

# Review of the *Vulnerable people in emergencies* policy

Discussion paper

December 2017



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# Foreword

This Discussion Paper is an important component of the review of the *Vulnerable people in emergencies* policy by the Department of Health and Human Services. It illustrates a commitment by the department to engage in a process that is inclusive and reflective of the important role the broader emergency management and community service sectors play in improving the safety of all vulnerable Victorians.

Events such as *Epidemic Thunderstorm Asthma* and the *Bourke Street tragedy* are indicative of the changing face of emergencies and the changing faces of communities. Not all communities will be grounded by a common thread such as geographical location, or a shared interest such as sport or a cultural belief system. This will make it challenging to identify those requiring assistance in the event of an emergency, however it will also provide the incentive for this policy to promote and facilitate the building of community resilience.

A renewed emphasis on preparedness and planning will be an opportunity to revisit an important part of the policy and contribute to the sector-wide commitment to build resilient communities.

The department's Strategic Plan 2017 highlights the need for a more people-centred, outcomes-based approach to service provision. The emphasis will be placed on evaluating policy outcomes which is embedded in the development of good policy. We will reference the lessons learnt from the 2009 Victorian bushfires, work with our emergency management colleagues and reflect on the publication of the University of Melbourne's *Beyond Bushfire Final Report*, which encourages us to think more openly around the relationship between policy outcomes and what those outcomes look like on the ground.

The department is committed to delivering a policy that better reflects the needs of all vulnerable Victorians. Your contribution will enable the department to understand what is required to achieve this and fulfil our responsibility to assist communities to prepare for, respond to and recover from an emergency.

On behalf of the department I invite you to read and reflect on the issues explored in this paper and I look forward to receiving your feedback on how you believe these issues can be resolved.

**Alison McMillan**

Acting Director, Emergency Management  
Regulation, Health Protection and Emergency Management  
Department of Health and Human Services

# Background

The Vulnerable people in emergencies policy (the policy) supports vulnerable Victorians to prepare for and respond to emergencies and forms a key part of Victoria’s emergency management arrangements.

The policy was introduced by the Department of Health and Human Services (the department) in 2011 in response to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (Commission). The Commission recommended that the department establish mechanisms for helping municipal councils to undertake local planning that tailors bushfire safety options to the needs of individual communities. The Commission recommended that municipal councils’ emergency planning include compiling and maintaining a list of vulnerable residents that require tailored advice or support to evacuate in an emergency event.

In 2015, and in response to the Victorian Floods Review, the policy was updated to better reflect Victoria’s “all hazards, all agencies” approach to emergency management.

The policy is designed to improve the safety of vulnerable people in regional and rural Victoria by:

- facilitating emergency planning with vulnerable people
- developing local lists of vulnerable people (Vulnerable Persons Registers or VPR) – coordinated by Municipal councils - which are made available to police and others with responsibility for helping vulnerable residents evacuate during an emergency
- developing local lists of facilities where vulnerable people may gather or be located.

The policy is supported by the following guidelines:

- *Guideline 1 – Planning and screening*
- *Guideline 2 – Vulnerable Persons Register (VPR)*
- *Guideline 3 – Vulnerable Persons Register – Getting started*

The roll-out of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), introduction to the Commonwealth Home Support Programme (CHSP) and associated changes to funding arrangements for the Home and Community Care Program for Younger People (HACC-PYP) has impacted the ability for the policy to operate and prompted the need for the policy’s governing arrangements to be reviewed.

This review presents a timely opportunity for the department to engage the experience and expertise of the broader emergency management and community services sectors to further enhance its arrangements to support vulnerable Victorians before, during and after emergencies.

The current VPE policy will be in place until 30 June 2019.

The review of the policy will consist of four phases over a period of two years:

Phase	Activity
Phase 1 (Jul-Sep 2017)	Consists of capturing issues with the implementation of the existing policy, mapping stakeholders and developing the project plan <i>Output: Draft project implementation plan</i>
Phase 2 (Oct-Dec 2017)	Conducting first round consultation with key stakeholders implementing the policy and development of this discussion paper <i>Output: Circulation of Discussion paper’</i>

Phase 3 (Jan-Jun 2018)	Analysis of the responses to the discussion paper and confirmation on the scope of the review. Establishment of the formal Project Steering Group. Convening of specific working groups to explore the opportunities identified as a part of the Discussion paper. <i>Output: Confirmed policy position</i>
Phase 4 (Jul 2018-Jun 2019)	Implementation of the confirmed policy direction <i>Output: Successful implementation of the revised policy</i>

## What is this Discussion Paper about?

This Discussion Paper (the paper) is an opportunity for the broader emergency management and community services sectors to provide feedback and raise ideas about how the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable Victorians can be enhanced during an emergency. It presents an opportunity to identify gaps in the current policy framework and offer contemporary solutions.

The objectives of this Discussion paper are as follows:

- To effectively engage with the broader emergency management and community services sector to better understand the needs of vulnerable people in the context of emergencies.
- To capture the experience of those with a knowledge of or role implementing the policy and reflect on the lessons learnt to identify possible solutions
- To reflect on the changing face of emergencies and developments in the emergency management and community services sector to help inform the review of this policy.
- To contribute to the development of a policy that focusses on outcomes and is complementary to a whole-of-government approach to supporting the needs of vulnerable people in an emergency.

## The structure of this Discussion Paper

Responses to the Discussion Paper will help shape the future development and effectiveness of the policy.

The paper raises six key issues identified through a series of discussions with key stakeholders and formal roundtable consultations with community service organisations and municipal councils. The key issues include:

- the scope of the policy, definition of vulnerability and language
- clarity of roles and responsibilities
- preparedness and planning for vulnerable people
- operation of the Vulnerable Persons Register
- local lists of facilities
- monitoring and assurance against outcomes

The department welcomes you to expand on any other issues and possible solutions you believe are relevant to the review of this policy.

## How you can respond

Responses to this Discussion Paper can include providing comment on some or all of the questions under each key issue or more generally about the topics raised.



The various themes explored in this Discussion Paper are interlinked and there will be overlap in how the discussion questions have been framed. It is recommended that you read the whole paper before commencing your response.

When formulating your response, the department encourages you to consider:

- aspects of the policy that improve the safety of vulnerable Victorians
- innovative programs or tools in existence in the broader emergency management and community service sectors that may complement a future iteration of this policy
- areas or gaps in knowledge, understanding or practice that require further research or exploration.

Please submit your response to [recovery@dhhs.vic.gov.au](mailto:recovery@dhhs.vic.gov.au) by no later than **2 February 2018**.

## Key issues

### 1. Scope, definition and language

#### Policy scope

Although the policy was revised to expand its focus on bushfire emergencies to include severe weather events, such as floods and storms, the policy remains only applicable to Victorians living in 64 of the 79 Municipal councils wholly or partly within a CFA district.

Whilst it may remain appropriate for some elements of the policy to focus on high hazard risk areas (such as those areas serviced by the CFA), the increasing frequency and diversity of emergencies across requires a consistent and holistic policy approach to supporting vulnerable Victorians to prepare for emergencies, which the current policy does not provide.

This position reflects the emergency management sector's commitment to 'all communities, all emergencies'<sup>1</sup> and the department's commitment to supporting the emergency preparedness of vulnerable Victorians regardless of their location.

#### Definition of 'vulnerable'

The policy defines vulnerable as someone who is frail, and/or physically or cognitively impaired, and unable to comprehend warnings and directions or respond in an emergency.

Therefore, this definition is considerably narrow in comparison to other definitions used in the broader emergency management and community service sectors. The current definition supports the focused and effective implementation of the current policy, particularly the Vulnerable Persons Register. However, the current policy framework excludes other forms of vulnerability, including:

- social isolation; either by circumstance or choice potentially limiting their access to emergency information and/or warnings or awareness by emergency personnel of their location
- mental illness; while mental illness can display as cognitively impaired, it is also much broader and can manifest in a multitude of ways increasing their vulnerability
- those impacted by family violence as a result of stress or trauma associated with an emergency
- homelessness or those sleeping rough or without a fixed address that would heighten their vulnerability due to exposure to the elements

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.emv.vic.gov.au/latest-news/all-communities-all-emergencies>

- culturally and linguistically diverse communities; includes Aboriginal Australians, recently arrived migrants, English as a second language and other cultural and/or religious belief systems that have the potential to influence emergency preparedness and/or response behaviours.

The department does not currently have a consistent or consolidated approach for supporting people experiencing these, and other forms of vulnerability, to prepare for and respond to an emergency.

## Language

The vision for Victoria's emergency management sector is 'safer and more resilient communities'.<sup>2</sup> It promotes the active engagement of communities in emergency planning, preparedness, response and recovery activities.

Ensuring that the policy continues to reflect a strengths-based approach to emergency management while aligning with the emergency management sector's commitment to community resilience will be an important consideration of this review.

Exploring whether the term 'vulnerable' or 'vulnerability' remains the most appropriate terminology for the policy in light of these considerations is a focus of the department.

### Discussion questions:

- Should the current policy framework be broadened to support the emergency preparedness of vulnerable Victorians living in non-CFA serviced areas? How could this be achieved?
- Should the department adopt a consistent and holistic approach to supporting people experiencing other forms of vulnerability to prepare for and respond to emergencies? What existing approaches could complement an expanded definition of vulnerability?
- With a growing focus on building resilience and adopting a more participatory approach to emergency preparedness, how could language around the term 'vulnerable' better reflect community resilience and Victoria's 'all communities' emergency management approach?

## 2. Clarity of roles and responsibilities

Well-defined roles and responsibilities are essential to the effective implementation of the policy. Ensuring that agencies, organisations and departments have the capability and support to fulfil these roles and responsibilities provides assurances that these roles and responsibilities achieve their intended purpose.

The department is responsible for administering the policy to assist vulnerable people to prepare for and respond to an emergency. Municipal councils and funded agencies are responsible for implementing the policy. Red Cross supports the preparedness planning function and Victoria Police accesses the VPR for the purpose of evacuation planning.

An issue identified during the consultation period indicated a level of confusion especially on the relationship between the roles. This confusion was further exacerbated when people are new to the role and new to the policy and may not have an awareness that the policy exists or clarity as to what is expected of them.

The policy review provides an opportunity to confirm that roles and responsibilities currently assigned under the policy remain appropriate and efficiencies and improvements to maximise the supports offered to vulnerable Victorians are identified.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.emv.vic.gov.au/news/safer-and-more-resilient-communities>

## NDIS, CHSP and HACC-PYP changes

The introduction of the NDIS and CHSP, together with funding changes to HACC-PYP will result in more organisations and people providing home, community care and disability services. Clients will have more service choice and the sector is likely to see increased client movement between providers. This will pose significant challenges to the current administration of the policy which relies on State-level funding and clients being effectively managed on the VPR.

The introduction of direct Commonwealth-service provider funding relationships will also require the department to revisit the regulatory arrangements that currently require the department's service providers to comply with the policy.

## Communications, Education and Capability roles

The department has previously undertaken communications activities to raise awareness of the policy. Following the introduction of the NDIS, CHSP and HACC-PYP funding changes, increased education and capability-building activities are likely to be required to support these new providers. Reviewing the existing training framework that was applied to this policy including the REDiPlan preparedness planning offered by Red Cross will create the opportunity to expand this further and identify additional training modules or initiatives to support this function.

### Discussion questions:

- d) What changes can be made under the policy to:
  - improve role clarity
  - better align roles and responsibilities with organisational strengths and capability
  - increase the service and support offering to vulnerable Victorians?
- e) Are the roles and responsibilities outlined in the current policy fit-for-purpose in light of the NDIS and HACC-PYP changes? What changes would increase the policy's effectiveness in this new environment?
- f) What roles and responsibilities is Red Cross best-placed to fulfil? How could we leverage further from the role of Red Cross to support the preparedness function?
- g) What communications, policy education and capability development activities are required to support the policy? Who is best placed to support delivery these activities?

## 3. Preparedness and planning for vulnerable people

Through the preparedness and planning component of the policy, vulnerable people and their support networks are encouraged to participate in their own emergency preparedness planning.

Effective planning can:

- increase individual and community resilience, capacity and capability to prepare for and respond to emergencies
- increase awareness of local emergency risks and hazards as well as opportunities to mitigate those risks and hazards
- connect vulnerable people to locally based programs and resources that better reflect their risk profiles and support needs
- lower the level of individual dependency on government agencies and reduce the need for people to be listed on the VPR.

Through initial consultation, stakeholders have identified a strong need to better emphasise and support a structured, effective, and tailored emergency preparedness and planning program. This will require addressing a number of existing planning and preparedness issues, including:

- lack of training and capability development to support planning and preparedness activities for service providers who do not have a background in emergency management
- little or no connection with broader planning and preparedness programs of municipal councils and emergency service organisations
- limited tools, resources and assistance to support effective planning and preparedness activities
- concerns of service providers that emergency planning and preparedness activities increase organisational risk for client welfare

**Discussion questions:**

- h) How can the current approach to emergency preparedness and planning be improved to strengthen individual and community resilience?
- i) What challenges and opportunities are presented by the introduction of the NDIS and changes to the HACC-PYP to increase individual emergency preparedness and planning?
- j) Who is best placed to support the preparedness planning function? What tools, resources and assistance is required to increase the capability for developing structured, tailored and effective emergency preparedness plans for vulnerable people?
- k) What are some other key emergency preparedness initiatives, either being implemented or trialled, which empower vulnerable people to increase autonomy, choice and resilience?
- l) How could the policy's preparedness and planning activities better align to the preparedness and planning activities of municipal councils and emergency service organisations?

## 4. Operation of the Vulnerable Persons Register

As a recommendation of the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, the VPR will remain a key element of the policy. Ensuring it continues to maximise the benefits of technology enhancements, operates efficiently and provides reliable and accessible information to support emergency evacuations is essential.

### Revalidation process

The revalidation process is the opportunity for funded agencies to review client information on the VPR and ensure that the information is accurate. It is also the opportunity to reassess the need for the client to remain on the VPR.

The VPR revalidation process occurs twice a year in April and October. At these times, the status of client records revert to *'to revalidate'*, prompting community service providers to review and confirm client information. Each revalidation process is open for one month. If a client's information is not verified during this time, their record status defaults to *'unverified'*.

Having unverified client records on the VPR creates uncertainty in the data and an increased safety risk to vulnerable communities and emergency response personnel. If a client record is unverified, additional steps will need to be taken to confirm if the person is at the address and in need of assistance during an emergency.

Some of the challenges experienced by those participating in the revalidation process include:

- There is no mechanism in the VPR system to notify the VPR Coordinator when a client has become *'unattached'* by their service provider. This can result in a client *'floating'* on the register without any service provider maintaining responsibility for updating the client's details.

- The process and/or method for revalidating clients has been inconsistent. There is no assurance mechanism in place to indicate that a client has been revalidated correctly.
- Municipal councils are aware of funded agencies operating in their areas. However, with the transition to NDIS, CHSP and HACC-PYP this information is not as readily available making it difficult to follow-up on clients that have become '*unattached*' from their service provider.

Improving the revalidation process will increase the reliability of VPR data and provide assurances that lists generated for evacuation planning purposes are accurate.

## Information sharing

Information sharing is paramount during emergency response. For the emergency management sector, access to timely and accurate information can be the difference between saving a life and catastrophic loss of life. This policy along with a number of other changes in the emergency management sector, most notably technical solutions, have been designed to enable the sector to reduce the likelihood, effect and consequences of emergencies through effective information sharing practices.

Key challenges to efficient information sharing include:

- A changeover in staff (knowledge transfer)
- New service providers implementing the policy
- Awareness of the policy in the context of responding to an emergency

Implementing additional communication channels to capture and engage new providers is one way to improve knowledge transfer as is the further integration of information systems, including those within the department designed and developed for a specific purpose.

The benefits of an integrated approach to information sharing include:

- More efficient data collection approaches/methodologies (less duplication)
- More accessible information in a timely manner (imperative for emergency response)
- Higher level of accuracy therefore increased confidence in the data

## System management and capability

The VPR is hosted on *Crisisworks*, which is the most widely used information technology system for Victoria's Municipal councils emergency management responsibilities. Utilising the existing platform eliminated the need to create a new system and build the capacity of Municipal councils to operate two different systems.

Some of the issues identified with the VPR hosted on the *Crisisworks* platform include:

- Not all funded agencies have a familiarity with *Crisisworks* and there is currently no formal training available on how to manage clients using this platform.
- There is insufficient space to capture historical information in the client's profile (ie communication attempts or client contact, changes to circumstances, copies of individual emergency preparedness plans etc.)

### Discussion questions:

- m) The VPR will continue to be a key component of this policy. What system or process changes would:
- result in lower numbers of unattached and unverified clients?

- improve the operation and reliability of the VPR?
- improve information flow between clients, service providers, Municipal councils and Victoria Police?

## 5. Local lists of facilities

The requirement for municipal councils to maintain local lists of facilities where vulnerable people may be located is designed to complement the VPR and support Victoria Police to coordinate evacuation planning during an emergency.

The Commission's final report highlighted that the approach to identifying and documenting the location of facilities where vulnerable people are likely to be located was inconsistent. Municipal councils are often aware of where vulnerable people are located and access this information for the purpose of service provision however the way this information is documented and accessed varies.

Councils have reported that in some cases, multiple 'lists' of vulnerable facilities exist, sometimes held by the same agency or multiple agencies for different purposes.

Advances in technology and geo-mapping capabilities increase the reliability and utility of 'lists' that were previously maintained as static documents, updated infrequently.

Any lists of facilities where vulnerable people are commonly located should:

- be reliable and up to date
- be easily accessible by multiple agencies for multiple emergency management purposes
- not duplicate existing or related lists held by municipal councils or agencies

### Discussion questions:

- n) What additional lists of facilities where vulnerable people are likely to be located exist?
- o) How might the policy's requirement to maintain a list where vulnerable people are likely to be located:
  - integrate existing lists kept by departments, agencies and municipal councils?
  - better utilise technology to ensure lists are accessible and up to date?
  - provide a 'single source of truth' for the emergency management sector on facilities where vulnerable people are likely to be located?

## 6. Monitoring and assurance against outcomes

Currently, the policy does not have a robust outcomes, monitoring or assurance framework to confirm whether the objectives of the policy are being achieved.

Municipal councils receiving VPE funding through their HACC-PYP areas are required to submit annual reports to the department on activities undertaken with this funding. Ensuring these reports provide valuable intelligence on policy activities and feed directly into a robust assurance framework will improve policy outcomes and promote the continuous improvement and refinement of the policy.

The departments strategic plan states that it is ineffective to simply report on the number of services government departments and agencies provide without understanding how these actions translate to making a difference to people's lives.

An outcomes-focused approach, underpinned by an outcomes framework, will guide how this policy will be monitored in the future. The framework will enable the department to measure performance against

the key indicators outlined in the policy and provide assurances to all stakeholders that the intent of the policy is being achieved.

**Discussion questions:**

- p) What does success look like in the context of a new policy?
- q) The department is committed to outcomes-based policy development. What outcome(s) should guide the development and implementation of this policy?
- r) How might existing monitoring functions (HACC-PYP reporting and the VPR revalidation process) be improved to form part of a robust assurance framework?
- s) What additional components of an assurance framework are required to confirm that all components of the policy (including emergency preparedness and planning) are achieving the intended outcomes?

## What happens next?

The emergency management sector has changed significantly since the policy was first developed in 2011. Opportunities now exist to better understand how the lessons learnt from emergency events and developments in the emergency management and community services sector have the potential to further enhance the outcomes of this policy.

This includes consideration through this review of other policies or strategies supporting vulnerable people including the department's Emergency preparedness policy for Clients and Services.

The department welcomes responses to the discussion questions accompanying each key issue in this paper. We also encourage you to expand your responses where you see necessary to support the next phase of this review which will look at exploring these opportunities in more detail.

Please submit your response to [recovery@dhhs.vic.gov.au](mailto:recovery@dhhs.vic.gov.au) by no later than **2 February 2018**



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