved cohort, our diverse experiences, and our experiential voice, have given a collaborative body of evidence from which valuable observations and learnings were, and can still be made.

These Learnings, have been, and still are, the BBAG functioning of advising Government, and other vested disaster recovery and management agencies, of what it is to be disaster bereaved, and how this trauma can be exacerbated when there are inappropriate and/or untimely responses from disaster management and recovery organisations.

BBAG has identified five key areas of learnings, which have recommendations for the future. But even before these key learnings, is the primary task of engaging with what it was like to be Black Saturday bereaved.

The second thread in this document is the documentation of the BBAG experience, including the difficulties and dilemmas, the activities and achievements, from which learnings can also be made. These range from the benefits of the advice and insight such a group can make, to the management and functioning difficulties encountered by such a group.

Let the voices of learning
the seeds for change
take flight, grow strong, speak loudly

Let them leave
an indelible imprint of positive change
make significant difference
to all people dealing with disaster
and disaster bereavement
now and in the future
It is clear from the minutes of the very first meeting that many Black Saturday bereaved people felt abandoned, unacknowledged and even betrayed by the Black Saturday recovery response; but critically, they were also able to clearly identify their needs and issues as Black Saturday bereaved people.

Although BBAG members were neither appointed, or elected by the bereaved cohort, and therefore were not representatives for the Black Saturday bereaved cohort, the members were representative of the Black Saturday bereaved, and as such were able to present a collaborating range of common issues, and thus begin to advocate for those issues to be addressed.

BBAG members had no direct responsibility to action any matters: the role of BBAG was to advise and inform Government. It was the role of the agencies appointed to BBAG to action the information provided, and matters identified, by BBAG as needing attention. The agencies were the sole conduit of all BBAG input into the disaster recovery space including to the bereaved cohort, Government departments, and disaster management agencies.

BBAG was Government appointed and funding was made available for administrative, practical and departmental support for the work of the bereaved members. It can be seen from the Minutes there were significant and frequent changes made to agencies and personnel providing admin support. Consequently there were matters and concerns raised by members which have never been addressed in spite of being tabled.

Notwithstanding the above limitations, these minutes serve as a valuable record of BBAG’s work, functioning and determination to inform disaster response management when there are deaths.

The minutes inform this Legacy document in a confirming, different and complementary way when juxtaposed with the previous experiential section as to the Legacy of the BBAG.
## MINUTES OF BBAG MEETINGS FROM DEC 2009

### 16 DECEMBER 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chair</th>
<th>Joyce Goh, VBRRRA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendees</td>
<td>Bereaved 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VBRRRA 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ACGB 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guests</td>
<td>D.H.S. 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venue</td>
<td>Gateway Motel Eltham</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Formation meeting

- Individual and Organization introductions.
- The bereaved expressed their experience of bushfire bereavement and the service system identifying:
  - Isolation
  - Insufficient information
  - Lack of options
  - Readiness and timing issues to access services
  - Lack of acknowledgement
  - Focus on property loss
  - Monetary acknowledgement c/f car accidents and work care
  - Practical acknowledgement
  - Material grants far greater than loss of life grants
  - Bereaved not acknowledged as a specific cohort
  - Geographical discrimination
  - No bereaved data base for communication
  - The hit and miss of case management for practical help
  - Concerns about long term mental health issues that will emerge over time
  - Unidentified bereaved people falling through the system

The need and desire for a formal bereaved gathering was tabled: VBRRRA to organize a Bereaved Community Forum in January 2010 for networking, meeting other bereaved, information exchange.

Discussed ACGB Focus Group for Young Bereaved (children and younger teens)
**27 JANUARY 2010**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chair</th>
<th>Joyce Goh, VBRRA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendees</td>
<td>Bereaved 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VBRRA 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ACGB 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DHS 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venue</td>
<td>Eltham Hotel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

VBRRA Chair welcome, thanked members and requested 12 month commitment by the bereaved members. Purpose and role of Advisory group ratified. Terms of Reference accepted.

First anniversary remembrance event 7.2.2010 arrangements discussed. Advice sought by VBRRA from the bereaved members re format/content.

Feedback from VBRAA to BBAG re Forum held 16 January.

- 88 bereaved attendees,
- guest speakers well received,
- frustration re Privacy Act highlighted by many
- inconsistent quality and lack of case managers raised
- another forum with inspiring speakers, and including video link for people unable to attend requested by BBAG
- opportunities for social and youth events requested by BBAG

BBAG requested a communication strategy, including newsletter be developed by VBRRA.

BBAG raised issue of the critical importance and urgent need for more inclusive language to ensure all bushfire bereaved are included in recovery and funding initiatives and considerations.

Government’s ability to locate and contact bereaved people identified by BBAG as a concern of key priority for VBRRA’s attention.

Discussion commenced around permanent memorial planning

- local
- State
- Strategies to engage bereaved who live outside the geographically bushfire affected communities.

The need for a Bereaved contact data base was identified. VBRRA agreed to explore achieving this.

Report by ACGB on Focus Group for young bereaved

BBAG requested enhanced education for the general public and media on disaster trauma recovery matters.

At BBAG request, VBRRA agreed to research “Learnings from Ash Wednesday” regarding the long term effects on mental health and wellbeing.
25 FEBRUARY 2010

Chair       Joyce Goh, VBRRA
Attendees   Bereaved 5
            VBRA 3
            ACGB 2
Venue       Eltham Hotel

Government provided response re bushfire bereaved data base issues – VBRRA has contacted Vic. Police and are awaiting reply.

VBRA distributed Ash Wednesday website information, DHS publication “After the Bushfires: Victoria’s Psychosocial Recovery Framework”

VBRA advised BBAG of Bereaved Community Recovery/Memorials Reference Group and sought BBAG members, 4 nominations accepted

Report by VBRA on the 1st anniversary commemoration service

Bereaved Newsletter draft discussed.
  > BBAG required it to be a “newsletter for the bereaved by the bereaved”
  > Content to be 60% articles by the bereaved, 40% information for the bereaved.
  > To be issued 6 weekly
  > Agreed to distribute in hard copy recognizing practical access difficulties with computers and technology and cognitive trauma deficits emerging as “bushfire brain”
  > Royal Commission and Coroners office invited to contribute to newsletter

Memorials update and discussion. VBRA reported on local memorials. Significant discussion about the importance of a permanent State Memorial/Enduring Acknowledgement and Tribute

Focus and support groups discussed

Next Forum discussed. VBRA sought ideas from BBAG—suggestions provided.

Significant discussion and input from bereaved members informing VBRRA about people suffering from survivor guilt.

VBRA/ACGB made BBAG members aware of the Headspace initiative to provide online support for Black Saturday affected youth. BBAG members provided input about the experience, isolation and communication barriers of their own, and other, bushfire bereaved children, teens and young adults.

BBAG members highlighted deficits in communication processes and alerting VBRA to communication needs for accurate, timely, and equitably distributed information. Need for communication improvements by all disaster involved agencies requested again by BBAG. VBRA to take action.

Salient inadequacy of the allocation of 6 counseling vouchers raised by BBAG with advocacy for change to this policy.

VBRA offered Leadership training to BBAG members (highly sought after by BBAG members however despite numerous offers and intent by VBRA the training never eventuated)
31 MARCH 2010

meeting cancelled

21 APRIL 2010

Chair       Joyce Goh, VBRRA
Attendees   Bereaved 6
            VBRRA 4
            ACGB 1
Venue       Glen Katherine Primary School

DVD of 1st Anniversary event discussed

Update on bereaved newsletter. 3rd edition in progress. VBRRA's ongoing efforts to locate bereaved people discussed.

Planning for the next bereaved forum being organized by VBRRA for 10 July 2010 undertaken. Purpose, date, progress and suggestions discussed.

A picnic in July social event suggested.

Memorials Forum to be held at Etihad stadium on 21 May 2010. VBRRA organizing. VBRRA asked BBAG members to function in front of house and meet and greet roles. Members agreed to do so.

Focus groups for young bereaved discussed by ACGB, including teenage mentor concept.

Leadership training discussed again. VBRRA advised that a needs assessment survey will go to BBAG members soon.

BBAG received a request from MP Bill Shorten to attend a BBAG meeting. BBAG welcomed this request. Invitation extended to attend meeting.

Ongoing request by BBAG members that metal yellow ribbon pins be made available to all bereaved as an act of acknowledgement in place of the more temporary fabric pins.

BBAG requested coronial matters to be on next meeting agenda

BBAG advised [first notification] by VBRRA that VBBRA's Snr. Project Officer Bereaved Community Recovery and Memorials was attending meeting for last time and leaving her position. A replacement will be appointed.
Chair: Joyce Goh, VBRRRA
Attendees: Bereaved 5, VBRRRA 2, ACGB 1
Venue: Glen Katherine Primary School

VBRRRA agreed to bereaved members request to make metal lapel pins available to bushfire bereaved people at the July Bereaved Forum. Discussion ensued re the importance of acknowledgement and permanence embedded in the gesture of providing a more permanent pin of remembrance.

ACGB update on grief groups.

Discussed coronial communication deficiencies and needs of surviving family members for accurate, effective and timely communication. Also discussed coronial related next of kin issues and the associated communication roadblocks arising in particularly complex family situations in conjunction with the additional challenges arising from the Black Saturday context of disaster caused complex traumatic bereavement and other losses and associated complex traumas. Letter from BBAG to be sent to Coroner’s Court CEO requesting improving access to information.

Men’s getaways discussed. BBAG alerted VBRRRA that the newsletter link is not working. BBAG highlighted issues and concerns that these getaways were not for bereaved people only and that there was a specific need for there to be getaways and initiatives provided and targeted specifically for bushfire bereaved people recognizing the unique circumstances and recovery requirements of this cohort of fire impacted people.

Reiteration by members to VBRRRA that the BBAG advocates about bushfire bereavement issues, provides experiential input and does not represent or advocate on behalf of other people.

Transition of BBAG from VBRAA to ACGB tabled. Noted VBAF supports the extension of the bereavement program and the existence and continuance of BBAG in this structural change. Governance structure discussed as well as role of BBAG members and leadership skills required.

Governance and expansion of the BBAG discussed. Rationalization of VBRRRA’s three tier bereaved program discussed with the view to removing a tier.

Discussion and planning for July 10 Forum, Etihad Stadium, re enduring memorial tributes. Advice sought by VBRRRA from BBAG members regarding guest speakers and publicity. Agreed that there would be speakers from the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, The Coroners Office, Professional specialist in disaster and trauma – Rob Gordon and an expert who was a coordinator and facilitator from the Canberra bushfire memorial community project process.

Discussion about support needs and plans in preparation for the upcoming release of the Royal Commission final report.
## 23 June 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chair</td>
<td>Not recorded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendees</td>
<td>Bereaved 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VBRR 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ACGB 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venue</td>
<td>Glen Katherine Primary School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Training needs analysis offered by VBRR to BBAG members**  
  - Member’s reiterated acceptance of VBRR’s previously offered training. Training is sought by BBAG members’ a.s.a.p. in the areas of advocacy, public speaking, media, networking and mediation.

- **Review of draft letter to Coroner’s office. Amendments suggested.**

- **Terms of reference wording to be updated per prior meeting discussion with removal of inference of “Advocacy on behalf of others”**

- **VBRR advised choosing BBAG representatives on the Bereaved Project Committee remains undetermined.**

- **BBAG requested the Advisory group have equal status and standing as CRC’s. In part this was requested to ensure the (BBAG) Advisory Group was included in community recovery group forums, workshops, training and gatherings.**

- **Further planning discussions re July 10 Forum, particularly about event promotion and publicity.**

- **Ongoing discussion re the release of Royal Commission report, about how to support the bereaved with sensitivity and compassion to minimize secondary preventable trauma and how to promote and educate about the ongoing and longer term recovery and trauma management needs of the bushfire bereaved.**

- **BBAG travelling to other fire involved towns was discussed with a view to enhancing function and reach of the work of the group and to source broader advice and input to better inform the reconstruction and recovery work of government.**

- **Significant discussion about VBAF funding and grants occurred, including advice that many bereaved are not aware of entitlements, that access to information and grants was not equitably available and that the process is in reality quite ‘hit and miss’ for bushfire traumatically bereaved people.**
  - VBRR to pursue with VBAF

- **Input that information provided by case managers is at times confusing and conflicting or that there was inconsistent advice and allocation of case management support to people.**
  - Attention to this matter by VBRR and VBAF sought by BBAG.
28 JULY 2010

Chair    Joyce Goh, VBRRRA
Attendees Bereaved 8
          VBRRRA 2
          ACGB 2
Venue    Glen Katherine Primary School

Mr Bill Shorten’s Office advised he is keen to meet the BBAG.
Appointment of BBAG representative members to sit on VBRRRA Bereaved and Memorials Project Committee announced by VBRRRA.
Feedback about Bushfire Bereaved Gathering For Recovery Forum and discussion about planned DVD.
Explored ways to achieve expansion of Advisory Group membership. Changes to group name discussed including incorporation of CRC terminology.
VBRRRA advise of change in Advisory Group chair from Joyce Goh [VBRRRA] to Annie Norish [ACGB].
Discussion about Advisory Group status – need for CRC status queried and future direction of BBAG debated.
VBRRRA advised the Advisory Group has 3 year VBAF funding to build group sustainability.
Feedback report from VBRRRA re the Community Leadership Forum.
The Advisory Group requested from VBRRRA a Planning/Strategic Day to assess training needs and group direction.
VBRRRA advised BBAG about Women’s Leadership Grant’s Royal Commission Report Release discussed. VBRRRA to organize a media briefing session for media to meet BBAG members for an on the record and off the record conversation to be held on July 30.
VBRRRA invited BBAG members to attend VBRRRA for release of Royal Commission Final report, Sat July 30th.
Discussed Sue Evans Fund Traumatic Grief and Multiple Death booklet.
Slight adjustments were made to the BBAG letter to be sent to the Coroner’s Court. VBRRRA to make required amendments.
25 AUGUST 2010

Chair   Annie Norrish (ACGB)
Attendees   Bereaved 5
            VBRRA 1
            ACGB 3
Venue    Glen Katherine Primary School

Sue Evans Fund Booklet on Traumatic Grief discussed. The Fund’s book working party seeks content input from BBAG members.

Ongoing discussion about Coronial process and informal response from Coroner’s office staff provided by ACGB chair. BBAG members not satisfied with response and situation and requested the Coroner to attend a BBAG meeting.

Financial and emotional hardship of bushfire bereaved was tabled and detailed. VBAF support funding difficulties and deficiencies were tabled and discussed including problems arising from definition issues, exclusion issues, hit and miss access to assistance and matters of location recovery and rebuild continuing to take precedence and priority over loss of life issues.

Ongoing discussion about training needs analysis. Yet again this matter was discussed but to date nothing has been delivered or scheduled for delivery to BBAG members.

BBAG Strategic planning day discussed and dates determined. (Strategic Planning day organized by VBRRA and ultimately held on 13.11.2010 facilitated by Ann Shannon – Seed Consulting.

Feedback from BBAG passed on to Premier of Victoria by VBRRA re Royal Commission buy back option.

Issues of inadequate and too short scheme timing, accuracy of information sharing and rights of involved people were raised by BBAG members for government consideration.

Members requested, VBRRA agreed, that the next edition of the bereaved newsletter ‘Staying In Touch’ would include a section about the BBAG.

Concept of CFA simulator bus, proposed by a bushfire bereaved person (BBAG member), was discussed by group – noted that CFA is keen on this idea.

Date confirmed for visit to BBAG by Bill Shorten Federal Parliamentary Secretary for Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction
15 SEPTEMBER 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chair</th>
<th>Annie Norish (ACGB)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendees</td>
<td>Bereaved 10, VBRRA 1, ACGB 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guests</td>
<td>Bill Shorten, Federal Parliament and Adviser, Viv Bateman (Sue Evans Fund book)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venue</td>
<td>Glen Katherine Primary School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bill Shorten (Federal Parliamentary Secretary for Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction) and Adviser Lance Wilson attended seeking input about bushfire bereaved concerns/issues, including funding and programs for psychosocial recovery.

Mr Shorten wishes to continue monitoring bushfire recovery (despite being in process of leaving this portfolio). Bill offered to facilitate media editorial by the Age and Herald-Sun about the work of the Bushfire Bereaved Advisory Group.

Bill undertook to hand over issues and concerns to MP Jenny Macklin who is taking over the fire recovery portfolio.

BBAG to invite Jenny Macklin to meet.

Viv Bateman, Sue Evans Fund book coordinator attended the meeting and invited BBAG members to contribute ideas for the booklet and requested dedicated meeting time for book contributions.

Coroner’s Office advised a response to BBAG communication is forthcoming.

Discussed next bereaved social gathering, scheduled for October 24, re logistics and promotion. Museum suggested as venue by BBAG.

VBRRA advised BBAG Strategic planning day arrangements are in progress.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 27 OCTOBER 2010 | Update by ACGB to BBAG on first draft of Traumatic Grief booklet  
Fire Education Buses discussed, VBRRA reported on consultation with CFA and BBAG member involvement  
Bushfire Bereaved Social Gathering feedback and debrief. Chair to arrange report to go to the Project Committee  
BBAG Strategic Planning day set for November. Nine BBAG member attendees. ACGB to organize  
VBRRA consulted with BBAG re planning for 2011 Second Anniversary Memorial State event. Members provided considerable input regarding location, format, compassionate gestures, invitee list, content. Chaplin, Jim Pilmer, to be invited to next meeting to discuss event planning  
Update on response from Coroner to BBAG letter. Preparation for Coroner’s attendance at next meeting  
Rob Gordon’s presentation from Community leadership Forum shared with BBAG members  
Review of Staying In Touch Newsletter timelines – agreement to publish quarterly after December issue. Next edition to include content re access to psychological counseling support and funding arrangements. ACGB and VBRRA to provide content  
BBAG members raised concerns about communication deficiencies and inequitable access by bereaved people living outside of burnt zones to Federal ATAPS funding for psychological recovery. Group advocated for VBRRA to liaise with appropriate government agencies and VBAF to ensure better access for all bushfire bereaved people regardless of their personal location relative to a burnt zone  
Group raised concerns with VBRRA and ACGB re June 2011 funding closure for psychological support and advocated for extension of services  
Communication, access to funding and funding concerns to be taken to Project Committee by BBAG representatives |
Concerns raised by members with VBRRA about the timing of the closure of Bushfire Case Management Service. Closure scheduled for February 2011 coinciding with the peak trauma period of the 2nd anniversary. Also concerns about the scale of trauma from current legal cases in progress and the ongoing needs for case management support. BBAG advocated that it is too soon to close case management services, need still exists and that the timing of the closure with the anniversary and other ongoing matters made February/ March closure inappropriate and problematic. Letter to be written about this and tabled at Project Committee.

Member concern expressed that Skills Victoria were targeting fire recovery assistance based on geography rather than needs based targeting fire affected people regardless of location. Skills Victoria to be contacted re this.

Jenny Macklin and Rob Mitchel have agreed to meet with BBAG to discuss ongoing member concerns about recovery, particularly concerns regarding adequate psychological support services, untimely case management closure, long term trauma recovery needs and grants and funding inequities.

VBAF gifts to the bereaved discussed and letter to be sent to VBAF from Advisory group expressing gratitude for this initiative.

BBAG compiled a feedback, complaint and suggestion letter to the Victorian Premier John Brumby re the government’s recent brochure drop to Victorian households titled ‘Prepare. Act. Survive’, being part of the government’s fire awareness and preparation campaign for the upcoming bushfire season.

A presentation by Rob Gordon was discussed and is to be circulated to BBAG members.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>24 NOVEMBER 2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chair</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Attendees** | Bereaved 7  
VBRRRA 1  
ACGB 3 |
| **Guests** | Jim Pilmer Vic. Police Chaplain  
Judy Leitch, CEO, Coroners Court |
| **Venue** | Glen Katherine Primary School |

Judy Leitch, Coroners Court attended the BBAG meeting and sought feedback listening to and noting concerns / issues BBAG raised.

Judy advised BBAG of changes already made in response to previous BBAG input, she advised about the availability of a complaints / compliments database.

BBAG’s expression of the importance of the need for bereaved people to be acknowledged and to feel heard was taken on board by the Coroner’s Office and further communication intentions by the Coroner to the broader bushfire bereaved community were expressed.

Input of an article about the Coroner into the ‘Staying in Touch Newsletter’ was discussed and welcomed by all parties.

The theme of ‘Remember, Hope, Reflect’ for the 2nd Anniversary was agreed to by all. Logistical and presentation ideas for the day were contributed by BBAG.

Jim Pilmer attended the meeting in his capacity as Victorian Police Chaplin to discuss his role in delivering the 2nd Anniversary commemorative service and to seek BBAG input and advice regarding this occasion.

Confirmed that arrangements have been made by VBRRRA/ACGB for BBAG to meet Jenny Macklin and Rob Mitchell in State Parliament on December 3, 2010 12:30 – 2:30pm to provide input on ongoing Bushfire Bereavement issues. Attendees, arrangements and issues to be raised were discussed.

Report by ACGB staff on research on the Bushfire Support Groups.
3 DECEMBER 2010

Chair
Attendees Bereaved
Venue Parliament House, Jenny Macklin

No minutes recorded
Discussion included:
> Ongoing psycho-social recovery needs and funding concerns
> Poor timing of case management closure – too soon and wrong time
> ATAPS poorly communicated- lot of confusion
> Too much recovery and funding emphasis on geographic loss and material loss at the expense of excluding fire impacted and bereaved people.
> Arson trial and Gippsland region unique needs
> Closure of VBRRA concerns
> Profile and consideration of urban based fire impacted people
> Language and definition problems in the disaster recovery model.

15 DECEMBER 2010

Chair Annie Norrish (ACGB)
Attendees Bereaved 10
Venue Eltham Hotel

Further discussion, advice and consolidation of arrangements for State 2nd Anniversary Event to be held 6th Feb, 2011
ACGB to organize counseling support for the event
At BBAG’s request ACGB representatives had further discussions with Coroner re BBAG concerns, coronial changes and additional communication needs
Feedback and discussion about Strategic Planning Day and consultants final Document recording outcomes.
Article to go in to next edition of bereaved newsletter about BBAG
Discussion about BBAG meeting with Jenny Macklin and last minute cancellation by Rob Mitchell. BBAG members disappointed in meeting, short attendance by Jenny and outcomes in general.
**JANUARY 2011**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chair</th>
<th>Annie Norrish [ACGB]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendees</td>
<td>Bereaved 6 ACGB 2 VBBRA 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guest</td>
<td>Jan Mathewson [Dept of Justice]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dept of Justice presented their proposed CFA fire awareness campaign for BBAG feedback.

Comments were sought re the legacy of the stay and defend policy as well as comments re proposed advertising material.

There was raw and passionate discussion regarding the Stay and Defend policy. BBAG considers this a flawed policy which contributed to the high number of deaths.

BBAG adamantly requested the following must be included in bushfire awareness campaigns:
- peoples lives matter more than property
- direct reference be made re possibility of death in fires
- holiday makers and tourists should be included in awareness campaigns

BBAG again discussed the merit and/or appropriateness of including the word ‘community’ in the name of BBAG/BCAG.

Subsequent to the Queensland floods, VBBRA advised BBAG they were consulting with Queensland Govt re disaster bereavement and lessons, in part learned from BBAG.

**23 FEBRUARY 2011**

Unable to locate minutes

Agenda items listed were:
- CFA awareness campaign
- Craig Lapsley invitation
- Central Anniversary Event feedback
- Update on Coronerial process
- Launch of the book *Surviving Traumatic Grief*
- BBAG letter of condolence to flood survivors of Greymouth, Queensland

**16 MARCH 2011**

Unable to locate minutes

Agenda items listed were:

reviewing the transition of BBAG from VBRRA to ACGB in June 2011
### 6 APRIL 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chair</th>
<th>Greg Ireton (VBRRA)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendees</td>
<td>Bereaved 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Volunteer 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guest</td>
<td>Jackie Kearney (DoH)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venue</td>
<td>Glen Katherine Primary School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Transfer to Dept of Health as service agreement manager
- Revised Draft Terms of Reference distributed for consideration (see appendix)
- DoH distribution of a ‘traffic light’ report so members could track project actions and status
- DoH will provide a breakdown of funding and expenditure will be advised
- VBRRA and DoH will determine options for a future agency to provide ongoing admin support
- VBRRA will finish on 30th June 2011

BBAG members presented a letter of condolences for bereaved communities in Queensland following disastrous floods for VBRRA/DoH to send to the affected communities.

BBAG expressed concerns about BBAG work stalling due to messy agency transitional arrangements.

Staying Touch newsletter content sought and distribution by VBRRA affirmed.

### 4 MAY 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chair</th>
<th>Greg Ireton (VBRRA)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendees</td>
<td>Bereaved 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dept of Health 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ACGB 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Volunteer 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venue</td>
<td>Glen Katherine Primary School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- ACGB was appointed by VBRRA as admin support agency following wind up of VBRRA.
- ACGB staff Erin Bevege and Wayne Lynch introduced (new to BBAG and also new to ACGB).
- In response to concerns of some BBAG members about expenditure of bushfire funding, ACGB presented financial statements of income and expenses for the bushfire bereaved program now managed by ACGB.
- D of H advised their intent to determine and appoint an alternative admin support agency for the bushfire bereaved program through an Expressions of Interest process.
- BBAG requested that ACGB prepare an edition of the Staying In Touch Black Saturday Bushfire Bereaved newsletter asap because in the transition between agencies this important information and support resource had been allowed to lapse by VBRRA.
- BBAG identified the need for clarification from Hon Jenny Macklin MHR re ATAPS access for Black Saturday affected people, particularly bereaved people.
- BBAG to host a social gathering for Black Saturday bereaved individuals and families mid July.
### 1 June 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chair</th>
<th>Christine Nixon (VBRRA)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendees</td>
<td>Bereaved 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VBRRA 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ACGB 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guest</td>
<td>Craig Lapsley (Fire Services Commissioner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venue</td>
<td>Glen Katherine Primary School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fire Services Commissioner Craig Lapsley attended the meeting and introduced himself as the newly appointed Fire Services Commissioner.

He presented proposed ‘Survival Options’ pamphlet for BBAG comment.

He advised that the priority was now people before property.

He invited BBAG members to inform him of issues members thought were important.

He requested further meetings with BBAG for future publications and fire awareness campaigns.

Social event for bereaved people to be at Melbourne Aquarium on July 24th.

ACGB advised BBAG re new ACGB bushfire staffing and support groups.

BBAG was informed by VBRRA that VBRRA was transferring information re BBAG activities, including data and mailing lists to Fire Recovery Unit.

FRU will maintain website for news and information updates.

Expression of Interest process re appointment of a new admin support agency for BBAG. DoH and Christine Nixon to make final decision.

DoH reported to BBAG that the Bereaved Project Committee had been disbanded. In its place a stakeholder forum was to be established by Government.

### 29 June 2011

**[IN LIEU JULY MTG]**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chair</th>
<th>Greg Ireton (VBRRA)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendees</td>
<td>Bereaved 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VBRRA 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ACGB 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Volunteer 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guest</td>
<td>Dr Ruth Vine (DoH)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venue</td>
<td>Glen Katherine Primary School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dr Ruth Vine, Victorian Chief Psychiatrist, DoH, gave an overview of counselling and psychosocial bushfire response support services.

BBAG gave Dr Vine specific information re lack of psycho/social service provision for bushfire bereaved people, and an overview of their continuing and evolving needs.

BBAG expressed ongoing concerns about the needs of teens and young adults.

Dissatisfaction express by BBAG about VBAF public consultation process on medium to long term recovery needs.

Arrangements for Aquarium day confirmed by ACGB.
3 AUGUST 2011

Chair: Erin Bevege (ACGB)

Attendees:
- Bereaved 4
- ACGB 2
- Volunteer 1

Venue: Glen Katherine Primary School

An in depth Aquarium day evaluation, prepared by ACGB, demonstrates the benefit of such an event to Black Saturday bereaved individuals and families:

- social and networking
- informal support – counseling
- agency information
- fire services commissioner presentation
- sharing a meal
- including fire affected groups such as book and Chocolate Lilies choir from Strathewen, St Andrews and Hurstbridge
- BBAG played a central role – MC, Greeting guests, informing, explain BBAG

(see appendix for full report)

Draft newsletter presented to BBAG by ACGB for approval. Newsletter to be sent to bereaved individuals and families by end of August

DoH Update was tabled:

- selection of an admin support agency criteria
- appointment of BBAG members for interview panel
- flagged an ‘opportunity to work with an independent consultant to strengthen its advisory role’

Discussion re funding from VBIRA seems to have prioritized communities over individuals which has negatively impacted many bereaved people, particularly those who do not lived in a flame affected area

BBAG to apply for VBAF funding for wellbeing programs for individuals and families who were bereaved on Black Saturday

Discussion re the new Fire Recovery Newsletter which focuses on the burnt areas, rather than all those affected by the fires, especially bereaved families

Issues re poor communications about psychosocial programs for bereaved family members raised by BBAG
Fire Services Commissioner Craig Lapsley presented information about many matters including the draft Summer Fire Campaign.

- Bushfire Survival poster, content and where to locate the posters
- Fire shelters and refuges discussed
- ‘split second decision’ campaign and BBAG feedback on the slogan
- town protection plan – permanent residents and holiday makers
- trailing of electronic fire danger rating signs
- apps for iPhones
- education buses and simulator buses
- fire services reporting structure

Mr Lapsley sought BBAG comments and feedback.

BBAG input sought by Government on the Green Paper on emergency management.

BBAG directed ACGB to compile a letter of response on behalf of BBAG.

Staying Touch newsletter distributed and discussion re content and production of November edition.

ACGB report to BBAG

- current support groups and counselling
- DoH to provide additional funding for regional and metro counselling

Feedback received by BBAG from Dr Ruth Vine (DoH, chief psychiatrist)

- counselling and wellness vouchers have been extended

BBAG members expressed concern that VBAF appears to have not communicated adequately the availability of 3rd round VBAF counselling vouchers to both agencies, practitioners and fire affected individuals.

In fact, 3rd round vouchers are available but are not shown on the VBAF website.

BBAG is also concerned at the ‘case by case’ VBAF criteria is not transparent and is inappropriately subjective.

BBAG advocated that these matters be addressed and rectified by Government immediately.

VBAF funding

- BBAG concerned about the allocation of medium to long term recovery funding for Black Saturday bereaved people.
- BBAG to submit own application to VBAF
12 OCTOBER 2011

Chair  Erin Bevege  Jess Freame reported FRU has been functional for three months and is located within Regional Development Victoria

Attendees Bereaved 6  FRU has noted a high volume of calls for post bushfire recovery services and information

ACGB 1  One of the particular concerns was the proposed winding down of psycho-social services – an issue BBAG has previously raised

Volunteer 1  FRU can offer information and assistance with property management, land taxes, insurance, but can offer little assistance regarding psychosocial support

Venue Glen Katherine Primary School  FRU is responsible for planning and organizing the annual central Anniversary event

Jess Freame (Fire Recovery Unit)  BBAG requested FRU assistance in formulating an application to VBAF for well-being funds specifically for the Black Saturday bereaved people

Venue Glen Katherine Primary School  DoH provided an update on BBAG evaluation

9 NOVEMBER 2011

Chair  Jackie Kearney (DoH) and Erin Bevege (ACGB)  Jackie Kearney advised that EACH has been appointed as BBAG admin agency

Attendees Bereaved 6  DoJ presentation of Summer Fire information and Education program BBAG members gave extensive and valuable feedback

ACGB 2  BBAG requested that consideration be given by Government and its agencies to inform and prepare Black Saturday bereaved people for the fire awareness television campaign as the ads are quite confronting.

Volunteer 1  Following previous BBAG consultations, the new ads focus on ‘what you can hear’ rather than ‘what you can see’

Guests Jackie Kearney, Ellen Sherinden (DoH)  Letters advising bereaved people of the ads will be sent out from ACGB

Tony ‘Dea (DoJ)  Additional counseling and wellbeing vouchers now available

Craig Lapsley (Fire services Commissioner)  Remembrance event for 2013 flagged

Dr Joy Humphries, Humphries Group consultant  An appropriate paragraph re the Gippsland arson court case to be included in the next newsletter

Green Paper Response from BBAG sent to Government 14 November
### 7 December 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chair</th>
<th>Christine Nixon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendees</td>
<td>Bereaved 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ACGB 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EACH 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guests</td>
<td>Craig Lapsley (Fire Services Commissioner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jennifer Tucker, Tony O’Dea (DoJ)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jessica Freame (Fire Recovery Unit)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venue</td>
<td>Doncaster Hotel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Introduction to BBAG of Bernie Durkin and Jodie Bowker from EACH who will be attending future meetings as BBAG admin support**

BBAG concerned that public perception is that BBAG endorsed the fire awareness ads (as opposed to advising feedback re the ads) Craig Lapsley to publicly correct this impression, and state that BBAG – *commented* on them

**FRU requested ideas for 3rd anniversary event.**

- BBAG requested that a minutes silence in State Parliament to acknowledge the anniversary of Black Saturday
- Supported idea of a centrally located event in Melbourne
- Close to public transport
- Minimal intrusion of press and politicians
- A symbolic and participatory activity
- A quiet reflective venue such as a space in the Art Gallery

Jessica Freame also advised that the concept for a permanent central Memorial is currently going through a budget process, and should be announced during 2012. Arts Victoria will be leading the process and it is hoped to have an unveiling for the 5th Anniversary

BBAG raised the issue of too many distracting items being placed on agenda, particularly about governance and issues not directly relevant to the actual work of advising and advocating by BBAG for people bereaved on Black Saturday.

BBAG is additionally concerned about the subsequent cluttering of agendas, minutes and meetings resulting in time and distraction away from BBAG work and purpose

BBAG also tabled the value and importance of producing a ‘Legacy and Learnings Document’
15 FEBRUARY 2012

Chair  Jackie Kearney  [DoH]
Attendees  Bereaved 9
          EACH 3
          Volunteer 1
Guests  Ellen Sheriden  [DoH]
        Dr Joy Humphreys  [Humphreys Group]
Venue  Glen Katherine Primary School

Jackie Kearney tabled the review conducted by Dr Joy Humphreys about the role, functioning and future of BBAG; this had originally been proposed as a capacity strengthening project.

This review was generally viewed by BBAG as containing inaccurate and at times offensive observations, in part because it did not understand, or take into account the emotional impact of Black Saturday bereavement, nor the impact of constant and variable changes of input and support provided by the Government for the Advisory Group.

Some BBAG members also felt that they had been ‘tricked’ about the purpose of this review which had been proposed as an ‘opportunity to work with an independent to strengthen its advisory role’. The group generally felt they had not been provided with an opportunity to work with an independent consultant to strengthen capacity.

Some felt they had been interviewed without being given an understanding of the purpose of the interviews. There was also some agreement that the process was ethically flawed.

14 MARCH 2012

Chair  Dr Joy Humphreys  [DoH appointee]
Attendees  Bereaved 4
          EACH 3
Venue  Doncaster Hotel

Dr Joy Humphreys appointed as Chair by DoH. BBAG advised only days before meeting which was considered inadequate notice, non-consultative and poor process.

DoH and FRU discussion re intent and purpose of BBAG; what has been achieved?

Discussions began re BBAG members desire for a Legacy document recording BBAG contributions as well as responses by government and agencies consulted/advised by BBAG.

BBAG identified the need for a research project into the experiences of Black Saturday Bereaved people for the purposes of informing government, agencies and others who have responsibility in disaster response was raised.

Format, content and agency attendees discussed in preparation for July feedback forum.
### 17 April 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chair</th>
<th>Dr Joy Humphreys [DoH appointee]</th>
<th>Issues discussed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendees</td>
<td>Bereaved 2</td>
<td>loss of twelve months of BBAG minutes, letters and documentation during transfers between Government appointed admin support agencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EACH 2</td>
<td>process to locate missing documents instigated, EACH to action, members to assist by searching personal files</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venue</td>
<td>EACH Ringwood</td>
<td>Further discussion re Legacy Document planning day</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was tabled that BBAG meeting regularity and venue were to be determined at each meeting until formalized at the Planning day

Discussion that BBAG has not received any VBAF response or update to the BBAG funding submission submitted August 2011. BBAG suggested EACH to write to VBAF pursuing this matter

### 30 May 2012

| Chair           | Dr Joy Humphreys [DoH appointee] | BBAG requested EACH to request copies from all previous agencies and Govt Departments which provided admin support to provide all minutes and documentation re BBAG that they hold. |
|-----------------|----------------------------------|Disappointment that the Melbourne University excluded bereaved people in the Black Saturday research project. |
| Attendees       | Bereaved 4                        | BBAG again expressed a desire for a discrete research project into the experiences of Black Saturday Bereaved people |
|                 | EACH 2                            | That EACH begin preliminary work be done re a Legacy Document (ie minutes and records) |
| Venue           | Doncaster Hotel                   | need for a feedback day to include as many BBAG members, Govt depts and agencies as possible |

EACH to contact ACGB inviting written reports when ACGB unable to attend BBAG meetings

Need for research project into bereaved experience and issues again flagged

EACH to follow up with VBAF status and response to BBAG application for wellbeing grant

### June 2012

No meeting – 4 July government and agency feedback forum instead
## 31 July 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chair</th>
<th>Bernie Durkin (EACH)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendees</td>
<td>Bereaved 6, EACH 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venue</td>
<td>Eltham Hotel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

EACH Black Saturday website construction  
FRU responsible for 4th Anniversary BBAG input requested  
Summary of outstanding issues raised by BBAG extracted from previous minutes  
- coronial process and DVI process (Coroners court-DoJ)  
- holiday makers fire warnings and info (CFA)  
- police interview process, and crime scene management (VIC Police)  
- disaster response timeline where there are deaths (DHS, DoJ, Vic Police, VBRRA and others)  
- case management policies and provision (DHS)  
- emergency relief (Centre link, Vic Relief and other)

## 29 August 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chair</th>
<th>Bernie Durkin (EACH)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendees</td>
<td>BBAG 4, EACH 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venue</td>
<td>Eltham Hotel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- discussion re Feedback Forum minutes/reportage. BBAG previous concerns that these did not contain and psycho/social/emotional contexts have been addressed by DoH, and the minutes amended  
- Legacy Document – further discussion about format, content, Learnings and dissemination  
- Forming a partnership with EACH to construct a document of the past, and present, and for the future

## 29 October 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attendees</th>
<th>Bereaved 3, EACH 3, FRU 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Venue</td>
<td>Doncaster Hotel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Fire awareness campaign presented for feedback  
- Discussion with FRU re 4th anniversary event  
- BBAG asked FRU about the status of the permanent State Memorial project (In Dec 2011, FRU advised BBAG the budget process for a State Memorial was occurring)  
- BBAG sought an update from FRU re the status of the BBAG application to VBAF for medium to long term wellbeing funding for the bereaved cohort  
- Concern was expressed that BBAG had been positioned under DoH Palliative Care. This placement was considered profoundly inappropriate for a disaster bereaved advisory group.  
- The group questioned why the Advisory Group was not aligned with FRU
21 NOVEMBER 2012
Chair Bernie Durkin (EACH)
Attendees Bereaved 4
EACH 3
Venue Eltham Gateway Motel and Conference Centre

Frank discussions re BBAG legacy –
> chronological
> work achieved
> impact on individuals
> impact on departments and agencies
> issues of acknowledgement and support for bereaved people which have had a negative and/or compounding affect
> need for a feedback day to include as many BBAG members for input into Legacy document – 17 Feb 2013

17 FEBRUARY 2013
Attendees Bereaved 7
EACH 3
Venue Eltham Gateway Motel

Legacy Document meeting – BBAG members discussed and contributed suggestions for the Legacy Document

29 MAY 2013
Attendees Bereaved 4
EACH 3
Venue Federation Estate, Ringwood

Review of first draft Legacy Document

14 JULY 2013
Attendees 5
EACH 3
Venue private residence
Panton Hill

First draft Legacy Document review and discussion

31 JULY 2013
Attendees Bereaved 4
Venue Templestowe

An informal meeting of some members as a follow-up to the meeting of 14th July 2013
BBAG members expressed disappointment in the document that has been presented to them. There was agreement that BBAG members needed to write the Legacy Document reflecting the BBAG Bereaved members experience of BBAG
How does the mind resolve
Intensity of grief?
Inner strength
Joining hands with like souls
Sharing individual experiences
Transform into dogged endeavor
Emotions evolve
into caring
ASSORTED DOCUMENTS OF INTEREST

A Sample of Some of the BBAG Documents

- VBRRRA Expression of Interest to join BBAG (around October 2009)
- VBRRRA Community Recovery & Memorials Reference Group T.O.R.
- Bereaved Community Recovery & Memorials Project Committee T.O.R.
- Staying in Touch Newsletter, Issue One, March 2010
- VBRRRA Gathering for Recovery Forum Invitation July 2010
- VBRRRA draft BBAG media letter re Royal Commission Report July 2010
- BBAG letter to Coroner July 2010
- VBRRRA 2nd round invitation to join BBAG, August 2010
- Bereaved gathering Museum Victoria, October 2010
- Letter, The Hon. John Brumby & Craig Lapsley, Fire Services Commissioner
- Aquarium Invitation and Event Report July 2011
- BBAG Skill Set Chart
- BBAG letters to VB AF re Counselling Vouchers and Medium to Long Term Bereaved Recovery Funding, September 2011
- BBAG Green Paper Response to Dept. of Premier & Cabinet
EXPRESSION OF INTEREST

BEREAVED COMMUNITY ADVISORY GROUP

WE RECOGNISE THE IMPORTANCE OF ESTABLISHING A WAY FOR THE BEREAVED TO HAVE INPUT INTO THE ONGOING WORK OF THE VICTORIAN BUSHFIRE RECONSTRUCTION AND RECOVERY AUTHORITY (VBRRRA).

WE WOULD LIKE TO EXTEND AN INVITATION TO YOU TO EXPRESS INTEREST IN PARTICIPATING IN AN ADVISORY GROUP FOR PEOPLE WHO HAVE LOST SOMEONE CLOSE TO THEM IN THE BUSHFIRES. YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THIS ADVISORY GROUP WILL PROVIDE AN OPPORTUNITY TO ADVOCATE FOR THE NEEDS OF THOSE WHO HAVE LOST SOMEONE CLOSE TO THEM AND TO FORMALLY PROVIDE ADVICE TO VBRRRA.

THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE WILL MEET EVERY THREE MONTHS AND THE FIRST MEETING WILL BE HELD IN ELTHAM ON WEDNESDAY 16 DECEMBER 2009 AT 7.00PM.

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED, PLEASE CALL MARIE THEOPHANIDES OR BETH JOHNSON ON 03 909 25891 OR EMAIL marie.theophanides@dpc.vic.gov.au

BEREAVED COMMUNITY RECOVERY AND MEMORIALS PROJECT TEAM
Purpose
The purpose of the Bereaved Community Advisory Group (the Advisory Group) is to bring together people who have lost someone close to them to:

- advocate for the needs of the bereaved
- formally provide advice to the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBRRA) on issues affecting the bereaved in relation to reconstruction, recovery and memorials.

Outcomes
- There is advocacy for support and services for people who have lost someone close to them.
- The work of VBRRA is informed by members of the bereaved community.

Role
The advisory group will advocate for the needs of those who have lost someone close to them and provide input into VBRRA activities. The advisory group will undertake its role by encouraging discussion, debate and consideration of a variety of views and opinions of the bereaved and work towards an options-centred approach that is based on best practice in the reconstruction and recovery process and the memorials.

Essentially, the advisory committee will:
- advocate on behalf of the bereaved community
- provide input on existing and potential issues that will impact on the bereaved community’s ability to be effectively engaged in the reconstruction and recovery process.
- help identify suitable options for managing these issues
- provide advice on key VBRRA activities.

Membership
The advisory group will be chaired by the Manager Bereaved Community and Memorials and will include:
- members of the bereaved community (between 10 – 14 members)
- representatives from the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement.

Reporting and frequency of meetings
Meetings will be held monthly. Minutes of the meetings will be recorded and provided to the Bereaved Community Recovery and Memorials Committee (the Committee). The Bereaved Community Recovery and Memorials team will provide secretariat support.
Terms of Reference
Bereaved Community Recovery and Memorials
Reference Group

Purpose
The purpose of the reference group is to bring together key stakeholders that will contribute to the:

- development of a community engagement process that is based on best practice, to enhance the input of people who have been bereaved into the reconstruction and recovery process;
- establishment of processes for the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBRRA) and the Department of Planning and Community Development (DPaD) to assist local governments to effectively engage and consult the bushfire affected and the bereaved community in relation to the local bushfire memorials.

Outcomes
- People who are bereaved are effectively engaged in the reconstruction and recovery process and the memorials.
- The experience of the bereaved and the affected communities will contribute to the knowledge base on effective ways of being engaged in the reconstruction and recovery activities and the development of memorials.

Membership
The Reference group will be chaired by the Manager, Bereaved Community Recovery and Memorials project. It will represent a cross section of the major stakeholders and subject matter experts in Victoria’s bushfire and recovery efforts. Membership of the Reference Group will include:
- Senior Policy Advisor Community Engagement VBRRA
- Representative from Communications and Media VBRRA
- Senior Arts Officer x 2
- DHS Senior Policy Advisor Recovery and Social Policy
- Bereaved Community Advisory Committee x 2
- Red Cross
- Local Government Council x 2
- Department of Planning and Community Development
- Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement x 2.
- Other experts will be invited to participate at selected meetings.

Role
Stakeholder input and consultation is required for the Project to achieve its objectives. The project reference group provides this by encouraging discussion, debate and consideration of a variety of views and opinions and work towards an options based approach that best meets the expectations and needs of the affected and bereaved community in the reconstruction and recovery process and the memorials.

Essentially, the Reference Group will identify strategies and opportunities to:
- enhance the input of people who have been bushfire affected and the bereaved into the memorial process.
• contribute to the analysis and assessment of the extent of community engagement in the memorials proposals prepared by local government councils for the Department of Planning and Community Development.
• consider the advice provided by the Bereaved Community Advisory Group on matters relating to the bereaved community and memorials
• identify issues that require a systems response.

Reporting and frequency of meetings
Meetings will be held each month at VBRA. Minutes of the meetings will be recorded and distributed to all members as well as to the members of the Project Committee. The Bereaved Community Recovery and Memorials Team will provide secretarial support.

Relationship
The Reference Group will interface with the Project Committee and the Bereaved Community Advisory Group (see fig 1).

The Project Committee is chaired by the Chair of VBRA and will include:
• CEO VBRA
• Director Bushfire Recovery, Department of Human Services
• Head Community Engagement, VBRA
• CEO Coroner’s Office of Victoria
• Director Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement
• Asst Director Psychosocial Recovery, Department of Health
• Executive Director, Department of Planning and Community Development
• Policy Advisor, Municipal Association of Victoria
• Victorian Council of Churches representative

The role of this committee is to provide oversight of the project and a systems response that may be required.

The Bereaved Community Advisory Group is established as a group of members of the bereaved community. Two members from this group would be invited to sit on the reference group and the latter may refer matters to the Bereaved Community Advisory Group.

---

**fig 1 Functions of committees**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Committee</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Directional Relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project Committee</td>
<td>• Oversee Project</td>
<td>↓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Systems response</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference Group</td>
<td>• Consult</td>
<td>↑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Problem solve</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bereaved Community Advisory Group</td>
<td>• Advocate</td>
<td>↑</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Advice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>←</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Affected and bereaved communities and experts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>←</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bereaved communities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Purpose
The purpose of the project committee is to bring together key stakeholders that will guide and provide oversight of the Bereaved Community Recovery and Memorials Project.

Outcomes
The objectives of the project are met in a manner that is consistent with best practice associated with bereaved community engagement in the reconstruction, recovery, and memorials process and community involvement in local government council memorial processes.

Membership
The project reference group will be chaired by the Chair of the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBorra). Membership of the project reference group will include:
- CEO, VBorra
- Head, Community Engagement, VBorra
- Director Bushfire Recovery Services, Department of Human Services
- Assistant Director, Psychosocial Recovery, Department of Health
- Executive Director, Community Investment, Department of Planning and Community Development
- CEO, State Coroner’s Office of Victoria
- Policy Advisor, Municipal Association Victoria
- Director, Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement
- State Coordinator, Emergencies Ministry, Victorian Council of Churches.

Role
Stakeholder input and consultation is required for the Project to achieve its objectives. The Project Committee provides this by guiding the work associated with bereaved community recovery and memorials as stated below:

- **Bereaved Community Recovery:** The project will develop a community engagement process to enhance the input of people who have been bereaved into the reconstruction and recovery process.

- ** Memorials:** The project in partnership with the Department of Planning and Community Development (DPDC) will assist local government to ensure that bushfire-affected communities and the bushfire bereaved living in other locations are effectively engaged and consulted in relation to bushfire memorials.

Reporting and frequency of meetings
Minutes of the meetings will be recorded and distributed to all members. Meetings will be held every two months at VBorra. The Bereaved Community Recovery and Memorials Team will provide secretariat support.
Staying in touch - for those who have lost someone close to them in the Victorian bushfires

Issue 1 March 2010

Christine Nixon's message
A word from the chair

Welcome to the first issue of Staying in Touch. Following on from the forum held in January 2010 we decided to put together this newsletter for those who have lost someone close to them in the Victorian bushfires.

Some of you have indicated that hearing from others in similar situations would be beneficial to you, so we have created this newsletter as a central space for information about upcoming events and other items that may be of interest to you, and others close to you. It includes tips and hints for recovery and support information, and also provides you with the opportunity to share your stories. More information on support can be found on the Website Rebuild website (www.wwrrebuidl.vic.gov.au).

As we move towards the Easter holiday period, I am aware that this may be a difficult time for many of you and I encourage you to talk to a friend or family member, or get in touch with the Australia Centre for Grief and Bereavement on 5268 2111 for a variety of helpful advice.

On behalf of the staff at VDBRA I would like to wish you a safe and restful holiday period.

Latest news

The case management service is still available. First time callers and people who have previously received the service can still request a Case Manager. For further information, contact 1800 685 400.

Counselling vouchers are available until August 2011 and can be used anytime during this period. People affected by the bushfires, whether or not you live in the bushfire affected area, are eligible. For further information, please ring 1800 180 213.

Women gathering after the bushfires program is organizing a 2 day workshop for women to learn how to run their own groups. For more information contact Women's Health Goulburn East on 03 3922 3099 or see www.wheast.com.au/womens_gathering_after_bushfires.html.

Free YMCA Easter school holiday program for bushfire affected kids. For further information email holidaysprograms@ymca.org.au or call 050 3403 5090.

It’s now time for the bikies to get away! A range of music get-aways are currently being organised. To find out more information go to www.musicgetaway.com.au or contact Paul Thorne by phone on 0413 098 097 or email paul@musicgetaway.com.au.

Bright Embers ’Journaling My Journey’ telling your story your way - choreography, audio recording, painting, drawing, film, DVD, song writing, dance and poetry. Contact Jackie Bowler at EA/54 on 0411 769 009 or email bowler@aoa.com.au for more information.

Free Parent & Child Creative Art Workshop - ages 3 – 7, workshop is in your home or at a convenient location near you. For more details and to register your interest please contact Time Transforms on 0403 319 553.

Parenting support is available during 2010, sessions are available where and when people want them. Call 1800 769 760, or visit www.parentingafterthefire.net.au for more information.
Looking after yourself

tips and hints

Most people who have experienced a disaster will go through times when they find things difficult or challenging and it’s important to understand the benefits of professional assistance. Don’t think you need to be struggling or suffering severely to access help. You may find it useful to talk to someone who is not a friend or a family member."

Source: Looking after yourself after a disaster. For a copy of this booklet see our contact details on the last page.

Getting support

Adult support groups

Discussion and support groups have been set up for people who have lost someone close to them in the 2009 bushfires and they are located in Epping, Elliminyt, Goulburn, Kinglake, North Melbourne, Ringwood, Strathewen (men), Strathewen (women). New groups are currently being developed for Whittlesea, Yarra Glen and Kyerong. Groups can also be developed elsewhere on request.

The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement is also investigating the possibility of establishing a group in Alexandra.

Please telephone the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement on 5265 2111.

Kids support groups: Kids Grive Toc (KG2)

Groups for children aged 5 - 14 who have lost someone close to them will be commencing during term 1. These groups will provide an opportunity for children to meet with other bereaved children in a safe and non-threatening setting. For further information or to register your interest in an existing or new group, please telephone the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement on 5265 2111 or email support@chief.org.au.

If you are a bereaved young person and wish to be trained as a volunteer to assist with the Kids Grieve Toc groups please contact Simon on 9265 2111.

Youth support services

Some of the agencies offering youth focused activities, programs, groups and support to young people aged 10 - 25:

- Kildorran Linking Care - 8401 0100 - Whittlesea and Murrindindi
- Nillumbik Community Health Service - 9430 9100
- Nillumbik and Murrindindi services for young people aged 10-21 years
- EACH - 8871 1590 - Yarra Ranges and Murrindindi
- St Luke's - 5448 1000 - Berwick and Casey
- NESBY - 5720 2201 - Beaconsfield and Mornington
- Quantum Support Services - 5120 2000 Wellington, Latrobe City and Baw Baw Regions
Your stories

Gift of Hope

We come together
Linked by deep common threads of suffering
And even deeper threads
Of resilience and connection
Together in our suffering and survival
There is time to nurture and encourage
Conquering this bushfire
Through spirit and passion
Pillars of strength
Warriors of quiet invisible force
Expressing the most basic of human needs
Love and care
A banquet of soul food
Solace for the days ahead
People in action powered by hope hearts
Poetry in motion
Testament to the power of compassion
And the priceless gift of hope

By Rhonda Aitken, read by Premier John Brumby
at the Bushfires Remembrance Service, held at St Paul’s Cathedral, Melbourne, on 7 February 2010

My experience of mutual support groups......

I have found that attending the bereavement group has been extremely helpful and comforting. As one of our members says “You feel safe”. You can say anything you like, everyone understands and no-one is judgemental.
Our counsellors steer us in the right direction, but they are never interfering.
We are all given time to say what we want. If one of us is not saying much, they are brought into the discussion. No-one is left out.
I think the most important thing is that we all understand what everyone else is going through, and we have had explained to us that there is no right or wrong way of coping with our grief, and that every person’s journey is different.

From Victor Evans who attends one of the Australian Centre for Grief and Loss Discussion and Support Groups.
Ask an expert

From next month there will be the opportunity to send questions you may wish to ask an expert. One question will be selected for each newsletter and we will not include information that will identify you.

Below is an example of a question and response.

People expect me to get over the loss of my wife. I am afraid of the time but as certain moments and times of the year I still have a hard time. Today for some reason I thought of her and felt sad. Right now I have the need to cry. Is it normal?

It is perfectly normal to periodically think about this and feel deeply about it for the rest of your life. You should definitely give in and let it happen - it’s like a wave that comes and goes...it won’t stay. Those are your honest emotions...this is who you are....there is no time limit.

Key contacts and useful links

- Headspace: information and support for young people, www.headspace.org.au
- Beyond Blue: the national depression initiative, www.beyondblue.asn.au or call 1300 224 636
- Reach Out: wide range of information to help young people through tough times, www.reachout.com.au or call Lifeline on 13 11 14
- Kids Matter: information for parents and carers to support children’s mental health and well being, www.kidsmatter.edu.au or call Kids Helpline on 1800 555 000
- Relationships Australia: providing professional services to support relationships, www.relationships.com.au or call 1300 366 277
- Bushfire Life: provides 24-hour, seven day support and call back services, www.mnmemorials.org.au/counselling or 1300 769 978
- Lifeline: Anonymous line and grief telephone counselling services 9098 7706
- The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement: providing support to people, www.grief.gp.au or call 1300 394 995

Your Bushfire Space has been designed for young people affected by the 2009 Victorian bushfires as a space to share experiences, ask questions, and find information about how to cope with their bushfire experience.

Go to: http://www.headspace.org.au/bushfirespace/

Seeds of Compassion Day suggests that we all perform a simple act of kindness for a bushfire-affected person on the first day of each month.

Visit the website for details and spread the word: http://www.seedsofcompassion.com.au/default.html

Sign up for future ‘Staying in touch’ newsletters by contacting 0892 560 010 or 0892 560 099 or emailing your contact details to signups@bushfire.rouse.com.au

Contact Us: Joyce, Marie or Beth - Bereaved Community Recovery and Memorial Team by phone on 9092 5917, 5918 or email marie.theophanides@dfpr.vic.gov.au or beth.johnson@dfpr.vic.gov.au if you would like to contribute to the newsletter, webpage or provide feedback.

Mail: Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority, GPO Box 4912, Melbourne VIC 3001
‘Gathering for Recovery’

A forum for people who have lost someone close to them in the 2009 Victorian bushfires

The Victorian Bushfire and Reconstruction & Recovery Authority’s (VBRRA) second Bereaved Community Recovery forum will bring the bereaved community together to share experiences, find out more about recovery, receive an update about reconstruction and hear from the Bushfire Royal Commission and the Coroners Court.

**Date:** Saturday 10 July 2010
**Time:** 10am - 3.30pm (lunch and afternoon tea provided)
**Location:** Limelight Room, Etihad Stadium

Speakers

Christine Nixon, Chair of VBRRA, will host the event and provide a brief update on the progress of the reconstruction and recovery effort.

Julie Dunsmore, President of the National Association of Loss and Grief and Bath Trauma Recovery Coordinator, will speak about grief and bereavement following disasters focusing on young people and children.

Rob Gordon, clinical psychologist, will talk about grief and bereavement in the second year after the bushfires.

Lana Kolyunska, Community Engagement Manager - Victorian 2009 Bushfires Royal Commission, will speak briefly about the release of the Royal Commission Report expected on 31 July 2010.

Judy Leitch, CEO Coroners Court, will speak briefly about the coronial process following the release of the Royal Commission Report.

You will have the opportunity to ask the speakers questions and share your own experiences throughout the day.

Support will also be available for interstate travellers and child care facilities are available for children aged 3 years and above so please let us know as soon as possible if you are in need of such assistance.

For catering and seating purposes please make sure you register to attend by Friday 25 June 2010.

For more information or to register please contact Veronica Jenkins on (03) 9092 5891 or email veronica.jenkins@dpc.vic.gov.au
From: 
To: 
Sent: Thursday, 15 July 2010 7:18 PM
Subject: Draft - Letter to Newspaper, TV - your input please

Dear All,

As discussed at the Bereavement Forum last weekend, we have drafted a letter to send to newspaper and radio editors and to TV news bosses on your behalf prior to the Royal Commission Findings being released.

I hope this covers some of your thoughts and feelings. I'd appreciate your feedback via return email as quickly as possible so we can send this to appropriate outlets by the end of next week.

We'd like to gather all feedback by the end of next Monday please.

Regards,

Jennifer H

Dear Editors and Chiefs of Staff,

As people who lost someone close to them in the Victorian bushfires of 2009, we ask that you and your colleagues please remember and respect us, and those who we have lost, when covering the Bushfire Royal Commission findings.

While those who died no longer have a voice, we are their mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, daughters, sons, spouses, partners, grandparents, cousins and friends left behind.

We see and hear media coverage of the fires, anniversary events, Royal Commission commentary and opinions of commentators about rebuilding - many times with no reference to the 173 people who died and those who are still struggling with the trauma of their loss.

While we respect that the media will report on these events, we ask that no photo of someone lost be used without permission, and that care be taken when labelling or describing images from the fires and in the days afterwards. We also ask that members of the Bereaved Community are given a chance to voice their views on the Bushfire Royal Commission and the long term process of recovery.

While some of us live in communities impacted by the flames, many of us no longer live or never lived in those areas. However our hearts will always have a place for the people of the 109 communities.

Trauma and recovery experts have helped us understand our feelings by confirming that we are recovering at different stages and in different ways.

They all said how much more difficult the second year can be for us as we try to find new meaning in our lives - they also tell us that the word "closure" doesn't exist - but that we will one day learn to cope with the 'new normal' that has become our lives.

Please respect and remember us, and our lost loved ones, as you go about your work.

Yours sincerely,

Members of the Bereaved Community

(all names to be included below)
28th July 2010

Judge Jennifer Coate  
State Coroner  
Coroners Court of Victoria  
436 Lonsdale Street  
MELBOURNE Vic 3000

Dear Judge Coate,

Re: Coroners Office Communication and the Bushfire Bereaved

Following the February 2009 bushfires the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority established a Bereaved Community Advisory Group comprised primarily of people bereaved through the 2009 bushfires.

This group has highlighted some issues relating to communication with the Coroners Office that have caused considerable distress, and would like to ask that you consider ways in which these issues can be addressed.

Currently communication from the Coroners Office to the bereaved is directed to the senior next of kin, who will hopefully then pass this information on to other family members. However this has not always happened. There have been family circumstances where it has been particularly problematic.

For some people it has been very burdensome to be the senior next of kin and the sole person to whom information is given, and then who has the task of passing this information on to all family members. In the midst of their shock and grief it has been a heavy responsibility to have to inform many other people of news that is inevitably shocking and distressing.

In one instance the senior next of kin was too traumatized even to open the letters from the Coroners Office, and certainly did not pass on information to the rest of the family. In another instance, the senior next of kin did not pass on information in the belief that she was protecting other family members. In other instances of family breakdown, important information has been purposely withheld from family members. Clearly there are serious implications for the grief and ongoing well-being of bereaved family members.

The Advisory Group believes that there needs to be "commonsense privacy", so that other relatives can register as next of kin and to receive information. Having only one person to whom all information is addressed ignores and marginalizes
many bereaved people, which may have long-term consequences for them. The Advisory Group believes that the Coroners Office can in fact have a helpful role in acknowledging that the grief of other family members by finding a way to give information to more than one family member. The additional trauma caused by this aspect of the coronial process could then be mitigated.

We would be glad to discuss this further with you.

Yours sincerely,

Bereaved Community Advisory Group

cc. Ms Judith Leitch, CEO, Coroners Office
cc. Mr Christopher Hall, ACGB
EXPRESSION OF INTEREST

BEREAVED COMMUNITY ADVISORY GROUP

WE RECOGNISE THE IMPORTANCE OF ESTABLISHING A WAY FOR THE BEREAVED TO HAVE INPUT INTO THE BUSHFIRE RECONSTRUCTION AND RECOVERY EFFORT

WE WOULD LIKE TO EXTEND AN INVITATION TO YOU TO EXPRESS YOUR INTEREST IN PARTICIPATING IN THE ADVISORY GROUP FOR PEOPLE WHO HAVE LOST SOMEONE CLOSE TO THEM IN THE 2009 BUSHFIRES.

THE ADVISORY GROUP WAS ESTABLISHED IN DECEMBER 2009 TO ADVOCATE FOR THE NEEDS OF THOSE WHO HAVE LOST SOMEONE CLOSE TO THEM AND TO FORMALLY PROVIDE ADVICE TO VBRRRA.

THE ADVISORY GROUP MEETS ONCE A MONTH ELTHAM.

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED, PLEASE CALL VERONICA JENKINS (03) 9092 5891 OR EMAIL VERONICA.JENKINS@DFC.VIC.GOV.AU BY COB FRIDAY 10 SEPTEMBER 2010.

PLEASE SEE SOME OF THE ADVISORY GROUP'S ACHIEVEMENTS AND CURRENT DISCUSSIONS OVERLEAF.
Bereaved Gathering -
A gathering for people who have lost someone close to them in the 2009 Victorian bushfires.

Following on from the feedback we received from the last forum VBRRRA has organised an informal lunch allowing people to come together and catch up for a chat.
Support services will also be available on the day.

Date: Sunday 24 October 2010
Time: 12 - 3pm (lunch provided)
Location: Treetops Room, Melbourne Museum
Level 1, 11 Nicholson Street, Carlton

Melbourne Museum Car Park
Entry to the Melbourne Museum Car Park is from either Nicholson Street or Rathdowne Street.

Car Park Rates
Day Rate (more than one hour) - $14.00 (max)

Public Transport Options
To plan your trip visit Metlink's Journey Planner at:

Registrations
For catering and seating purposes please make sure you register to attend by Friday 15 October.

For more information or to register please contact Veronica Jenkins on (03) 9092 5891 or email veronica.jenkins@dpc.vic.gov.au
25/11/10
The Honourable John Brumby
1 Treasury Place
GPO Box 4192VW
East Melbourne 3002

Re: Communication to Householders about Prepare, Act, Survive, Fire ready and the Bushfire Impacted Community

Dear Mr. Brumby,

As you may be aware, following the February 2009 Victorian Bushfires the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority established a Bereaved Community Advisory Group comprised primarily of people bereaved through the 2009 bushfires.

At a recent meeting of this group, issues were raised relating to the recent publicity communication to householders about Prepare, Act, Survive, Fire Ready: published with the Victorian State logo beside it. This caused considerable distress, and the group would ask that you consider a more sensitive, considerate and consultative approach to formulate and communicate this information to ensure additional trauma to survivors and all impacted people, including the bereaved is actively avoided.

The group’s response to the “Essential Information for the Fire Season” brochure was that they thoroughly support the information, but the content in the other leaflet, which opened to the date and time of 7th February, 2009 was completely inappropriate, unwarranted and sensational. It is also potentially inflammatory, stressful and re-traumatising. It is the opinion of the group that this information could have been portrayed just as well without the need to make reference to 7th February 2009 or at the very least that the bushfire impacted community be advised that this material was to be distributed in this manner.

They are therefore recommending that the government invite members of Community Recovery committees or the Bereaved Community Advisory Group, so that they be given the opportunity to be consulted and provide input and advice on these initiatives. This could ensure a sensitive approach to prevent such distress occurring again and allow the bushfire impacted community to contribute as they are an invaluable resource.

We would be grateful if you would consider this matter and respond to this request. Yours sincerely,

Annie Norris on behalf of the Bereaved Community Advisory Group
Manager Bushfire Services
Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement
McColloch House
Monash Medical Centre
246 Clayton Road
CLAYTON VIC 3168 Australia

cc Christine Nixon
cc Mr. Christopher Hall, ACG8
SOCIAL GATHERING
at MELBOURNE AQUARIUM
Sunday July 24th, 2011

Did you lose someone close to you in the 2009 Victorian Bushfires?

- A Family member
- Neighbour
- Work colleague
- Relative
- Friend

The Bereaved Community Advisory Group (BCAG) would like to invite you to a social gathering to meet and talk with people who have been through a similar experience.

This gathering is aimed at all age-groups and is FREE for you and your loved ones to attend. Lunch is included, as well as activities for kids and access to the aquarium for the rest of the day. Why not bring family or friends and make a day of it?

Where: Yearra Room, Melbourne Aquarium
Corner of Flinders Street and King Street, Melbourne

When: Sunday, 24 July 2011

Time: 11am-2pm
11:30: Welcome from BCAG
Introduction of Craig Lapsley, Fire Services Commissioner
Sue Evans Fund Book Presentation
1200: Lunch and performance from the Chocolate Lillies

Public transport:
Train - Melbourne Aquarium is a short walk from either Flinders or Southern Cross train stations.
Tram - The Melbourne Aquarium tram stop is located on the free City Circle Tram route and also routes 70 and 72. City Circle trams run every 10 minutes in both directions.

Parking: Parking is available for Melbourne Aquarium function guests, at Secure Parking, 474 Flinders Street at a weekend flat rate of $5. All you need to do is take a ticket from the machine at the boom gates when entering Secure Parking, then visit the Front Desk when leaving Melbourne Aquarium to get the $5 weekend flat rate ticket. You'll need both tickets for Secure Parking's pay station before you drive out.

Aquarium access: Wristbands will be available at the gathering which allow for free access to the aquarium for the rest of the day.

RSVP - Friday, 8th July 2011

For catering purposes, and for access to the aquarium, please RSVP to Erin by Friday, 8th July, 2011 by emailing e.bevege@grief.org.au or calling 1300 664 786. If you have any dietary requirements or if you are bringing children aged between 3-15, or under 3, please specify this when you RSVP.
Event Report
Social Gathering for the Bushfire Bereaved Community

Event Synopsis

Date: July 24th, 2011
Time: 11am – 2pm
Location: Melbourne Aquarium
Purpose: To bring together members of the bushfire bereaved community in a relaxed and social setting, providing opportunity for them to communicate with others who have had similar experiences.

Statistics in Brief

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre event:</th>
<th>Post event:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RSVPed numbers</td>
<td>Actual attendee numbers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendees: 207</td>
<td>Attendees: 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chocolate Lillies: 42</td>
<td>Chocolate Lillies: 30-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGBR staff and volunteers: 9</td>
<td>AGBR staff and volunteers: 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiting List: 81</td>
<td>Still on waiting list: 71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How did they find out? (Including those on waiting list)
On AGBR Mailing list: 67.2%
Through other means: 31.3% (see Planning: Promotion section for breakdown)
Uncertain: 1.5%

Geography of Attendees
Greater Melbourne Area 52%*
Regional Victoria 34%
Undisclosed 14%

* Greater Melbourne includes far outer suburbs such as Eltham, Whittlesea, Werribee etc.

Event Planning

Community Consultation
The Bereaved Community Advisory Group (BCAG) were consulted before and throughout the organising of the event, to ensure that the event catered for the needs of the broader bushfire bereaved community. Feedback and advice from the group consisted of (but was not limited to):
* Necessity for a family friendly event
* Importance of inclusiveness when issuing the invitation i.e. being specific around what constitutes bereavement (losing someone close to you whether it be a relative, friend, neighbour, work colleague etc.)
Importance of reaching as many people as possible from both bushfire affected communities, and those living outside these areas.

Importance of venue accessibility (e.g. parking options and public transport accessible)

Suggestion of running kids activities during the proceedings

Suggestions around menu choice

Venue suggestions, as well as confirmation of Melbourne Aquarium as an ideal location

Recommendations regarding guest speakers

Recommendation to have the choir perform

Venue
After assessing a range of quotes from a variety of inner Melbourne locations, Melbourne Aquarium was selected as an ideal venue for this event. Features included that it was family friendly, centrally located, public transport accessible and cost effective. Melbourne Aquarium offered a family day package rate which included (per person) a buffet lunch, access to the aquarium and a 20% discount for the gift shop and cafe. Room hire, waiting staff and clean up were also incorporated into this costing and children under 15 were given a significant discount. The aquarium were very accommodating with our event, which was by no means straight forward given the unexpected surge in numbers and the incorporation of a choir that was much larger than anticipated.

Promotion
A detailed promotion plan was put together, in the planning phase of the project, however this plan was not completed due to the overwhelming response rate. As such, aside from the mailing list the invitation was mailed through to VBHRA, 5 local council contacts (Yarra Ranges, Latrobe Valley, Nillumbik, Whittlesea and Murrindindji), AGGB bushfire discussion and support group facilitators and the Kinglake Community Peer Support Program coordinator, with the request to send it out to their networks. As a result of this alone, the invitation appeared in the VBHRA newsletter, Kinglake Ranges Newspaper, Whittlesea Council Bushfire Recovery Newsletter and EACH’s Bushfire Affected Communities News & Activities Email bulletin.

RSVP strategy
The invitation was sent out 3 weeks prior to the RSVP date and 5 weeks prior to the event itself. Last year’s social event had attendance of 80-100 people, and much of the initial planning was based around this figure. However, after receiving 70 RSVPs in the first few days of the invitation going out, a re-assessment of numbers and room capacity was negotiated with the aquarium and a cut-off number of 200 respod guests introduced. This number was reached a week before the RSVP date.

Once the cut-off figure was reached, a waiting list was kept, so that in the event of cancellations, more guests could be invited in their stead. This was also a way of keeping the channels of communication open with the members of the community, as many were interested in being added to our mailing list to receive the Staying in Touch Newsletters as well as invitations for future events.

As many RSVPed guests as possible were contacted in the lead up to the event in order to confirm attendance. This enabled us to re-confirm numbers and fill any cancellations from the waiting list. As with any event, there was still a number of
guests who did not turn up on the day, however this RSVP strategy helped to decrease this number.

So the Event

Speakers
- Rhonda Abotomey and Elizabeth Savage-Kooroonya, Bereaved Community Advisory Group
- Craig Lapley, Fire Services Commissioner
- Carolyn Westall and Vicki Evans, Sue Evans Fund for Families

All speakers were pleased with the event and received a yellow rose as a thank you gift.

Brochures provided
- ACGC bushfire counseling services
- ACGC support groups – kids and adults
- ACGC about Grief
- ACGC newsletters – Staying in Touch (bushfire specific) The Rosemary Branch (general grief and loss)
- Bushfire Community Support program – brochure and support line magnet
- Red Cross kids brochure
- Surviving Traumatic Grief Book (The Sue Evans Fund for Families both sold and gave copies away)

Lucky Door prizes
Melbourne Aquarium kindly donated the following prizes that were distributed to guests in the form of a ‘lucky door prize’ raffle.
- 2 x Family Memberships to Melbourne Aquarium (year-long membership for two adults and 2 children)
- 3 x Tickets for 2 adults for ‘Friday Night Drinks’ at the Aquarium (special event held once a month)

Choir performance
The Chocolate Lillies were invited to sing at the event, as a number of members of BCAG were keen to have them perform. They performed 3 songs during lunch, which were all well received by the guests. After their performance the choir were given a yellow rose each as a thank you, were provided with tea, coffee and cake and were invited to stay at the event until the end of the function at 2pm. The aquarium also kindly provided vouchers for the choir to receive 20% off at the Gift Shop and at the Aquarium Cafe.

For the kids
In order to keep kids occupied during the event (particularly during speeches), a range of craft activities were run by ACGC Support Group Coordinators. Two face painters were also present and were given a VISA gift card to help cover any costs incurred as well as a yellow rose to thank them for donating their time.

Melbourne Aquarium also provided stickers, tattoos, colour-in placemats and aquarium passports free of charge for the kids.
Post event evaluation

Both at the event and after, AGBB received a great deal of positive feedback.

Emails received by AGBB from event attendees

“Thanks Erin for a wonderful day, we all thoroughly enjoyed it.”

“Thank you so much for the opportunity to attend the Aquarium on Sunday. We had a good time and [my daughter] was able to catch up with [a friend]. They had lost touch so it was good for them to get together again and the aquarium was as good as I remember it.”

“We just want to say a big thank you to you and your organisation for the lovely day we had yesterday. Many of us do not get the opportunity to get into Melbourne and also would not be able to afford to go to the Aquarium. It was fantastic. Winter has been very hard as many people are still living in tents, and it is depressing to see the slow speed at which our friends homes are being completed. We are very grateful that you thought to give us a lovely day out, we cannot thank you enough. I was glad of an opportunity to speak to the Chief Fire Commissioner too, about what he can do to help prevent such a large catastrophe in the future.”

AGBB Evaluation

All AGBB staff who helped out on the day have fed back that they believed the event was very successful on a variety of levels.

Successes include:

- High rate of interest and attendance
- Improved reach: 31% of attendees were not previously on our mailing list
- Broad geographical representation
- Broad age representation: all age groups were represented in kids, teenagers, young adults, adults and the elderly
- Short speeches ensured that interest was maintained throughout
- Popularity of venue
- Increased awareness of BCAG
- Many guests appeared to be mingling and connecting with those who were outside of the groups they came with

Improvements for future events:

- Earlier planning around contingency plans should numbers exceed that expected.
- Inclusion in the invitation that RSVP is essential and that you should book early to avoid disappointment.
- If working with the Choir again, communication needs to be better streamlined

BCAG Evaluation

The event will be discussed at the next BCAG meeting (3/8/2011) so that AGBB can gain further feedback around event successes, as well as areas that could be improved in the future.
BUSHFIRE BEREAVED ADVISORY GROUP
Profiling our skill set to achieve maximum benefit.
This group provides a WEALTH OF ADVICE AND INPUT
drawn from a WIDE RANGE OF PERSPECTIVES which include:-

Personal Bushfire traumatic experiences
Missing persons
Community recovery projects and CRC's
High & extensive Public and Media profile
Police, Criminal and Court Process

VBRRRA
Coronial

Property & Material loss
Royal Commission

Government & Departmental Involvement at local State and Federal levels

By Rhonda Abbotney 2011
To: VBAF

From: The Bereaved Community Advisory Group

Re: Additional Psychological Counselling Vouchers

Dear VBAF,

The Bereaved Community Advisory Group (BCAG) circulate a periodic newsletter to over 250 people impacted by the bushfires of 2009, with particular focus being on those people bereaved as a consequence of the bushfires.

The BCAG is aware that an additional allocation of psychological counselling vouchers, funded by VBAF, is apparently available for fire affected individuals who have fully utilised the twelve vouchers available under rounds one and two - in essence a third round of vouchers.

To assist BCAG in facilitating improved support and recovery, we are writing to ask VBAF to please advise us of the details and application arrangements for this third allocation of counselling vouchers so that this important additional resource can be promoted in the next BCAG newsletter.

It is a pleasure to be able to share positive opportunities, such as these additional psychological counselling vouchers, so that all people whose lives have been adversely changed by the events of February 7th have equal access and opportunity to the generous, publically provided recovery assistance.

Thank you for continuing to support people, including the bereaved. As you would be aware the dispersed and diversified circumstances of the bushfire bereaved adds complexity and challenge in recovery initiatives and BCAG would like to ask that VBAF keep forefront in their process some of the unique and extra challenges faced by this cohort of bushfire people.

Yours sincerely,

The Bereaved Community Advisory Group
To: VBAF

From: The Bereaved Community Advisory Group

Re: $16 million VBAF allocation for medium and long-term recovery initiatives

Dear VBAF panel and the Community Advisory Committee,

We are writing to you with regards to the $16 million VBAF allocation for medium and long-term recovery initiatives. We are aware that public consultations regarding use of these funds have taken place over the last few months. The Bereaved Community Advisory Group request VBAF consideration that a lump sum allocation be set aside for the bushfire bereaved people for medium to long-term recovery initiatives. The Advisory Group feel disappointed and confused that as part of the VBAF consultation process no consultation was initiated with the bushfire-bereaved community, particularly given that it is an integral community in the recovery sphere and one already formally acknowledged in the bushfire affected space.

Those who are bushfire-bereaved are a true impacted cohort unto themselves - a community not definable by geography. The bushfire-bereaved are not just located in the burnt areas, but rather are scattered throughout the state, and throughout the country. These people, who lost someone close to them in the 2009 Victorian Bushfires, face a host of additional and unique emotional and psychosocial challenges as a consequence of the fires. For example, the suffering of many bushfire-bereaved persons has been compounded by isolation. Others face the additional challenges of rebuilding their lives - physically, emotionally and financially. Some feel they have been forgotten or been poorly represented with regards to the bushfire recovery process, including for medium to long-term recovery.

We, the Bereaved Community Advisory Group (BCAG), were established to advocate for the issues faced by and the needs of the bushfire-bereaved community. As such, we urge you to make a specific targeted allocation of funds for the recovery of the bushfire-bereaved when allocating funds for the medium to long-term recovery initiatives. We are aware that the deadline for putting in a BCAG funding submission has passed, however we urge you to consider making an exception for our group, and indeed our ‘community’, on this occasion.

The bushfire-bereaved face additional challenges in meeting the on-going bushfire-related timetables. As an advisory group and as bereaved individuals, we find ourselves kept constantly busy by the tasks we take on as we assist with bushfire-bereavement matters. When combined with the issues and challenges we face in our personal lives this represents significant demand
and burden, which requires additional assistance and time. Many of the advisory group, bereaved people ourselves, describe extreme bushfire fatigue.

In light of these realities, we would like to appeal to the panel to consider a late request that an allocation of funds be considered for activities that promote social interaction and wellness and respite initiatives for the bereaved community. We are aware that the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement already receive funding for a community support program; however this funding only lasts until mid-2013, and BCAG are concerned that there will be need for increased social activities now, and further programs beyond this period.

In our experience, social gatherings for the bereaved community have proven of immense value. The opportunity to get away, and to interact with people who share similar experiences is a breath of fresh air – particularly to those who are dispersed and isolated.

We are happy to communicate further around this proposal if required. BCAG meet on a monthly basis, and can be contacted via email BCAG2009@gmail.com or alternatively communication can be instigated through Karen Howell on 03 9459 5165.

Thank you for your continuing work and support for all those affected by the Victorian 2009 Bushfires. BCAG appreciate the challenges you face in the process that you are currently undertaking, but would ask that as you progress, you keep the bushfire-bereaved community in mind and communicate and include them in consultation and allocation processes.

Yours sincerely,

The Bereaved Community Advisory Group
To: Department of Premier and Cabinet and the Department of Justice

From: The Bereaved Community Advisory Group

Re: Green Paper: Towards a more disaster resilient and safer Victoria

Dear Green Paper Review Panel,

We are writing to you in regard to the Green Paper released on the 12th September 2011 addressing crisis and emergency management and disaster resilience in Victoria.

We, the Bereaved Community Advisory Group (BCAG), were established to advocate for the issues faced by, and the needs of, the bushfire-bereaved community. Those who are bushfire-bereaved are a fire impacted cohort unto themselves - a community not just located in the burn areas, but scattered throughout the state, and throughout the country.

The people who lost someone close to them in the 2009 Victorian Bushfires, faced a host of unique emotional and psychosocial challenges as a consequence of the fires. Grief does not have a timeline, everybody's journey is different. Grief is not something that one just 'gets over', but is something we learn to live around. This may take many years, particularly in regard to traumatic grief. For bushfire bereaved persons, grief is often compounded by a host of other factors, such as trauma, isolation, and the challenges of rebuilding lives - physically, emotionally and financially.

Having read the Green Paper, we wanted to take this opportunity to emphasise the importance of immediate, medium and long-term recovery needs of those bereaved following a disaster, with particular emphasis around the importance of strong communication channels.

Communication is the key component required to keep people informed, both during and after a disaster. Following the Black Saturday Bushfires those who had lost someone close to them, faced an uphill battle in relation to finding, identifying and claiming their loved ones. Accurate and prompt information needed to be communicated to those awaiting news and this was severely lacking across the board. This of course led to additional trauma and significant distress. It is an extraordinarily harrowing time waiting days/weeks for 'official' confirmation of a death. Families were not offered immediate support regarding the processes and their rights in the aftermath of a traumatic disaster event and struggled to find anyone who could answer their questions. Many felt helpless and unable to control the situations unfolding around them.
On top of all this, many bereaved families also had to deal with the invasion of media following the events of Black Saturday. The media gave little to no regard to the trauma and intense emotion experienced by the bereaved. Many felt they were being trampled on in the quest for a good news story, and this lack of sensitivity, often caused significant additional trauma.

When putting response structures into place, we feel that it is absolutely essential that response and communication processes concerning the deceased be clearly identified, so that sensitive and accurate information is made available to families sooner. We also feel that some regulation around media response must be outlined. We feel very strongly that change needs to occur so that nobody need experience what we went through. Caring for families who suffer a death must have a place across the board in the overall management of a disaster, and subsequent recovery and resilience.

Ongoing communication is also important around services and support (both emotional and financial). Structures need to be put in place to enable continuous communication around the support that is available to those affected by a disaster in the immediate, medium and long term.

Provision of emotional and financial support is essential throughout the recovery process. Recovery from a disaster is ongoing, and as such, we encourage you to investigate and provide the necessary information as to the availability, accessibility and longevity of support services for all those affected by any future disaster, especially those who are bereaved. As discussed earlier, support is needed not just in the immediate — but also the medium and long-term recovery. New challenges and stresses emerge with time, and it is essential that structures and services are in place to support those who face them. We feel that in providing clear, easy-to-access and broad options to support services, you will not only foster resilience for those affected by future disasters, but also for those who are still affected and have ongoing recovery needs.

We are happy to communicate further around this feedback if required. BCAG meet on a monthly basis, and can be contacted via email BCAG2009@gmail.com

Thank you for your work and support for all those affected by the Victorian 2009 Bushfires and for instigating this forum. BCAG appreciate the challenges you face in the processes that you are currently undertaking, but would ask that as you progress, you keep the recovery needs of the bereaved in mind.

Yours sincerely,

The Bereaved Community Advisory Group
### ABBREVIATIONS LIST

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACGB</td>
<td>Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATAPS</td>
<td>Access to Allied Psychological Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBAG</td>
<td>Black Saturday Bushfire Bereaved Advisory Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFA</td>
<td>Country Fire Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRC</td>
<td>Community Recovery Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DHS</td>
<td>Victorian Department of Human Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOH</td>
<td>Victorian Department of Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOJ</td>
<td>Victorian Department of Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DVI</td>
<td>Disaster Victim Identification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRU</td>
<td>Fire Recovery Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOR</td>
<td>Terms of Reference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VBAF</td>
<td>Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VBCMS</td>
<td>Victorian Bushfire Case Management Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VBRA</td>
<td>Vic. Bushfires Reconstruction and Recovery Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VBRC</td>
<td>Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Authors: Rhonda Abotomey and Elizabeth Savage Kooroonya.

This report has been published by the Black Saturday Bushfire Bereaved Advisory Group in partnership with the Fire Recovery Unit in the Department of State Development, Business and Innovation.

Copyright Rhonda Abotomey and Elizabeth Savage Kooroonya 2014.

This publication is copyright. No part may be reproduced by any process except in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

ISBN 13 978-0-9924431-0-8 (Print)
ISBN 13 978-0-9924431-1-5 (pdf)

Keywords:
2009 Victorian bushfires
Black Saturday Advisory Group
Bushfire bereavement
Deaths in disasters
Disaster recovery/response