



SERIES FOR EMERGENCY WORKERS WORKING WITH REMOTE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Overview

There can be gaps between the concept of emergency risk management implemented by emergency teams, and how Indigenous people see the safety of their community.

Emergency risk management requires thinking about future incidents that may not occur, whereas many Indigenous communities have immediate concerns relating to social issues occurring on a daily basis. Lack of understanding about emergency management is not about the ability to understand the concept, or willingness to engage about it, but about its relevance to day to day living.

The Kiwirrkurra evacuation demonstrated that there are ways in which to work with communities that can benefit both the community and the emergency teams, and ensure optimal outcomes in an emergency situation.

Lesson 1 : *Building trusted relationships enables two way communication and understanding*

Lesson 2 : *Good, established communication channels and working within community decision making structures is vital*

Lesson 3 : *Understanding and respecting country and culture will improve outcomes and recovery*

Lesson 4 : *Education and training offers benefits to community members and emergency teams in terms of building resilience, improving planning and preparations, assisting recovery and community development and capacity building*

Lesson 5 : *Self reliance, preparation and planning are important for communities, especially those remote and distant from emergency services*

Lesson 6 : *Emergency teams and emergency service workers need to work with communities in the recovery process*





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Lesson 1 : Building trusted relationships enables two way communication and understanding

Emergency teams working with Indigenous communities need to understand the historical and current context of the community they are working with. This information provides a basis for interactions with the community and is vital for the work to develop safe and prepared communities.

Trust takes time to develop and is based on mutual understanding. While the community learns more about emergency management, the emergency teams and government representatives gain a deeper understanding of the community, the issues, and the strengths of the people.

Since the Kiwirrkurra floods, the relationship between emergency teams and the community has strengthened. The Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia has a program of pre-wet season visits to remote Indigenous communities and provides advice on risk management and mitigation strategies.

Working with communities to prepare for natural disasters in advance helps to build relationships and increases respect and understanding on both sides. It also provides essential on-the-ground knowledge that will help should an emergency occur. Emergency teams will better understand the issues the community faces in a disaster and know who the decision makers are when an urgent, but effective and culturally appropriate response, is required.

Having a good relationship also encourages community members to get in contact with the emergency teams and discuss appropriate responses where there is an imminent risk to the community.





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Lesson 2 : Good, established communication channels and working within community decision making structures is vital

Since the flood in Kiwirrkurra good relationships have been established between senior Kiwirrkurra men and women and emergency teams who are respected for their work and the emergency plans and strategies they have put in place together with the community.

In traditional Indigenous communities, gender roles are clearly defined and specific roles govern interpersonal communication between men and women. Having both men and women from emergency teams working with the community means that knowledge and understanding can develop with regard to both men's and women's issues.



Opening up good channels of communication assists emergency teams to understand:

- the structure of the community
- community consultation and governance processes
- the decision-making arrangements within the community
- the protocols of talking with men and women
- broader cultural, spiritual and custodial considerations in relation to country and community, and events such as flooding (if the community is able to share such information), and
- the community's cultural and spiritual needs. This will ensure that emergency management arrangements and procedures can be flexible enough to accommodate these.





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Lesson 3 : Understanding and respecting country and culture will improve outcomes and recovery

The story of the Kiwirrkurra floods highlights that government agencies and emergency teams need to understand the historical and cultural context of the community they are working with.

This can help avoid awkward misunderstandings and embarrassing trip ups over cultural and/or historical sensitivities and issues that may damage trusted relationships.

After the Kiwirrkurra evacuation, community members spoke of the difficulties associated with leaving their dogs behind. These animals were (and remain) an important cultural element of the community and it was devastating to leave them.

The Kiwirrkurra people identified the importance for Indigenous people being evacuated to shelters in their own country or to a neighbouring community. This helps them to:

- Maintain the relationship with their country and ensure custodial and cultural responsibilities are fulfilled
- Keep in contact with family and friends, attend funerals, ceremonies and other important social and cultural events
- Be accessible for direct involvement in decision making and for recovery work to help get the community back to a sense of normalcy.
- All emergency management arrangements and procedures need to be flexible enough to accommodate the cultural and spiritual needs of the people.





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Lesson 4 : Education and training offers benefits to community members and emergency teams in terms of building resilience, improving planning and preparations, assisting recovery and community development and capacity building

Education and training offers benefits to community members and emergency teams.

Education and training in emergency planning, risk management, mitigation strategies and incident response are invaluable for all communities, particularly remote communities in areas most at risk of natural disasters. It improves pre disaster preparations, and benefits the response and recovery processes.

Education and training also has other positive spin offs – self reliance is enhanced, which in turn helps build individual self-esteem and community resilience. Some emergency education programs link in with school curricula, such as the *Smart Sparx* program run by the Northern Territory Fire and Emergency Services, and the *Skilling Queenslanders for Work* project in Queensland, which included accredited training through the Queensland Fire Service plus literacy courses, training in job search and interview techniques.

On the other side, ongoing cultural awareness and community engagement training for emergency management and services staff is crucial. Not only does it enhance understanding of Indigenous issues, it also increases confidence and competence, and provides the tools to work more effectively, and make the most of, interactions with Indigenous communities.





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Lesson 5 : Self reliance, preparation and planning are important for communities, especially those remote and distant from emergency services

Self reliance, preparation and planning are important for communities, especially those remote and distant from emergency services. It is imperative that emergency managers maximise the community's capability to deal with an emergency until help can be provided.

Current and past chairmen of the Kiwirrkurra community have expressed their desire for continuing education, training and engagement with staff from emergency teams to help them build a strong, healthy and vibrant community.

Where communities, like Kiwirrkurra, are hundreds of kilometres away from the most basic of emergency services, they must be self reliant for as long it is likely to get emergency services there. First aid courses, community fire trailers, emergency kits with food, water and batteries and other necessary items can help communities ride out the initial stages of a disaster until help arrives.

One of the key learnings from the Kiwirrkurra floods experience was that the community needs to be involved early in the plans for response and recovery, particularly where a community requires evacuation.

The Kiwirrkurra people came to feel that moving to another community was preferable to being moved out of their country. Where this is a consideration, an assessment needs to be done of the capacity of the neighbouring community to cope with a population influx. While the neighbouring community can handle large numbers at one time for significant events such as funerals, arrangements may need to be made for material and non material support for the extra demands placed upon them for extended periods of time assisting the evacuated community.





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Lesson 6 : Emergency teams and emergency service workers need to work with communities in the recovery process

The work with the Kiwirrkurra community has highlighted the importance and complexity of the recovery process for remote indigenous communities.

At a minimum, emergency teams should seek to involve the affected community in decision-making processes that affect them and their recovery.

The involvement of community members in the physical recovery of Kiwirrkurra was problematic given the physical distance between Morapoi, where the community was relocated to, and Kiwirrkurra (around 2000kms). The lack of ground access was also a problem.

In the event of a disaster, consideration needs to be given to involving community members in the clean up and renovation process, including decisions on refurbishment of housing. It may be disturbing, for example, for people returning home after more than a year away to find their personal belongings gone and their houses refitted with furniture and whitegoods not necessarily of their choosing.

The involvement of community members in decision-making of this kind is likely to facilitate better community and individual recovery from such traumatic incidents.

