ACT Emergency Services Agency  
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**Strategic Bushfire Management Plan**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback for the next iteration of the Strategic Bushfire Management Plan. We hope you will accept this response shortly after yesterday’s closing deadline which coincided with the release of the Commonwealth and ACT Government responses to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse and Neglect of People with Disability.

**About us**

Advocacy for Inclusion (AFI) is an independent organisation delivering reputable national systemic advocacy informed by our experience in individual advocacy and community and government consultation. We provide dedicated individual and self-advocacy services, training, information and resources in the ACT.

As a Disabled People’s Organisation, the majority of our organisation, including our Board of Management, staff and members, are people with disabilities. AFI speaks with the authority of lived experience. It is strongly committed to advancing opportunities for the insights, experiences and opinions of people with disabilities to be heard and acknowledged.

AFI operates under a human rights framework. We uphold the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and strive to promote and advance the human rights and inclusion of people with disabilities in the community. AFI is a declared public authority under the Human Rights Act 2004.

**Bushfire management: People with disability**

Around 1 in 5 Canberrans has a disability. People with disability are at increased risk during fire and other emergencies. People with disability are over-represented in fire statistics and have accounted for 47 per cent of fire fatalities in Australia between 2003 and 2017.[[1]](#footnote-1) The current 2019-2024 Strategic Bushfire Management Plan (SBMP) places a strong focus on Community Preparedness and Safety, as well as Bushfire Recovery. It is these themes that this submission focuses on.

In terms of Community Preparedness, it is critical that the next Strategic Plan takes into consideration the needs of people with disability when it comes to information and warnings, contingency planning, and relocation in the event of emergency. The current SBMP mentions the importance of recognising that some people will need help to understand or undertake all actions necessary to manage their risk exposure and need support in a bushfire emergency.

A key aspect of preparation is effective communication to identify and inform audiences. Disaster-related information can be passive one-way distribution which may be inaccessible for some members of the community. People with disability have different needs, expectations, and access to information. In the absence of alerts and information tailored to different groups with access needs and practices, people with disability frequently rely on their support networks to assist them with hearing, reading, understanding, believing, personalising, deciding and responding.

Recent insights from the [Living Well in the ACT Region Survey](https://www.act.gov.au/wellbeing/explore-overall-wellbeing/social-connection/sense-of-social-connection) show that people with disability reported a lower sense of belonging and inclusion in the community. Given the importance of community in bushfire preparation and emergency planning, it is vital to consider different mechanisms to ensure that people with disability are seen, heard, and accounted for in emergency planning and situations.

Effective communication and preparation for people with disability could be enhanced by providing accessible and timely information through NDIS client lists, for example.

People with disability may have specific needs leading to difficulties when seeking shelter during disaster events. Emergency shelters typically include public and temporary buildings. These are generally not purpose built to accommodate different requirements.

During all phases of a disaster, people evacuating their homes should be in a safe and accessible environment that is equipped to meet their needs. People with disability often have specific needs including accessibility, specialised equipment, medication storage and support from trained health care workers. It is critical that these needs are incorporated in emergency planning and risk reduction. In general, there is a lack of research on the experience of individuals with disability using emergency shelters. As a consequence, this limits the understanding of requirements and the strategies needed for this population from government agencies, disaster planners, and the wider community.

Workforce planning also needs to prioritise continuity of support by disability support workers especially workers providing essential daily personal care.

In terms of evacuation and recovery, the next SBMP should incorporate transition plans which detail what is in place and what needs to happen if support needs to be delivered elsewhere, for example in public buildings or hospitals. Transition and recovery plans need to account for the numerous unintended consequences that can occur when people’s lives are upended.

Early response and recovery for vulnerable people, including people with disability, should also be seen as a litmus test for the effectiveness of the entire bushfire management effort. People with disabilities are often the first to experience policy and operational shortcomings and unintended consequences during disasters and periods of disruption. The effectiveness of planning, foresight and mitigation measures for people with disability and others is a therefore one useful test of the effectiveness of the entire management plan. This should also be baked into evaluation and post recovery work.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission towards the next iteration of the plan. We’d be happy to expand as needed so please feel free to contact us to discuss further via AFI's Research and Data Policy Officer Jo Luetjens on [jo@advocacyforinclusion.org](mailto:jo@advocacyforinclusion.org) or myself on [Craig@advocacyforinclusion.org](mailto:Craig@advocacyforinclusion.org)

Regards

A signature of a person

Description automatically generated,

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1. Coates L, Kaandorp G, Harris J, van Leeuwen J, Avci A, Evans J, George S, Gissing A, van den Honert R & Haynes K. (2019). [*Preventable residential fire fatalities: July 2003 to June 2017*](https://www.bnhcrc.com.au/publications/biblio/bnh-5807)*.* Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC, Melbourne. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)