



## **RISING TO THE CHALLENGE**

### **1. SUMMARY**

A telephone survey of sixty-five community organisations working in mental health by the Queensland Alliance has revealed:

- 19% of organisations are directly affected by the floods, 7.5% have lost their premises;
- 37% of organisations have experienced increased demand for service, and most expect demand to increase significantly in coming weeks;
- Demand for low to medium cost rental housing is likely to escalate in the worst affected areas;
- The general public will need information and education on how to maintain and promote their mental health and the mental health of others in their communities;
- Community spirit and resilience is strong, but will need significant attention and investment in the coming months to ensure ongoing community wellbeing.

All of us – business, government and community – will need to respond to these needs. The Queensland Alliance recommends that Governments consider:

1. Assistance available to small businesses affected by the floods is extended to small non-profit organisations serving the community.
2. A small grants program is established which makes funds available to support local community initiatives aimed at maintaining and promoting community resilience and wellbeing. This program is administered by the Queensland Alliance to streamline the process of grant-making to local community organisations.
3. The Queensland Reconstruction Authority ensures low to medium cost housing is made available in affected communities as a matter of high priority.
4. Funding is provided to establish local health promotion officers based on the successful rural model of *Act-Belong-Commit* from West Australia. This funding will be managed by community organisations and will support and extend community participation in existing sporting, recreational, arts, cultural and other local groups.
5. One-off funding is available to mental health community organisations to increase skill levels in working with trauma and supporting people experiencing the mental health effects of trauma.

## **2. INTRODUCTION:**

The Queensland Alliance is the peak body for the mental health community sector. We are an independent charity which represents over 200 community organisations working in mental health in Queensland. Our membership is made up of a variety of organisations from all regions in Queensland, and ranges from large national organisations, to small unfunded support groups in the community.

## **3. BACKGROUND:**

The 2010/2011 flood crisis in Queensland has affected over 75% of the state over a significant period of time. Media and political attention has focussed on the destruction of physical infrastructure and how this needs to be repaired. The Queensland Alliance has contacted over 100 of our members in flood affected communities to assess the impact of the floods on their services and their clients, to the research also aimed to gain an understanding of what these organisations believe may be some of the challenges faced by their communities during the rebuilding process.

## **4. METHODOLOGY:**

115 member organisations in the areas between Rockhampton and Brisbane were contacted directly by telephone between 19 and 21 January 2010. Sixty-seven (67) member organisations responded. Members were asked the following questions:

- Have you been affected by the floods
- Is there any assistance that you need?
- Have you experienced an increase in demand for your services?
- What do you think your community will need to maintain and promote good mental health in the coming months?
- Are you funded by the Department of Communities?
- Is there anything else you would like to let us know or follow up?

This data was then compiled in the Queensland Alliance database, and analysed by the CEO and Operations Manager.

## **5. FINDINGS:**

### Direct Impact

Thirteen organisations or 19% of respondents had their premises directly affected by flood waters:

1. Ipswich Regional Advocacy Service Inc (IRASI) - Ipswich
2. Jacaranda Clubhouse - Ipswich
3. Alara Assocaiton - Ipswich
4. Boystown - Milton
5. Toowoomba Depression Support Network - Toowoomba
6. Neami – two offices evacuated
7. Lifeline - Ipswich
8. Mental Illness Fellowship of Queensland – damage in Cooroy and Central Queensland
9. Amparo Advocacy - Milton
10. Micah Projects – West End
11. FSG Australia – Ipswich centres closed
12. Assert Services - Toowoomba
13. A Place to Belong – West End

Ipswich Regional Advocacy Service Inc; Jacaranda Clubhouse, Toowoomba Depression Support Network and Boystown, lost their premises and are currently in temporary premises or searching for alternatives.

Many other organisations reported that they had difficulty maintaining service delivery, as staff were either affected by the floods or had difficulty reaching their place of work.

Immediate Impact on Services:

37% of respondents reported an increase in demand on services. Most enquiries were related to concern about others and counselling services.

Lifeline reported record breaking enquiries, both via telephone and in person. Centacare Toowoomba reported an increase in demand, particularly from Murphy's Creek, Chinchilla and Dalby. Neami had an increase in enquiries. Micah, Footprints in Brisbane and Brisbane Youth Service have all seen an increase in clients made homeless by the floods, including those in boarding houses.

The majority of services that reported an increase in demand were from Toowoomba, Ipswich, Western Brisbane and Inner City Brisbane.

Members in the Rockhampton region had not seen a significant impact on demand. Three organisations in Rockhampton stated that this was due to Rockhampton being “very well prepared”, and that natural disasters are “part of their social fabric”.

#### Additional Findings:

All organisations contacted were concerned about the long term impact of the floods on the mental health of their communities.

#### *Raising Awareness*

Raising Awareness through advertising and community information services was identified by members as a vital component of the long term flood response. Currently there is not a lot of focus on mental health, as the repair of physical infrastructure has been a priority. Community organisations believed awareness raising should not only focus on services, but also increasing general mental health education so that people can care for their loved ones. Direct mental health promotion to affected populations was identified as a critical part of a future response.

#### *Workforce*

All organisations have been very focused on maintaining continuity of services for their clients, as to not further traumatise them. Bidjerdii Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Health Service in Rockhampton encapsulated all services by stating “they are continuing all programs to make sure their clients mental health is maintained”. There was a general concern that the pressure on staff could not be maintained, and that extra resources will be needed in future to better support agencies. Not only do currently staff require upskilling, but new staff will be required to meet the increased community demand on services, particularly with trauma skills.

## **6. ANALYSIS:**

#### *Homelessness*

The demand for both public and affordable private housing outstripped supply before the floods and services weren’t able to house all clients. The demand for reasonably priced rental will increase. People who were already marginalised in the rental market - such as those with a mental health issue - will be significantly disadvantaged in the rental market. As one respondent stated:

*The reality is that our clients are already at the bottom of the heap and the heap suddenly got a lot bigger. There is a supply and demand issue, even counting what can be brought on line quickly or can be brought into service from being unoccupied. There was a huge mismatch between supply and demand prior to the floods and this will only increase.*

### *Community Response*

Harnessing the community spirit that has been evident during the flood recovery was identified by many respondents. Footprints in Brisbane stated that they were “observing a sense of euphoria in response to the help from the community”. However, organisations will need additional support to ensure that community based services are able to respond to the needs of *their* communities.

A one-size fits all response by external organisations that does not take into account the different social and mental health challenges faced across the many different areas of Queensland, will not meet community needs. Resources will be required to support existing local activities and priorities, and be sensitive to the diversity of interests both amongst affected communities and within them. Engaging people in these types of community activities may then encourage those who need counselling or stronger interventions, to avail themselves of this support.

Education around general wellbeing and promoting mental health after natural disasters was also mentioned by community services. A number suggested that information on mental health promotion will be desperately needed by individuals, families and communities in the coming months.

## **7. RECOMMENDATIONS:**

All of us have a responsibility to respond to the community needs identified in this report. Contributions will be required from families and individuals, community organisations, businesses and governments at all levels. These recommendations are focused on governments, but could also be supported by all of us in the community. The Queensland Alliance recommends that:

7.1 Assistance available to small businesses affected by the floods is extended to small non-profit organisations serving the community.

7.2 A small grants program is established which makes funds available to support local community initiatives aimed at maintaining and promoting community resilience and wellbeing. This program is administered by the Queensland Alliance to streamline the process of grant-making to local community organisations.

7.3 The Queensland Reconstruction Authority ensures low to medium cost housing is made available in affected communities as a matter of high priority.

7.4 Funding is provided to establish local health promotion officers based on the successful rural model of *Act-Belong-Commit* from West Australia. This funding will be managed by community organisations and will support and extend community participation in existing sporting, recreational, arts, cultural and other local groups.

7.5 One-off funding is available to mental health community organisations to increase skill levels in working with trauma and supporting people experiencing the mental health effects of trauma.

