Step By Step

Blue Mountains Bushfire Support Service

Final Report

October 2014

A personalised support worker service assisting people affected by the bush fires with information, decision-making and recovery resources.
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### Appendices:
1) Summary - Client Needs and Step by Step Response
2) Step by Step Continuity of Care and Connection Plan
3) Step by Step Communications (updates, media articles, client resources)
GATEWAY FAMILY SERVICES – EXECUTIVE OFFICER

Gateway has been privileged to undertake the Bush Fire Support service- known as Step By Step in the wake of the October 2013 Fires in Springwood, Winmalee, Yellow Rock, Mt Victoria and the Upper Blue Mountains communities.

We have appreciated the confidence that was placed in our agency to take on this work and we gave an undertaking from the beginning that our intention was to ensure a best practice approach to providing this service and a desire to grow the evidence base in disaster welfare recovery.

In adopting a Solution focused approach, the project was titled very deliberately as Step by Step- thus giving a clear understanding that recovery would happen at the pace of the people affected by the disaster.

This report details how the project was set up and how learning from the people affected by the fires combined with Gateway’s practice knowledge of what is likely to be most helpful to support people on their journey to recovery determined the shape of the project.

In all of this work we were supported by the expert team at MPES- Dr Allison Rowlands, Sonya Ramke, Sally McKay and appreciated the contribution of Rachel Nibbs to the overall Recovery effort as well as the input and guidance of the members of the Recovery (Wellbeing) Sub-committee/Working Group.

We also acknowledge the support of the teams from Anglicare who provided solid assistance in the early days of recovery and Red Cross whose support of the recovery effort has been expert, timely and collaborative.

All of the members of the ‘alumni’ from MPES were a great resource and source of support in the early days.

As Executive Officer of Gateway I want to acknowledge with pride the exceptional work of the Step By Step team. Led inspirationally by Anne Crestani, the team came together quickly and worked tirelessly to ensure that all those requiring support received the very best service possible. Each worker brought their wealth of professional skills and personal qualities to the tasks that were required.

I commend this final report to you in the hope that through its pages you will catch a glimpse of the achievement that has been Step by Step.

Kerry Thomas

Executive Officer
Executive Summary

Following completion of service delivery in the bushfire impacted areas of the Blue Mountains, the Step by Step bushfire Support Service exited on August 29 2014. This document provides a final report on the operations and activities of the project and as a follow up to the 6 month project update. Step by Step has been a partnership project of Gateway Family Services, Ministry for Police and Emergency Services (MPES) under the NDRRA and was jointly funded by the Federal and New South Wales governments. Under these funding arrangements the time-frame for the project was 6 months. The project was extended for a further 3 months with the allocation of funds provided by the Uniting Church’s Disaster Relief Fund Committee. The final report provides an overview of all activities and operations from service set up (November 8 2013) to service exit and project completion (September 12, 2014) and includes the following data sets:

QUALITATIVE DATA

- **Abbreviated Summary of Client Needs**
  The report provides a brief overview of client needs as they presented over the 4 quarters of Step by Step Service operations.
  *The full table description of client needs and Step by Step service responses is included in the Appendices (appendix 1).*

- **Step by Step Client Support Model**
  The report presents a summary and analysis of the efficacy of the case-work and practice model crafted and utilised by Step by Step during the course of delivering support services to bushfire impacted households.

- **Step by Step Communications Strategy and Transition and Exit Strategies:**
  The report presents a summary and analysis of the communication and transition and exit strategies employed in the final phase of the project. *Copies of the regular updates, tips sheets, media articles and Facebook page screen shots are found in the Appendices (appendix 3).*

- **Step by Step Lessons Learned and Recommendations:**
  Each report includes an in-house evaluation of the strategies employed by the project and where changes could have been made to increase the effectiveness of the service. Recommendations for future actions are included. It is hoped that the lessons learned from the experiences of the Step by Step project will prove enlightening and beneficial for any future case-management teams set up to assist the recovery process for people impacted by disaster events.
QUANTITATIVE DATA  Client Statistics captured via the Step by Step database over the 4 quarters of service operations

Includes the following:

- total number of clients
- total number (and modes) of client contacts
- total number of clients with total and partial loss
- total number and distribution of services utilised
- total number and distribution of referrals made
- patterns of client mobility *(distance moved from impacted residence)*
- client demographics *(e.g. country of origin, households with dependent children, health/medical needs)*
- snapshot - services still required *(at time of service closure)*
- snapshot - long-term housing plans *(clients)*
- peaks in service contacts with clients

Where appropriate a brief analysis of the data is included to accompany the graphs and charts.
### SUMMARY - CLIENT NEEDS

(*In-depth summary of Step by Step responses to client needs are included in Appendix 1*)

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<td><strong>Temporary/emergency accommodation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Elderly/frail clients needing assistance to move debris and waste to front of their blocks for Council’s kerbside clean-up</strong></td>
<td><strong>Increased contacts received from clients (with total loss) who had not accessed any prior assistance</strong></td>
<td><strong>Incoming calls and emails from clients in response to Step by Step’s announcement of closure.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Essential goods (i.e. clothing, blankets, furniture)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Increased contact from households with complex needs</strong></td>
<td><strong>Clients reporting financial hardship as bills and costs associated with bushfires increase.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Residents calling to double check their eligibility for grants and financial assistance and to request support for specific needs before the service closed.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Finances/income support</strong></td>
<td><strong>Increased ”1st” time” contacts from fire affected residents not registered on DWS database</strong></td>
<td><strong>Clients seeking information regarding potential exemptions from paying stamp duty (when purchasing a new home) and council rates on existing blocks.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Increase in requests for assistance with garden clean up and regeneration</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Assistance with Insurance Companies</strong></td>
<td><strong>Increased reports of households facing severe financial stress</strong></td>
<td><strong>Clients reporting an increased sense of sadness and awareness of the losses they have experienced</strong></td>
<td><strong>Calls and emails coming from clients wanting to express their appreciation and thanks for support received from Step by Step</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Replacement of lost documents (i.e. birth certificates, passports)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Increased requests from households for assistance with block clearing and dangerous tree removal</strong></td>
<td><strong>Clients reporting increased anger and frustration with their situations, in particular the financial set-backs</strong></td>
<td><strong>Increased number of clients expressing an interest in accessing emotional support through counselling</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Access to telephones, printer/fax, computers/internet</strong></td>
<td><strong>Increasing number of clients self-reporting an increase in “strong emotions” and “angry outbursts”</strong></td>
<td><strong>Increasing number of clients requiring assistance with completing Development Applications for rebuilding</strong></td>
<td><strong>Continuing inquiries from clients reporting concerns about trees on their blocks that they consider dangerous</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Clearing of blocks and removal of debris, asbestos and dangerous trees</strong></td>
<td><strong>Client inquiries regarding BAL rating of their property</strong></td>
<td><strong>Client concerns regarding their capacity to meet increased costs of rebuilding to the required standard</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Toys, food hampers, vouchers and resources for the Christmas/school holiday period</strong></td>
<td><strong>Continued stress related to level of insurance pay-outs and capacity to rebuild to required building standards.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Contacts from clients who have moved out of the area and still requiring information and assistance</strong></td>
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Data Analysis:

- At closure - the majority of services utilised by clients were Step by Step (SBS) Miscellaneous Assistance. This included (for example) providing general information and recovery updates, assisting with vouchers and food hampers, assistance with replacing documents, advocacy with insurance companies and utilities, informal counselling, liaising with NSW Public Works and Council, drop-in visits to local businesses and schools.

- Financial Support, Counselling, Recovery Goods and Services and client referrals to Blue Mountains City Council (BMCC) represented a significant proportion of services utilised.
Step by Step’s transition and exit strategies (as part of our Continuity of Care and Connection Plan) focused on maintaining the continuity and quality of client links with recovery resources and services following Step by Step’s closure.

- **Lessons Learned:** Step by Step successfully initiated a process of ‘warm transfers’ of clients (with persistent factors for vulnerability) to Catholic Care Social Services Counselling and Family Support Teams. In addition, these teams also had the capacity to continue the ‘structured follow ups’ with clients that were initiated by Step by Step.

  **Recommendation:** An ongoing process of reviewing the capacity of the existing recovery service system is required in determining which services are best able to continue intensive case-work and ‘structured follow-up’ with clients.

- **Lessons Learned:** Step by Step was able to transition a proportion of its Upper Mountains support services to Blackheath Area Neighbourhood Centre (BANC). This was achieved via a proportionate allocation of Step by Step’s project ‘extension’ funds to BANC. This strengthened their capacity to provide outreach support services to the bushfire impacted community in the Upper Mountains (following the exit of Step by Step).

  **Recommendation:** Transition plans need to be developed and actioned well in advance of the exit of bushfire support services. This highlights the need for setting up collaborative arrangements with services located in key impact areas. In addition, stress may increase for clients if they are experiencing too many changes in connections to services and service personnel. It is very important that there is adequate forward planning, client consultation and back-up plans in place prior to transferring clients from one service to another.

- **Lessons Learned:** A collaborative relationship was developed between Step by Step and Blue Mountains City Council’s Recovery Team. This enabled both teams to plan and implement an effective strategy which enabled a seamless transition from Step by Step to Council’s Recovery Team in delivering recovery information, referrals and links to goods and services.

  **Recommendation:** Building relationships with key recovery stakeholders (i.e. local government, community interagency, emergency services) plays a significant role in effective coordination of services and future transition and hand-over of key roles and responsibilities.
Data Analysis:

- At closure the majority of referrals were directed to Blue Mountains City Council’s Recovery Team.
- At closure a significant proportion of referrals were made to formal counselling services (e.g., Relationships Australia, Anglicare).
- Financial Support and Recovery Goods and Services made up a combined total of 281 referrals.
- Warm transfers and assisted referrals of Step by Step clients to Catholic Care Social Services Counselling and Family Work teams totalled 112 (this constituted a key component of Step by Step’s Continuity of Care and Connection Plan—appendix 2).
Data analysis: All buildings, all contents, fencing, carports, garages, cars made up the significant ratio of total loss.
Data Analysis:

- The largest number of requests for assistance were related to fencing and garages (e.g. fencing/garage replacement not covered by insurance, negotiations with neighbouring properties for replacement of fences).
- A significant proportion of clients (partial damage) requested assistance with clean up/regeneration/beautification of their fire damaged blocks and gardens. A small number of families requested assistance with replacing outdoor children’s play equipment (swings, trampolines etc).
### Final Phase Communications Strategy

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| **JUNE** | Red Cross outreach door-knock targeting residents who Step by Step have been unable to contact. This strategy was initiated following discussions between Step by Step and Red-Cross where specific locations (i.e. streets, neighbourhoods) were identified for targeted contacts from Red Cross Volunteers. Red Cross distributed data related to outcomes of the door-knock to Step by Step and the Recovery [Wellbeing] Sub-Committee.  
Prepare editorials and articles re: Step by Step closure for publication and distribution  
Commence liaison with Blue Mountains City Council Recovery team to develop transition plan  
Information flyers, posters and pamphlets created with Step by Step closure announcement and Council’s Recovery Team contact details. |
| **JULY** | Step by Step Manager interviewed on ABC 702 Radio notifying of Step by Step closure and a “call-out” to bushfire impacted residents who may have moved out of the area and had not accessed assistance  
Closure date announced on Step by Step face-book page and via emails sent out across the client and interagency networks (including Neighbourhood Centres, Community Health, and Medicare Local G.P. network).  
Two postal mail-outs to all Step by Step clients announcing closure of the service and details of Council’s Recovery team  
Announcement of Step by Step closure on Blue Mountains Council’s Recovery website and in Council’s Recovery E-Newsletter  
Step by Step closure flyers, posters distributed across network of public libraries and schools.  
School Principals, Counsellors and Directors of Early Childhood Centres contacted directly re: Step by Step Closure and transition to Council’s Recovery Team  
Community ‘catch-up’ events organised at Winmalee and Mt Victoria to provide bushfire impacted residents the opportunity to come together, hear first-hand about Step by Step’s closure and to meet members of Council’s Recovery Team.  
Articles published in the Blue Mountains Gazette (by Blue Mountains Council) announcing Step by Step closure and outlining the transition to Council’s Recovery Team (*See appendix 3)  
Initiate final phase of making contact with affected households who have had no or limited contact with Step by Step. The primary purpose of these contacts is to provide information re: closure and transition to Council’s Recovery Team and to assess client needs and ensure connectivity with existing goods and services. |
| **AUGUST** | Final ‘thank you’ cards posted (and emailed) out to Step by Step clients with Blue Mountains Recovery Services contact list  
Final ‘thank you’ message emailed across partner recovery service network with contact details of Council’s Recovery Team  
Completed final phase of “check in” courtesy calls to clients who have had limited or no contact with Step by Step.  
Final message on Step by Step Facebook page (prior to de-commission)  
Voice message left on intake phone notifying of Step by Step’s closure and the contact details for Council’s Recovery Team.  
Final articles published in Blue Mountains Gazette – 1. Local State member meeting with Step by Step team 2. Blue Mountains Mayor meeting with the Step by Step team (* See appendix 3). |
COMMUNICATIONS – LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Lessons Learned: Having immediate access to accurate client contact details was crucial for Step by Step to initiate and sustain contacts with bushfire affected households. In a proportion of cases the contact details for clients that were listed in the DWS folders became quickly outdated or were incomplete. This was often due to the levels of mobility of bushfire affected households. This meant that many hours and weeks were spent in attempts to locate the correct details and make contact. The task of contacting clients would have been more efficient if a database was available to receive and store information from the first week of the recovery. The accuracy and efficient handling of client data would be an improvement on the current system of working with hard copy spreadsheets. In addition, many clients complained that they were required to undergo multiple identity checks and re-tell their story numerous times as they accessed goods and services when referred by Step by Step. As a result, some clients reported a reluctance to engage with primary recovery goods and services.

- Gateway Family Services and MPES Disaster Welfare Services Executive took the initiative to set up a database specifically designed for the Step by Step project. This became an invaluable tool for storing client data and tracking needs. However, a great deal of time was expended in entering client data as well as making minor amendments to some functions of the database. There is general agreement within the Blue Mountains Recovery (Wellbeing) Working Group that a centrally managed database is needed to gather and store client data with authorised access provided to key recovery services. Data gathering and entry could commence from evacuation centres and continue to operate from newly set up recovery centres. In addition, this strategy would strengthen the capacity to track client needs and emerging trends (as they happened). Most importantly, collecting client contact details (with consent) would be a one-off process. This would strengthen the recovery service systems capacity to protect client confidentiality and the integrity of data.

Recommendation: MPES design or have access to a data-base mainframe that has the essential functions required to gather and store key client data (in the first phase of recovery operations). Administration and management of the database could be negotiated with key recovery stakeholders (although MPES seems the obvious choice). IT training and on-going support would need to be embedded in the project.

- Lessons Learned: Many affected households appeared to experience “cognitive overload”. This is understandable given the impacts of the bushfires and the multiple issues and tasks people were/are trying to manage. A significant amount of recovery information was being distributed across the community at regular intervals. For many clients their capacity to engage with that information was compromised. For example, some clients would report to Step by Step that they did not have access to information or had forgotten or lost track of the information they had received.

Recommendation: Key recovery messages and information needs to be concise and worded in simple, easy to understand language that is repeated at regular intervals across each phase of the recovery process. The community is then able to engage with key information at times when they have the necessary “headspace”. In addition, the content (and intent) of recovery communications and messages need to remain consistent over time. Step by Step communications were consistently framed around key themes of hope and resilience and normalising the emotional/psychological responses of people impacted by the bushfires (i.e. “It’s Okay to not be Okay” – Step by Step Client Support Model page 14).

- Lessons Learned: Employing a variety of communication methods and technology proved to be the most effective way to stay connected with affected households and ensure a reliable flow of information. In the hours/days/weeks after the bushfires many households did not have access to computers, mobile phones or internet. This often inhibited their capacity to access important recovery information. Over time many clients were able to access online resources as
they replaced computers/laptops and phones. In the final quarter (June-August) a significant proportion of step by step clients utilised their mobile phones as the primary means for receiving and sending information (via Facebook, SMS text and email). There were no requests from clients to meet with a Step by Step worker via SKYPE.

**Recommendation:** Reliable and up-to-date IT hardware/software /training/support is made available to recovery support services from the first day of operations. Email, Internet, SMS needs to be accessible with the capacity to set up a social media site within the first week or two of operations. Access to reliable internet coverage is imperative particularly when providing services in rural and remote areas. Given the increased community reliance on mobile phones as a communication tool “face –time” in addition to SKYPE capability may increase capacity for workers to meet “face to face” with clients in an on-line capacity. The needs of clients who do not utilise on-line resources for their communications needs to be taken into account. For those clients, face to face meetings, telephone calls and information updates via traditional post may be more appropriate.

**Lessons Learned:** Step by Step received some negative feedback from a very small number of clients regarding 2 x Step by Step e/mail communications. One was a quick guide (devised by Step by Step) to managing “Anniversaries” and the other was a “hope scale activity”. Step by Step needed to be more mindful that some of the more therapeutically focused communications could carry the risk of being misinterpreted or could trigger an emotional response for the recipient.

**Recommendation:** Information that is sent out across the client network needs to be well managed and thoroughly assessed for intended and unintended impacts prior to distribution. For example, some information may need to be delivered in person by a support worker or with the support worker providing a supportive presence (in person or over the phone).

**Lessons Learned:** Roll out of Step by Step’s communication strategy was held back by approximately 6 weeks due to a number of factors outside of Step by Step’s control. This led to a delay in getting key information about Step by Step out to the community and services network.

**Recommendation:** Any promotional/information resources need to be finalised and approved within the first 1-2 weeks of service operations. Supplementary information materials could be rolled out in stages (if time is a factor). In addition, the line of command for providing approval for roll-out of communication/promotional materials needs to be clarified in the first days of recovery.

**Lessons Learned:** Less traditional forms of service “branding” appeared to be more effective for engaging the impacted community. In general, clients appeared to be more comfortable engaging with Step by Step via our Facebook page, SMS texts and emails. This was particularly the case from the 3rd quarter of service operations onwards. Step by Step’s Facebook page included pictures and names of the team and a variety of links to other relevant recovery websites (e.g. RFS, Blue Mountains Council Recovery webpage etc.). Emergent social media sites set up by individual community members (after the bushfires) provided additional access points in which fire-affected households could link in with Step by Step (i.e. Blue Mountains Garage Sale, Blue Mountains Fire-watch and Recovery).

**Recommendation:** Communication methods need to reflect the community’s preferences and their access to information technology and media (which can be significantly impacted by a disaster event). Utilising communication strategies that personalise the recovery support service by putting faces to names helps to create a friendly, more accessible service profile. Linking in with emergent community based social media sites casts a bigger net for reaching impacted households.

Commented [WU1]: lots of food for thought here and some of these ideas would need scaling back - from DWS perspective - but important to put them out there - no changes needed!!
Data Analysis:

- Peak client activity times: 15/3, (12/04 – 23/04), (1/05 – 20/05), (29/05 – 10/06), (19/06 – 27/06), (16/07 -1/08), (18/08 -29/08).
- Highest peaks in activity occurred in July and August (final phase of service delivery). This increased level of activity was initiated as part of Step by Step’s Continuity of Care and Connection Plan (see appendix 2). The plan implemented an increased volume in the number of emails and phone calls to clients from the Step by Step team.
- Lowest peaks in activity occurred in late December 2013 and early January (Christmas and school holiday period).
- Highest peak in activity in 2013 occurred in November (Step by Step set up and operating from the Recovery Centre at Springwood) and the period just before Christmas (assistance provided with Christmas hampers, toys, vouchers).
- Low peaks of activity in the middle of May (Step by Step team focused on entering client data on newly set up database). Following completion of data entry there is a significant upward trend in client contacts.
- From April 2014, Step by Step had email addresses and mobile phone numbers for the vast majority of clients. Step by Step then initiated a cycle of regular updates, messages, reminders and referrals via internet (email, Facebook) and mobile phone (SMS, calls).
SUMMARY - STEP BY STEP CLIENT SUPPORT MODEL FOR (psycho-social) DISASTER RECOVERY

**Step by Step Client Support Model**

- **Information & resources**
  - Links to goods & services
  - Achievable solutions (client preferences)
  - Scaffolding tools
  - Evaluation (what works?)

- **Safety & Wellbeing**
  - Housing
  - Information & resources
  - Healthy Food
  - Clothing & Essentials

- **Cognitive ‘Scaffolding’**
  - Information & resources
  - ‘breaking it down’
  - ‘learning out’ functions of pre-frontal cortex
  - Repetition of key data & recovery messages

- **Emotion Regulation**
  - “being with”
  - Emotion-regulation (client & worker)
  - Client-Centered
  - “It’s ok to not be ok”

*Devised & created by Anne Crestani (for Gateway Family Services – July 2014)*

- **Lessons Learned:** The Step by Step Client Support Model integrates 4 key elements of therapeutic intervention to form a coherent, replicable model for responding to clients in a post-disaster environment. The Step by Step model represents the cycle of interventions that were crafted and embedded within each worker-client interaction. Solution Focused Brief Therapy (yellow centre disc) was utilised as the framework for engaging clients in conversations focused on preferred futures.
Recommendation: Dependent on the outcomes of the independent evaluation of Step by Step – training in implementing the model could be offered to future disaster recovery case-management teams.

- **Lessons Learned:** In general, clients exercised their own choices and preferences in relation to how and when they engaged with Step by Step. For example, some client households initiated first contact with Step by Step upon receiving notice of the service’s closure. These clients indicated that while they had not made direct contact with Step by Step they had been receiving the regular updates and recovery messages (via email and/or Facebook). They had utilised this information to access the required goods/services and supports for themselves. In this context, Step by Step was utilised by clients as a type of ‘self-service’ resource. This meant that they would “check in” with the service at times and in ways that were most convenient for them. Other clients reported that while they may not have made regular personal contact with a worker they felt reassured by the consistent presence of Step by Step. Many clients stated “it’s good to know that you are there if we need anything”

Recommendation: Services should avoid making assumptions that if a client has not made direct contact that this is an indication that the client has “fallen through the cracks”. From the experience of Step by Step, it appears that many clients will exercise their own preferences around whether they want or need to have more direct contact with the service. At the same time, many clients will prefer to have more personalised, regular contacts. In general, the service model should be designed with flexibility in mind so as to tailor services to fit with client preferences and individual circumstances.

- **Lessons Learned:** There was significant diversity in the issues that clients presented after the bushfires. For example, simply providing a phone number or an update about recovery services was very helpful for many clients. Other households were experiencing issues that were multi-layered and complex and required more intensive intervention and support. Another cohort of clients seemed to find it very helpful to share (unprompted) their experiences of surviving the bushfires (sometimes repeatedly). Others preferred to leave any topics related to the bushfires firmly out of the conversation. Some clients whose properties had been untouched by the fires or who had sustained relatively minor damage presented as extremely distressed. Other clients who had lost everything presented as relatively calm and accepting of their situation. Some households presented with issues that did not come under the core business of Step by Step. However as potential future clients, they were provided with information and support that was relevant to their current needs.

Recommendation: Regardless of their circumstances, client needs and presentations (in all their variations) should be approached as holding equal weight in terms of the impact experienced by each household. The philosophy that underpins this approach that “no door is the wrong door” understands that there are often multiple (and linked up) pathways that can lead people to the right support and assistance.

- **Lessons Learned:** Step by Step maintained a strengths approach in the way that we viewed and responded to client households. Recognising and utilising the existing resources within households proved to be an effective way of engaging in conversations about current and future capacity. Many of our clients commented that they appreciated that Step by Step did not attempt to step in and rescue or take-over while they engaged in the process of deciding on first steps. Step by Step found that by focusing on what people could do rather than what they could not, the locus of control stayed firmly in the possession of the client. This in turn decreased the pressure experienced by workers to take primary responsibility for clients’ recovery.

Recommendation: All elements of the disaster preparedness and recovery service system actively engage with the philosophies and strategies of a Strengths Approach. Education and mentoring in this approach be rolled out across emergency services, local council, business, and health/community/education sectors.

- **Lessons Learned:** Community development played an important (albeit secondary) role as part of the Step by Step client support model. By adopting a broader approach to providing support that extended the focus on meeting immediate needs, important outcomes were achieved. In general, Step by Step was able to work effectively with existing and emerging community development initiatives to provide a more comprehensive response to impacted schools, pre-schools, businesses and staff working in recovery services. This approach played a role in strengthening the community’s capacity to support bushfire affected residents
**Recommendation:** A Community Renewal worker position is embedded within future recovery case management teams. This position can capitalise on the naturally occurring synergies between community renewal work and client casework in post-disaster environments.

- **Lessons Learned: Service Time-Frame**
  1) Step by Step was initially funded for 6 months which was then extended by 3 months (due to additional funding from a non-government source). This extension of time was critical for Step by Step to connect with impacted households who had not had prior contact. The team engaged in some lengthy detective work to locate and make contact with these clients. In addition, as the community approached the one year anniversary of the bushfires, on-going connection with Step by Step may have provided continuity in support during this milestone period.
  2) Following on from the last day of service delivery (August 29) the project required an additional 8 weeks in order to complete the following essential tasks:
   - decommission of the Winmalee Neighbourhood Centre service outlet
   - completion of client data entry
   - write-up of the final report
   - auditing and financial acquittal

**Recommendation:** 1) Future case management service is funded for a period that extends for at least 12 months. This allows sufficient time for service set up, establishment and integration with the affected community. In addition, provides a consistent presence that can deliver practical and therapeutic support over the time leading up to (and just beyond) the first anniversary of the disaster event. 2) Project budget calculations include an amount that is set aside to cover costs associated with project wind up and completion. In addition a time-frame (and staffing) be allocated beyond the final service delivery date to complete administrative tasks and report writing.

- **Lessons Learned: Staffing.** a) Step by Step team structure included 6 part-time support workers, 1 part-time client liaison worker and 1 full-time Manager with 10 hours per week of administration and IT support provided by Gateway Family Services. In response to changes in work-load, the client liaison position extended to include key responsibilities for managing communications and media relations. b) During the recruitment period Gateway was able to contract a worker from Platform Youth Services (Nepean/Blue Mountains) to join the Step by Step team for a limited period of time. Gateway had identified and approached a number of services in the Blue Mountains seeking to populate the team with workers from various local health/welfare services. However with such short notice and organisational constraints, most services were only able to offer very limited hours to the project (i.e. 5 hrs per week).

**Recommendation:** a) Depending on the scale of the disaster event, a communications and media liaison position could be included as part of the team structure. An administrative/intake position within the team would cover key tasks related to intake and triage for incoming client referrals; receipt and despatch of recovery information/updates across the team; administrative tasks including data entry; IT support, payroll etc. b) Capacity for building a multi-service team is built into locally-based disaster preparedness plans. For example, Blue Mountains City Council and MPES identify local services with relevant resources and staff and invite them to engage in an Expression of Interest (EOI) process. Services can nominate to provide specific aspects of case-management services according to expertise and skills base of staff. A lead agency can be selected to take on management responsibilities for the project.
Peter and his wife Mary presented at Winmalee Neighbourhood Centre (Step by Step service outlet). The Step by Step worker who met with the couple made them each a cup of coffee and sat and listened while Peter recounted their experiences of the bushfires and the past nine months of travelling and living on the road in their campervan. Peter shared that Mary had only just escaped the October bushfires with her life. The couple’s property had been totally destroyed and they had only recently made the decision to return to the Mountains to consider their future. They had heard about Step by Step from a neighbour. Peter and Mary were completely unaware of the recovery assistance that was available and they had not registered their property following the bushfires. Mary appeared very anxious, avoided all eye contact with the worker and barely spoke when she was addressed. The Step by Step worker wondered (to herself) if Mary might be experiencing symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and remembered that Peter had stated earlier that Mary was very reluctant to access any professional help.

The worker continued to proceed gently and sit with the couple as they recounted their story of survival after the bushfires. Over the course of the meeting the worker employed reflective listening and empathic responses which assisted in helping Mary and Peter to feel a little more relaxed. The worker identified that Peter and Mary shared a very strong relationship which provided them with a sense of comfort and security. They were also very resourceful in being able to adapt to living in cramped quarters with very few resources to make life a bit more comfortable. The worker inquired how they had been able to manage so well and the couple spoke of the routines they had developed that helped to give their days structure. They also spoke of the hobbies that they shared (knitting, travelling) which provided relaxation and enjoyment. The worker asked them what would be one thing that would make living in their campervan a bit more comfortable. Peter identified that they had no quilts and the temperature at night in the campervan could get very cold. He also identified that some saucepans would assist in cooking meals. The worker was able to provide these resources immediately and the conversation continued with the worker providing information about the relevant bushfire relief funds and services. By the end of the first meeting, Mary had started making eye contact with the worker and between them they managed to share a joke before parting with plans made for a follow up visit. As Peter and Mary walked out the door of the neighbourhood centre Peter was heard to say to his wife “I think you might have just had your first counselling session…..see …It’s not as bad as you thought it would be”.

**Key elements of Step by Step Practice**

- Soft entry engagement model (meeting Peter and Mary in a non-clinical setting, framing meetings as “chats over a cup of tea”)
- Emotion Regulation (providing a consistent regulated worker presence)
- Strengths Approach (identifying existing client strengths and resources)
- Cognitive Scaffolding (breaking down complex information)
- Solution Focussed Brief Therapy – key questions (“what is one thing that would make a difference?” – “how were/are you able to do that?”)
- Safety and Security (provision of immediate practical assistance and information)
- Informal counselling/therapeutic support (unconditional positive regard - client centred - empathetic understanding). *Carl Rogers*
How far is the alternate housing from the affected area?

Data Analysis:
Following the October 2013 bushfires:

- The majority of Step by Step clients remained in the local area close to their impacted property (0-5 KM). This number may also include those residents who were able to remain in the impacted property (i.e. due to bushfire damage being limited to outbuildings, garden etc.).
- The number of Step by Step clients who had moved the longest distances (60-100+ KM) from their primary residence were 9 in total. Some of these clients had moved from the Blue Mountains LGA immediately following the bushfires (*see case study above). These clients were often the most challenging to initiate contact and many were only able to be contacted just prior to the closure of Step by Step (when they had returned to the mountains).
- The majority of Step by Step clients remained within a 30 KM radius of their impacted property. Many clients reported that they were willing to pay extra for rental properties that allowed them to remain in their local area. This was particularly the case for families with children who attended local schools and preschools. In addition, a number of clients were able to stay with friends or relatives who resided in the local area.
### Summary - Step by Step Client Contacts (November 8 2013 – August 29 2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total # Client Case Note entries</th>
<th>11,899</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total # Email Contacts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incoming</td>
<td>7,668</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outgoing</td>
<td>399 (email conversations with individual households)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7,387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total # face to face contacts with clients</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client's Venue (home, workplace, school, cafe)</td>
<td>906</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recovery Centre (including Bushfire Information &amp; Support Centre)</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>651</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total # phone contacts with clients</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incoming</td>
<td>1,424</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outgoing</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1,181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total # SMS Texts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incoming</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outgoing</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total # postal mail outs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outgoing</td>
<td>1,572</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1,456 (bulk mail)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>116 (mail outs to individual households)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total # of “unable to contact” clients</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(“contact unable to be made with client at time of service closure”)</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Step by Step Contact Summary

Data Analysis:
- The majority of face to face contacts with clients occurred at the Recovery Centre (Springwood Presbyterian Church) and Bushfire Information and Support Centre, Springwood (BISC).
- The number of incoming emails (399) was larger than the number of incoming phone calls and SMS texts received from clients. Many clients reported being extremely busy with managing their recovery with very little time to investigate what goods and services they were eligible to access. Emails provided a means in which clients could access information and make enquiries at flexible times and places (i.e. at night when children were in bed, at home, at work etc.).
- The majority of information and updates distributed by Step by Step were via emails, followed by postal mail. Email (particularly in the final phase of service operations) became the most efficient and well-accepted means of communicating with a client base with extremely limited time.
SERVICE EVALUATION

- Step by Step is currently the subject of an independent evaluation being conducted by the Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health, NSW Ministry for Health, University of Newcastle. Centre Director, Professor Prasuna Reddy is providing oversight for the project.
- Step by Step conducted brief informal evaluations with clients (at the time of contact) to ascertain if clients had found Step by Step helpful (YES/NO). The results were entered on the database (see below).

Did the client find SBS helpful?

- **Yes**: 364
- **Unable To Contact**: 143
- **To Be Confirmed**: 11
- **No**: 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>364</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unable To Contact</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Be Confirmed</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Step by Step – Client demographics
Primary Client Contact

Area of Origin of Primary Contact

- Africa: 4
- Australia: 229
- Europe: 2
- Hong Kong: 2
- Malaysia: 15
- New Zealand: 2
- To Be Confirmed: 19
- UK: 1
Does the client/family have health and wellbeing needs?

- Yes: 149
- No: 169
- Unable to Contact: 143
- To Be Confirmed: 30

Which health and wellbeing needs are applicable?

- Urgent medical needs: 9
- Aged or Disability needs: 37
- Ongoing medical needs: 58
- Non-urgent medical needs: 18
- Mental Health Needs: 3
- Counselling needs: 103
How many children at the affected address?

- Yes: 5+ Children: 6
- Yes: 3-4 Children: 29
- Yes: 1-2 Children: 108
- Unable To Contact: 143
- To Be Confirmed: 16

Is the client currently receiving Government Benefits?

- Yes: 87
- No: 154
- Unable To Contact: 143
- To Be Confirmed: 137
Data Analysis:

- At the time of service closure a significant percentage of Step by Step clients (with total loss) reported that they were still undecided about their long term housing plans.
- Many clients reported that while their preference was to rebuild on their block, the additional costs associated with complying with current building regulations (and the amount of insurance payout) impacted on their capacity to rebuild.
- A sub-section of married/partnered clients reported a level of disagreement occurring between them regarding their long-term housing plans (i.e. one partner wanting to rebuild on the block, with the other wanting to move out of the area altogether).
Data Analysis:

- At time of closure the majority of client cases (187) did not require further services.
- At time of closure the majority of services that were still required were SBS Miscellaneous Assistance, links to Council’s Recovery Team and referrals to generalist Counselling Services. A smaller proportion of clients were referred to specialist mental health services (13 in total).
- At time of service closure a significant proportion of clients (143) were unable to be contacted.
Conclusion

During the course of its operations Step by Step was successful in providing high quality early intervention recovery services to households impacted by the October 2013 bushfires. In the final phase of service operations, Step by Step was successful in making contact with the majority of impacted households who had not requested follow up assistance when contacted by the DWS team in the first phase of recovery. A proportion of these clients subsequently became clients of Step by Step. The Service’s Transition and Exit Strategy was successfully executed and I am confident that the community was provided with adequate notice of Step by Step’s closure. Prior to closure, impacted households were provided with appropriate referrals and up-to-date information and contact details of the full suite of local recovery services. This was an important strategy in terms of ensuring that affected residents were linked in with services that could assist them over the period leading up to and beyond the 1 year anniversary. During the final phase of service operations, effective relationships were developed with a number of key recovery service providers (i.e. BMCC Recovery Team, Anglicare and Catholic Care Social Services). These collaborations enhanced the effectiveness of Step by Step’s Continuity of Care and Connection Plan and I am confident that impacted households will continue to have access to the services and resources they require over the longer-term.

Summary - Project Achievements:

- From the original number of bushfire impacted households (330) a total of 521 households were provided with assistance, information and links to recovery goods and services
- Rapid set up and establishment of service operations (1-2 week timeframe)
- Broad acceptance and uptake of the service in a relatively short period of time
- Establishment of a best practice (replicable) model of therapeutic client support with potential broad application across disaster recovery contexts
- A total of 11,804 client contacts achieved over the 10 months of service operations
- At closure – 1,333 client referrals made
- Establishment and maintenance of consistent communications utilising a variety of methods and technology based tools
- Enhancement of core Step by Step deliverables via the roll out of a number of capacity building initiatives which included:

  a) Initiating (in partnership with Red Cross) the first in a series of forums targeting disaster recovery and preparedness across the children’s services sector in the Blue Mountains
  b) Provision of additional resources and support to community development workers at Blackheath Area Neighbourhood Centre
  c) Organising ‘Moving on Strong’ forums held for Outside of School Hours Care (OOSH) services staff impacted by the bushfires, parents and staff at Rainbow Pre-school and parents and staff at Mt Victoria Public School
  d) Facilitating weekly Step by Step worker “drop-ins” at Oasis and Sonters Nurseries (Yellow Rock) and organising an information forum (facilitated by local clinical psychologist) for a combined staff of 60
e) Organising 2 x community ‘catch-ups’ at Winmalee and Mt Victoria to enable impacted residents to meet with Blue Mountains City Council’s Recovery Team.

f) Facilitating a practice information forum for front-desk staff at Blue Mountains City Council

g) Liaising with Department of Premier and Cabinet to organise meetings between Step by Step clients and the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge

h) Presentation of the Step by Step 4 Quadrant Model of Client Support at the 2014 Australasia Solution Focused Conference held in Sydney.

Summary - Project Challenges:

- Setting up a service database (from scratch) during service operations.
- Delays in establishing and distributing Step by Step promotional materials in the first 6 weeks of operations.
- Maintaining a consistent practice philosophy and approach (strengths based) in a high pressure, rapidly changing recovery environment.
- Setting up a team consisting of professionals sourced from a variety of local health/welfare services (see below).
- Setting up a project specific ‘steering group’ in an environment where the local service system was already overburdened and operating under significant constraints. Fortunately, the Recovery (Wellbeing) Sub-committee had capacity to provide some oversight, guidance and input into the operations of the Step by Step project.

The Step by Step project is currently the subject of an independent evaluation being conducted by the Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health, NSW Ministry for Health, University of Newcastle. The evaluation involves the participation of service users, stakeholders and management and staff of Step by Step and Gateway Family Services. I am confident that the outcomes from this evaluation will complement and possibly contribute new information to the current evidence base regarding best practice in psycho-social recovery. In particular, I am hopeful that the experience of the Step by Step project (as only the second service model of its kind to be employed in NSW) will continue to forge the path ahead for the replication and expansion of this particular service model in other disaster events within NSW and across Australia.
I would like to personally acknowledge and thank (in no particular order) the following individuals, organisations and groups for their invaluable support and contribution to Step by Step over the course of the project.

*If I have forgotten anyone, please forgive my inadvertent oversight – as there are often too many people to personally name.

The Step by Step team – Eleanor Mann (Team Leader), Ruth Myers (Support Worker), Nicola Horton (Support Worker), Rachel Hannan (Support Worker), Faizah Kaye (Upper Mountains Support Worker), Peter Worboys (Support Worker), Bianca Sobhani (Client intake worker/Communications Officer).

Gateway Family Services – Management Committee & Executive Officer (Kerry Thomas), Financial Manager (Terese Klynhout) and Gateway Staff and Volunteers. Beck Klynhout – IT support for Step for Step.

Ministry for Police and Emergency Services (MPES)
Dr Allison Rowlands - Director, Disaster Welfare Services
Sonya Ramke – Senior Manager, Disaster Welfare Services
MPES Disaster Welfare Services Alumni (thanks for the excellent crash course in disaster recovery 101!)

Morna Colbran – Manager, Winmalee Neighbourhood Centre.
Judy Finch – Manager, Blackheath Area Neighbourhood Centre.
Stephanie Oatley – Executive Officer, Platform Youth Services

Reverend Janice Freeston, Dr Stephen Robinson and the Uniting Church Disaster Relief Fund Committee
Danielle O’Hara and Danny Croucher – Red Cross
Celia Vagg – Catholic Care Social Services
Liz Murphy – Community Renewal Project Worker (Springwood Neighbourhood Centre)
Dan Long, Jai Allison, Brooke Wynn and Justine Sinclair from Blue Mountains City Council’s Recovery Team
Rose Glassock – Blue Mountains District Guidance Officer
Jenny Ranft and David Poulier - Blue Mountains Family and Community Services (FaCS)
Kris Newton - (Manager MCRN) for moral support and endless encouragement
Members of the Recovery (Wellbeing) Sub-Committee/Working Group
Michael Durrant – Clinical Psychologist and Clinical Supervisor for Step by Step
Habitat for Humanity – *Brushed with Kindness* team, The Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul, The Lions Club, Rotary, NSW Public Works, Springwood Baptist Church, Anglicare, Relationships Australia (Penrith/Blue Mountains), Lithgow Family Support Service, Lithgow Adolescent and Family Counselling Service.

Last but by no means least - I would like to thank the wonderful clients of Step by Step (and the Blue Mountains Community) who have been a source of constant inspiration, motivation and generosity over these past 10 months. We have learned much from you. I and Gateway Family Services wish you all the very best as you continue to take your next steps towards recovery and renewal.

Anne Crestani
Manager – Step by Step
Practice Manager – Gateway Family Services