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Inspector General for Emergency Management,
GPO Box 4356
Melbourne VIC 3000

Dear Sir,

My qualifications are in engineering and project management achieving the National top award for a Professional Mechanical Engineer's achievement in 2012 along with several States awards and one International top award.

As there were clearly problems with the preparation of preparedness for the Victorian bush fires in respect to Mallacoota, I would like to submit where I perceived such problems to have occurred. They particularly apply to our township being 23 kms from the Pacific Highway at Genoa just below the NSW border and surrounded by state forests with only the one single access road.

In no way whatever do I blame the individuals who so bravely defended us or subsequently cared for us in a manner well beyond expectation, often putting their own lives at risk. The problems appeared to be substantially with pre-planning, a lack of understanding as to the community demographic and district involved and particularly conflicting information given to the public.

As an elderly 87-year-old great grandmother with a 92-year-old husband (lacking mobility) to care for, I naturally set about planning what we should do if the fire risk escalated. I was dumbfounded to find that it was impossible to discover who was responsible for the planning. At no time was a line of authority made clearly known to the population (Were we under the control of the CFA, the State Government, our Regional Council (or unknown District Council) or the local Police?). Periodic notices informed us to have a "Fire Plan".

Evacuation was the obvious but how do retired folk with no sensible alternative accommodation relocate on a pension for what would likely be a month or more? To where do we go? Our plan committed us to act at the

second highest warning level – but it is impossible to leave your home at every such fire risk occasion when you are then faced with deciding at Genoa – “Do I go North or West” and to where?

We were thus committed to going to the safest gathering point in Mallacoota should the fires dictate this necessity. But what was the safest place we were expected to go to?

The CFA meetings directed us specifically to the wharf area.

A subsequent town meeting on the oval directed us to the oval.

A Council warning notice specifically warned us that the wharf area was NOT a safe area to gather.

However, the oval was a ridiculous area to take a 92-year-old mobility impaired resident to locate during the impending likely fire storm. A resident queried the safety of the oval should the fire reach the surrounding forest. The answer was to re-locate to the beach on the shore line (which did in fact occur). The town has, I believe, over 47.5% seventy-year old's plus, with 7.5% being over 80-year-olds. Anyone knowing the terrain from the oval to the beach would be well aware that it is **not negotiable** for the elderly. I therefore ignored this advice realizing that there was only one alternative for the elderly trapped in Mallacoota – to retire to the wharf area where there would at least be multiple fire hydrants in play to re-charge the appliances.

There was however, one other advice given to a just prior town meeting by (I believe) some departmental authority. I attended a packed resident gathering at one of our halls called “The Muddie”. The officer concerned first admitted that he did not know Mallacoota and it transpired that he also obviously did not know the demographic of Mallacoota either.

His advice:

It is safest to stay in your home. Wait till the fire front passes your home (!!!) and approximately ten minutes later go out to extinguish any spot fires!!!! And yes, disconnect your gas cylinders on days of acute fire danger and move them clear of your dwelling. How many times can a 92-year-old do that bearing in mind that their home is on a hill side.

This advice was so ridiculous in our circumstances as to warrant no consideration whatever. We knew that should we stay at the property we would be trapped as there is likely no way out of our area depending on the

fire direction. We were not going to risk that – full stop. Seeing the utter post devastation of the town with some 100 dwellings burnt to the ground was vindication indeed.

Lack of preparedness occurred:

- 1. The town needs a fire plan spelt out and available to all residents.**
2. The town needs to know which of the authorities are in charge in an undeclared State Emergency and post the declaration of such an emergency.
3. The plan needs to be based on the population demographic and noting areas that can become isolated from the emergency centres.
4. In particular there should be notations specifically for the elderly.
5. It is NOT adequate to tell the elderly to have a “Fire Ap” on their phones – there needs to be someone responsible for seeing that they **do have** them available. Not all of us have grandchildren for these tasks.
6. The road-side rubbish around Mallacoota is an unnecessary risk and should not be allowed. Pushing dead vegetation clear of the paths and roads when required simply guarantees an unacceptable fire load where it potentially has the most risk. When I queried this on one such an occasion, I was told “Madam – we are refused by law to remove it”.
7. The same applies to highway verges. We were trapped outside Mallacoota for nearly a month **because of burnt tree risks** along our access highway. The same occurred, but for much longer with the Pacific Highway from Bairnsdale to NSW. Of direct comparison was the NSW section to Eden where much of the highway verge had already been cleared meaning safe access was re-established in a matter of weeks.

The execution of all emergency services during the actual fire storm was, to my observation, exemplary. There were some small gaps in the post evacuation procedures that need to be improved:

My husband I were evacuated by Black Hawk helicopter to Sale. Upon landing, I was medically checked and rushed by ambulance to Emergency, naturally accompanied by my husband. While I was medically checked – he was **not checked by anyone** despite his age and all other evacuees being given detailed checks and accommodation arranged. We simply missed out.

There were no procedures in place for evacuees taken to hospital. Thus, upon being ultimately declared fit for discharge we had no idea whatever as to

where to go or what to do. The hospital staff were wonderful and ultimately made arrangements through whoever (?), to have us taken to a motel for the night which was extended to two nights after enrolling at the Sale Emergency Centre for evacuees.

We were to be located in two motels over the coming week. Both many blocks from shopping and sources of food, medications and clothing. I was unexpectedly evacuated by demand (presumably to care for my husband even although I was 87 years of age) having been told he would be domiciled in a nursing home. Thus, my husband had some essentials with him as arranged the night prior by the Mallacoota Police station, I had absolutely nothing but a handbag. It thus fell upon me to walk more city blocks than I can remember in search of clothing, essentials and food. The second motel provided limited facilities – two cups, some tea bags and a small electric jug (no microwave, what was literally a car refrigerator, no china etc)! Absolutely no way of caring for ourselves. It is no fun being in a strange place without transport and the means of conveniently getting the essentials of life. I walked some five blocks to the local police station to see what information they could provide to be told essentially zilch. I then met an angel from heaven at the local Information Centre in the form of an experienced theatre nurse from Brisbane visiting her family in the district. She cared for me and my husband in ever so many ways as did the motel finally in a limited way by arranging a microwave, refrigerator and collecting some groceries for us.

I would like to confirm the treatment we received at the Sale Emergency Centre was exemplary within the constraints they were subject to. I would note however, that I was continuously asked as to why we could not stay with family. My husband had no family whatever other than a surrogate daughter travelling in Europe who relayed us information on the Mallacoota fires throughout our ordeal. She and her husband were due to return to Melbourne approximately a fortnight later and they undertook to rent a small apartment for us in Melbourne for a fortnight and have friends of theirs collect us and see us delivered there. There was some expectation that we might be able to stay with them subsequently but that became quite impractical due to copious stairways that my husband could not manage. I had three daughters all over the country with two being on rural properties also subject to fire risk that we simply could not entertain going from one to another such environment. My third daughter was interstate with a partner that we could simply not entertain visiting let alone living with. Beyond that, I had a twin brother in Wodonga,

legally blind, living in a small two-bedroom unit who would be delighted to have us. We were reluctant to ask for his help but ultimately had to do so.

Our problem was now how to get home, when could we get home, by what route could we get home? We seemed to have slipped off the emergency records somehow and I had become increasingly anxious as to being home but understood we were not in a category warranting our return. The lack of information was making me increasingly despondent. When I attempted to get information via the Emergency Response Number, I was to find that NSW responded and not Victoria! I asked them to re-direct me to Victoria but they stated they could not do so. So, how do you ring Police Emergency in Victoria when you get NSW? They gave me a Red Cross number which I tried the next morning despite their answering service stating they were closed till the following day. Essentially, I got nowhere until my husband's surrogate daughter found a contact means for me. I pleaded When can we get home? - How do we get home? – By what route do we get home? (Melbourne, Sale, Mallacoota or Albury, Canberra, Eden, Mallacoota)? I was utterly desperate. The response was beyond belief. A phone call asked us to be at the Albury Airport early the next morning where we would be flown directly to Mallacoota. It seemed that the Victorian Emergency Authority along with Victoria Ambulance and possibly The Red Cross all decided to rescue us having subsequent publicity and meetings with their executives in Mallacoota culminating in "Channel 7 Sunrise" filming a 1 hour documentary of which some two minutes plus was aired during the Sydney fire fund raising concert.

We are so happy to be home safely in our beloved Mallacoota and pray that there will be some good come from our collective experiences. I know one thing now – I never want to be evacuated again and will strenuously resist it. Being without transport at our age, not knowing where you will be living, having the trauma of getting food and essentials and not knowing what is going on at your home are very unpleasant experiences when dragged out over a month.

Our property was miraculously left untouched by fire other than being lathered with burnt leaves and bark. Our burden is dealing with a sense of guilt when over 100 other properties were lost and many partially so.

Dianne Blood