Context

The context for the CARTWHEELS project is both highly specific and complex. It is important that this context is understood in order to appreciate the work of the project and the findings emerging from the evaluation. These learnings are of particular importance when considering the place of collaborative creative and mental health promotion strategies in contributing to community recovery responses to communal trauma.

The context of the 2009 Victorian bushfires

The scale of the disaster

As one of the most bushfire-prone areas in one of the most bushfire-prone countries in the world, Victoria has had its fair share of catastrophic fires, such as Ash Wednesday in 1983, the Black Friday fires of 1939 and Black Thursday fires in 1851. While the fires of 1851 burnt an estimated 5 million hectares and in 1939, 2 million hectares, in terms of loss of life, Black Saturday 2009 eclipsed them all. The majority of the fires ignited and spread on a day of some of the worst bushfire-weather conditions ever recorded (though with strong parallels to the conditions of 1939) - ten years of drought, almost two months of little or no rain and an exceptional heatwave in the ten days before the fires with much of Victoria experiencing three consecutive days above 43°C. On the day the bushfires commenced, temperatures reached 46°C. Melbourne and many localities across the state recorded their highest temperatures since records began in 1859. The hot dry winds on the day were in excess of 100 km/hr. A cool change in the evening brought lower temperatures but gale-force southwesterly winds in excess of 120 km/hr, which should have brought relief from the heat, cruelly caused the eastern flanks of the fires to become massive fire fronts that burned with incredible speed and ferocity towards towns that had earlier escaped the fires.

This was not a single fire on a single day – as many as 400 individual fires were recorded on the day. While the extreme devastation occurred on one day, ten days later six fires were still burning out of control and other fires were still burning within containment lines well into March 2009. Flare-ups and new fires continued for weeks.

The subsequent 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission showed the failure of information and communication systems to keep pace with the event. On the night of the 7th February, Victoria Police announced an initial estimate of 14 fatalities. The official death toll was 173, with 120 lost in a single firestorm. Information emerged days and weeks after the event, as the state and the nation tried to come to grips with what had happened, while in Victoria, fires continued to burn and the state remained on bushfire alert. That the event is the eighth deadliest bushfire/wildfire event in recorded history and Australia's worst natural disaster in terms of loss of life are further statistics that speak to the scale and impact of these fires.

It is not the place of this evaluation report to document the tragic history of the fires, but understanding the scale of the disaster is vital for understanding the context for CARTWHEELS. Those living outside the areas directly impacted struggled in the subsequent days and weeks to process the information, statistics

and personal stories about what had happened. Those living in the Murrindindi Shire, where 95 lives were lost and 40% of the shire was burnt lived through an event that is unimaginable to others.[4] This, more than anything else, is the context for the CARTWHEELS project.

The response to the disaster

The Victorian Bushfire Recovery and Reconstruction Authority (VBRRA) was established on the 10th February 2009 –three days after Black Saturday, in recognition that the scale of the disaster exceeded the capacity of existing emergency management provisions. These were set out in the Emergency Management Manual of Victoria and were based on the worst disasters already experienced in the state. It was evident immediately after the disaster that the state was dealing with a recovery operation on an unprecedented scale.[5] VBRRA reviewed national and international disaster recovery models and developed its strategic recovery framework based on a New Zealand model which comprised four pillars of recovery: People, Reconstruction, Economy and Environment.[6] Short, medium and long-term activities were addressed in the Rebuilding Together Plan, the overarching plan for restoration and recovery of regions, towns and communities affected by the bushfires. The plan was implemented through partnerships with the Commonwealth, Victorian and local governments, as well as non-government partners, with strong support for community engagement in the process.

The need for individual and community support was recognised immediately, but, again, developing the response was complicated by the unprecedented nature of the disaster. Some of the key structures either developed or enhanced for the Victorian psychosocial response are outlined below.

◆ The Department of Human Services was delegated a key role in leading the recovery work with people. New structures were required to coordinate the response. The DHS established the Bushfire Recovery Services Unit; the Bushfire Case Management Service, providing case management to more than 5,500 households over two years and working with 4,365 families and Community Service Hubs. In addition, there were major community development programs, outreach services provided by the Australian Red Cross and psycho-social support services including specialist mental health services, non-specialist counselling services and targeted responses to specific needs. These services, designed to reduce the need for trauma services included grief and bereavement supports, community information sessions, mental health counselling services for children and adolescents, special programs in schools and targeted supports for men, women and older people.[7]

As outlined in the *Evaluation of the Psychosocial Response to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires*[8], other supports included:

◆ The Bushfire Psychosocial Recovery Team, established within the Mental Health Branch of the Department of Health to provide policy leadership on the psychosocial responses to the 2009 Victorian bushfires. This team also had a budget to fund activities such as coordination of service networks and workforce capacity building.

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[4] http://www.murrindindi.vic.gov.au/Your_Council/About_Murrindindi_Shire
[5] Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority, Legacy Report, Overview, State Government, Victoria, June 2011 pp. 6 - 8
[6] ibid, p. 9
[7] ibid, p. 48
[8] Australian Healthcare Associates *Evaluation of the Psychosocial Response to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Final Report, November 2010*