



Helping farmers recover - Karleen Elledge, Bayles

Extract 2 of witness statement to the 2009 Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission

15. On 8 February 2009, I went to the general store in Bayles to get a few things and some people came up to me and asked what had happened and how they could help. When I returned home, Mick and I decided that we would try and get together some hay and fencing gear for some of the local farmers in Labertouche and surrounding areas.

16. We made up a flyer, with my mobile phone number printed on it, asking people to donate spare feed or fencing materials and took that down to the general store.

17. By 10 February 2009, my phone was going nuts – hundreds of people were offering to make donations. At that time, we started transforming the Bayles CFA station into a relief centre. There was no direct involvement from the CFA – I was doing this as a member of the local community, rather than as the Captain of the brigade.

18. I received phone calls about supplies being trucked down from Queensland, Perth and all over the country. It felt like everybody was calling the relief centre to say that they had hay or fencing to donate. A lot of people who contacted us wanted to donate money and we had to explain that we could not accept money because we were not a charity.

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19. After a few days, we also started getting phone calls from people who needed help. Baw Baw Shire Council started calling us every hour on the hour to give us a list of people needing help. The Victorian Farmers Federation, the Livestock Exchange, Salvation Army and Cardinia Shire Council were also sending people to us. Calls for help just started coming from everywhere.

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22. Once we started making deliveries to people, I understand that one farmer told the farmer next door, who told the farmer next door, and the word of mouth just kept going. News about what we were doing was spread around entirely by word of mouth – we never made any announcements on local radio. What started off as a simple flyer just took on a life of its own and it snowballed into something huge which I never anticipated.

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25. I closed my cleaning business for about three weeks while I spent all of my time at the relief centre. I hadn't planned on setting up this massive big thing, but it became a massive big thing. Some of my employees were able to continue their regular jobs, but otherwise they told me that they understood why the business needed to close.

Bushfire Education



26. Because of the relief centre, our quiet little town became very busy for a few weeks. During the three week period following Black Saturday, we re-fenced about 70 properties. We had 642 volunteers work for us during those three weeks. It was an enormous logistical exercise but I organised the volunteers a bit like a CFA brigade with "strike teams" and each volunteer designated to a particular team. We had a team sheet so I knew exactly who was on what team, where they were going and what they were doing.

27. After a short time, the relief centre started offering all sorts of things – not just feed and fencing. In our "other things" area, we had an assortment of donated goods, including two horse floats. They were looking a little bit ratty when we got them so we sent them off to a panel beater who repaired them for free. They came back the next day looking brand new, and we donated them to people who had lost their own horse floats. We also received donated supplies for animals, particularly grain and soft feed, which is good for horses with burnt mouths. Horse associations also sent us things like special feeds, medications, rugs, bandages, saddles and halters. As well as providing agistment, we distributed plenty of medical equipment for injured animals. Although we only managed to place about ten horses on agistment, we had a big list of people who volunteered agist animals including cows, dogs and other farm animals. We found that many fire victims did not want to agist their animals and preferred to stay with them. For some, the animals were the only things they had left.

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