

# 2021–22 Snapshot

Year in review



**IGEM**  
Inspector-General  
for Emergency  
Management



### **Acknowledgement of Country**

IGEM acknowledges and respects Victorian Traditional Owners as the original custodians of Victoria's land and waters, their unique ability to care for Country and deep spiritual connection to it.

IGEM honours Elders past and present whose knowledge and wisdom has ensured the continuation of culture and traditional practice.

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# 2021–22 Snapshot

A highlight of key activities through 2021–22, ranging from significant reviews and monitoring responsibilities to the challenges presented with a continuing pandemic.

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- > *Tracking and reporting the momentum of reform*
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*The Inspector-General for Emergency Management (IGEM) provides assurance to the government and the community regarding Victoria's emergency management arrangements. IGEM's assurance activities contribute to better outcomes for Victorian communities before, during and after emergencies.*

*The Inspector-General reports to the Minister for Emergency Services (the minister), and an Office provided by the Department of Justice and Community Safety assists the Inspector-General in the performance of his functions and exercise of his powers under the Emergency Management Act 2013.*

*Our published reports are available online at [igem.vic.gov.au](http://igem.vic.gov.au)*

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As an independent, Governor in Council appointment, the Inspector-General is uniquely positioned to provide Victorians with confidence that our management arrangements are effective and actively supporting community safety in emergencies

Year round, IGEM conducts assurance activities ranging from inquiries to objective reviews, evaluations and assessments of Victoria's emergency management arrangements and the sector's performance, capacity and capability. In a complementary activity, our monitoring of recommendations and actions identified through reviews and inquiries track that agreed changes are being implemented, and are effective and sustainable in the long-term.

Through reliable, evidence-based information, we identify what is working well and where improvements can be made in the State's emergency management arrangements.

## Scales of emergency

Large-scale events such as bushfires, floods and storms occur every year. Less common events include public health emergencies such as thunderstorm asthma and epidemic human disease. Frequent events include traffic accidents, house fires, and medical emergencies. Regardless of their experience, when people call for police, fire, or ambulance assistance, they expect that call to be answered quickly.

Throughout 2021–22, a range of emergency events affected Victorian regions and their communities including:

- the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent strain on the broader health system, including triple zero 000 emergency ambulance call answer and dispatch
- recovery from the 2019–20 ‘Black Summer’ fires in the East Gippsland, North East and Alpine regions
- recovery from the June and October 2021 storms
- supply, or threat to supply, in critical infrastructure areas including energy and food systems.

Unlike generations past, few living Australians have experienced anything like the upheavals wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since March 2020, all Victorians have been affected, and in some way continue to be affected, by this significant public health emergency.

Associated consequences ranging from death, physical and mental health effects, social dislocation and economic ruin on a broad scale, have held prominence and prevalence in media outlets, and occupied people’s day-to-day lives.

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged all Victorians in many ways, and similarly it has placed enormous pressures on our health care system including the ambulance service, and by extension, emergency call-taking.

While less obvious to the broader community, the long process of recovery for many Victorians affected by the 2019–20 Black Summer fires, and the storms and floods of June and October 2021 continued.



# Planned review program driving system-wide improvement

## Identifying opportunities for better practices in emergency management arrangements

IGEM undertakes system-wide reviews, including reviews of the emergency management functions of responder agencies and government departments based on an Annual Forward Plan of Reviews.

In 2022 we completed the following reviews:

- Victoria's preparedness for major public health emergencies, including pandemics
- Review of emergency ambulance call-answer performance during the COVID-19 pandemic-related surge

### Victoria's preparedness for major public health emergencies

IGEM completed its *Review of Victoria's preparedness for major public health emergencies, including pandemics* in June 2022.

Preparedness for all types of emergencies is at the heart of creating safer and more resilient Victorian communities. We know this from decades of responding to large-scale emergencies and disasters stemming from natural, environmental or human-made hazards.

A major public health emergency is an extensive biological or biohazard event that is causing – or has the potential to cause – loss of life or serious risk to public health, significant adverse consequences for the Victorian community, and threatens to overwhelm the public health and healthcare systems.

The COVID-19 pandemic has drawn major public health emergencies into sharp focus for both government and the community. It provides an opportunity to consider how prepared Victoria was to respond to a public health emergency of this scale, duration and severity.

While the pandemic provides one example, Victoria's arrangements need to be flexible enough to accommodate a range of public health emergencies. These may be rapid onset and brief duration (for example, thunderstorm asthma), of medium duration but broad scale (smoke and other air quality events) or gradual onset and prolonged duration (pandemic influenza).

In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, case studies such as heatwave, air and water contamination, thunderstorm asthma and other forms of communicable disease, provide an examination of Victoria's preparedness for public health emergencies, specifically major emergencies which will test the emergency management sector's capability and capacity to respond.

While this review used the pandemic as a key case study at a point in time to examine preparedness, it is important to acknowledge much has happened since the commencement of the pandemic as government, agencies, and the Victorian community have learned to cope and eventually live with a virus which continues to infect thousands daily and tragically claims many more lives.

Victorians owe an enormous debt to those frontline workers in the State's health system and the emergency services, together with many in government and the private and non-profit sectors who continued to work in the face of the unknown implications of the pandemic in an effort to reduce its impacts.



## Emergency ambulance call answer performance during the pandemic

The second of IGEM's two completed reviews focuses on the acute, direct impact of the pandemic and the implications for emergency triple zero (000) call-taking.

Victorians are accustomed to being able to rely on the emergency call service. They are used to calling 000 and being promptly connected to the most appropriate emergency service (police, fire, ambulance) by ESTA – the Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority.

Although not without its challenges, ESTA has demonstrated an ability to manage large emergencies that result in a surge in calls over a period of hours, days or in some cases several weeks. However, in its 17-year history, ESTA has not had to face a sustained surge in activity that has lasted more than 12 months.

In the *Review of emergency ambulance call-answer performance during the COVID-19 pandemic-related surge* we examine and assess both ESTA's and the broader emergency management sector's planning and preparedness for a major surge in emergency calls. Also examined is how the sector responded to the surge in 000 calls, the effectiveness of its response, and collaborative efforts to address the challenges.



Like its counterparts in other jurisdictions both in Australia and around the world, ESTA has faced challenges in managing record-breaking volumes of emergency calls, particularly for ambulance events.

As the COVID-19 pandemic peaked, the level of emergency calls grew in late 2021 to a point where most 000 calls in Victoria were taking an unacceptably long time to be answered, damaging the public's confidence in the system and placing the community at risk.

While ESTA plays a critical role in the Victorian health system, numerous others have critical roles in meeting the health needs of Victorians. For example, Ambulance Victoria needs to ensure an ambulance arrives at the scene in a timely manner once the 000 call is answered and ambulance is dispatched.

In some reporting periods, Ambulance Victoria recorded its lowest quarterly performance against its benchmark. In addition, ambulances were also waiting longer at emergency departments to transfer patients (sometimes referred to as ramping).

The COVID-19-related surge in 000 demand has had major community consequences with call answer times blowing out for calls relating to life-threatening emergencies. Sadly, numerous call answer delays may have had a negative effect on patient outcomes. The review uses de-identified examples of these cases to illustrate the potential harm of poor call answer performance.

The actual consequences of degraded call answer and response times for the community may not be clear for some time. It is the role of the Coroner to determine whether any call answer or response delays were contributing factors to any death. Consistent with his role, the Inspector-General continues to liaise with the Coroners Court of Victoria in order to provide information to assist its inquiries into the circumstances surrounding these deaths.

ESTA's frontline staff, like many across the emergency management sector, have endured a heavy burden during the COVID-19 pandemic and continue to do so today.

# Emergencies are managed in line with Victoria's arrangements

## The system is effective and efficient

Monitoring, reviewing and assessing critical infrastructure resilience at a system level allows us to proactively identify emerging performance issues, risks and trends.

Sector organisations undertake monitoring, debriefing, review, investigation, audit and evaluation activities both at a point in time, and specifically in response to unforeseen events.

During active events, our established practices allow us to quickly initiate monitoring activities and maintain watching briefs in a way that is low burden and low intensity.

Through collecting and analysing publicly available information, sector reporting and observations of relevant meetings and committees, we are efficient in our monitoring function, and have avoided any burden on response, relief and recovery agencies, allowing them to focus on their emergency roles and functions.

Live observations of select emergency events have informed the Inspector-General's advice to the minister regarding any apparent risks associated with those emergencies, and has facilitated the provision of responsive and timely advice on emerging sector, state and national issues, risks and trends.

## Pandemic response

The emergence of the communicable disease outbreak of the novel coronavirus strain (COVID-19) emergency presented an unparalleled challenge for Victoria, and significant demand on health and emergency management sector resources in managing the societal-wide impacts and consequences into the foreseeable future.

To maintain IGEN's system-level focus our approach to COVID-19 emergency monitoring concentrated on system-level governance, policy development, and incident management aspects. Australian Government decisions and their potential impacts on Victorian Government decision-making were also closely monitored.

IGEM monitoring of the COVID-19 pandemic response commenced in March 2020. As the pandemic continued through 2021 and into 2022, bringing with it several infection waves, our monitoring included a specific focus on surge response in the emergency and health systems.

## State Energy Emergency – June 2021

On 17 June 2021 a State Energy Emergency was declared in response to the impacts of flooding in Gippsland on the Yallourn power station.

If the mine flooded, Yallourn power station – which provides around 22 per cent of Victoria's power – would either stop operating or operate at a significantly reduced capacity, potentially for months. Swift action was essential to stabilise the mine walls to protect the state's interests and ensure ongoing energy security.

With the understanding that the basis of the proclamation was to enable urgent remediation works to occur at Yallourn, IGEN commenced monitoring activity focused on system-level governance, information flows between relevant committees and agencies, and overall progress toward mitigation of risks to ensure the continuity of the supply of energy to Victoria.



## Power outages – October 2021

A severe weather and wind event on the night of 28 October 2021 and the following day resulted in more than 500,000 Victorians affected by the power outages.

Our monitoring approach concentrated on system-level governance, information flows between relevant committees and agencies, and overall progress toward mitigation of risks and restoration of power.

It was also an opportunity to observe if lessons from the June 2021 storm and flood events were evident in practice – specifically around ensuring intelligence from the ground was collected and used to inform decisions.

Reflecting our low burden, low intensity approach, the intention in these activities was not to provide the minister with routine observations, rather to provide only those observations that were time critical and reflected significant system-level risks.

However, the results of all our monitoring activity are relevant for IGEM’s existing and potential future assurance activities.

These legislative monitoring functions are an important part of Victoria’s emergency management arrangements.

By providing this function IGEM supports ongoing continuous improvement across government and industry, and in turn, better outcomes for the Victorian community.



# Tracking and reporting the momentum of reform

## Assurance founded on transparency and integrity

IGEM's implementation monitoring offers confidence to government and Victorian communities that lessons and agreed changes from emergencies are contributing to sustainable improvements that make a positive difference.

The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic were largely unknown when it began, exposing shortcomings in government services that in turn eroded community confidence and trust.

For IGEM, being able to provide our communities with a level of confidence that the momentum of reform generated by past emergencies is continuing, despite a changing environment, is vital.

## Preparedness and response to future emergencies

By ministerial request, we report on the work of departments and agencies in implementing the actions committed through government response and implementation plans.

This includes reporting of any risks or delays to implementation progress and our assessment or commentary on the alignment of implementation with the intent.

In addition to our committed annual monitoring reports, we published our first report assessing the Victorian Government's implementation of recommendations and actions in response to the *Review of 10 years of reform in Victoria's emergency management sector* and the independent *Inquiry into 2019–20 Victorian Fire Season – Phase 1*.

As communities and individuals affected by the 2019–20 fire season continue their journeys to recovery, it is important that we track and report on how the lessons identified in the wake of the fires are being turned into realistic improvements to Victoria's emergency management system.

Our assessment shows the progress the State has achieved in terms of learning from the 2019–20 fire season and making improvements in response, as well as how it is enhancing Victoria's emergency management arrangements through initiatives in response to the 10 Year Review.

In terms of implementation progress against the combined 139 response actions to these reports, 48 actions are now complete, 75 actions are in progress, 10 actions are closed with no further activity planned, and six actions are yet to commence.

As many key initiatives are by their nature longer-term foundational pieces of work currently in the early stages of development, this report will be the first of in a series of progress reports tracking reform in Victoria's emergency management arrangements in the wake of the 2019–20 fire season.

The report also provided an opportunity to acknowledge and commend the sector for its efforts implementing improvements in these challenging times, as Victoria continues its response to the COVID-19 pandemic while at the same time preparing for, responding to, and managing recovery from other emergencies, and the sustained operational pressures that this brings.



# Thinking big in anticipation of uncertainty



## Adapting arrangements for a changing Victoria

Preparedness for all types of emergencies is, and will continue to be, at the heart of creating safer and more resilient Victorian communities. We know this from decades of responding to large-scale emergencies and disasters stemming from natural, environmental or human-made hazards.

However, the need to 'think big' in anticipation of uncertainty due to potential crises is probably more apparent now than at any point in our recent history.

Emergency management arrangements address hazards based on risk assessments that are highly influenced by past events like bushfires, floods, heatwaves, and pandemic influenza. Risk assessments should involve thinking about uncertain events, including those that may never have happened in Victoria or of a magnitude not yet experienced.

Building resilience for a future Victoria lies in focusing on common consequences rather than discrete risks or specific hazards.

There is an increasing need for Victoria to be prepared for more widespread, longer and more complex emergencies as the impacts of climate change take effect. The emergency management sector needs to better understand intersectionality in systems and sectors, for example, how climate change will influence public health as much as it influences natural disasters.

Similarly, we need to learn how pandemic illness drives change through economic and social consequences.

## Challenges or opportunities in a changing Victoria

Victorians from all communities – such as youth, multicultural, multifaith or LGBTIQ+ communities – have perspectives and experiences which offer insights into ways in which preparedness, response, relief and recovery arrangements could embrace a wider range of cultures, values and needs.

Through conducting the Fire Season Inquiry, IGEM is well aware that the needs and values of Aboriginal Victorians have been poorly recognised or understood during past emergencies. Aboriginal Victorians have lived through generations of disconnection, discrimination and trauma which has influenced their concepts of culture and healing – and their experiences during emergencies.

The opportunity to better prepare communities against future major emergencies that have whole-of-government consequences and affect the entire community lies in an appreciation of Victoria's changing demographics. Changing demographics means sector organisations must respond to the differing generational values that shape and will shape the Australian population.

For example, will the approaches which attracted or continue to attract the Baby Boomer, X and Y generations to volunteer with sector agencies translate in volunteerism from Generation Z? Volunteers have less time available and demand more in terms of support. Hierarchical institutions may struggle to grow their volunteer base unless they consider and meet the many challenges and barriers to modern day volunteering.

Changing demographics means sector organisations must also respond to people movement. New residents in regional areas will likely be unfamiliar with local risks. More diverse communities require more culturally sensitive communications.

As always, placing community at the centre of our emergency management efforts will be crucial in delivering better outcomes for all Victorians.

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