Step By Step
Blue Mountains Bushfire Support Service
Progress Report - June 30 2014

Step By Step
A personalised support worker service assisting people affected by the bush fires with information, decision-making and recovery resources.
Executive Summary

This report provides a general update on the progress of activities and operations of Step by Step, Blue Mountains Bushfire Support Service for the final phase of service delivery leading up to the scheduled closure of the service (August 29 2014).

This report follows on from the Mid-term report and provides a concise overview of current service delivery and client statistics. Step by Step was funded for an initial period of six months with plans for extension premised on review and assessment of need. An application for a time-limited extension of the project was submitted to NSW Treasury but was unsuccessful. MPES Disaster Welfare Executive and Gateway Family Services collaborated to develop strategies to enable a time-limited extension to the project. Following an offer made by Uniting Church Disaster Relief Fund to provide funds for an extension, the project will continue for a further 12 weeks with a new completion date of August 29 2014.

Step by Step Service Activities, Transition & Exit Plan, Client Contacts Summary, Services utilised Chart, Current Active and Non-active clients, Referrals Chart, Contacts Made Summary are all included in the Appendices.

As the project moves into the final phase of its operations it is imperative that a comprehensive plan for transition and exit is actioned. The Step by Step transition and exit plan focuses on 4 main areas:

- ‘Warm transfer’ (structured hand-over) of identified vulnerable client households to appropriate local services
- Transition of bushfire recovery information and referral services from Step by Step to Blue Mountains City Council (BMCC) Recovery Team
- Comprehensive Communication Strategy that targets client, community and agency partner groups
- Completion and de-commission of service outlets, social media sites, administration systems, Step by Step database, final service report (to MPES).
Overview of Current Service Issues

- The current (sole) Step by Step service outlet is Winmalee Neighbourhood Centre (WNC). While the team has managed to set up a functional operations centre at this location, the space itself has limitations in terms of size, fit out, internet and mobile coverage. If the team had remained at their original size, service operations would have likely become more challenging. Strategies employed by Step by Step to counter these challenges have included; embedding flexibility in terms of work spaces utilised by support workers (i.e. working from Gateway offices, utilising the counselling room at Mountains Youth Services Team Winmalee office to meet with clients, booking additional space at WNC as required). Workers have also utilised their mobile phones to hot-spot access to the internet when coverage at WNC has been intermittent or weak.

- Since March 2014 Step by Step have seen an emerging trend of increased contacts with fire affected residents who did not indicate follow up on their initial DWS paperwork. A small number are from residents who are not recorded on the Step by Step database. In response Step by Step commenced pro-active outreach with registered households (listed on the DWS team spreadsheet) who had not requested follow up services.

- The extension of the project (via additional funds from Uniting Church Disaster Relief Fund) has delivered both opportunities and challenges. The impacts of the project extension (both positive and negative) are as follows:
  - It has allowed for Step by Step to negotiate an integrated client transition plan and communications strategy in collaboration with Blue Mountains City Council’s Recovery Team. Recruitment of BMCC’s recovery team had not been recruited finalised until the second half of May (into early June). If Step by Step had completed its project on May 7 (the original closure date), a valuable opportunity would have been lost for Step by Step and Council’s Recovery Team to collaborate and develop a transition plan for client information and referral services. This in turn could have led to a sizable “gap” in the delivery of information, support and referrals to the impacted population. Step by Step’s experience over the past 6 + months has indicated the vital importance of timing in “capturing” a sometimes disparate and dislocated client base whose engagement with recovery services does not necessarily follow a predictable and clear pathway.
  - It has allowed Step by Step additional time for workers to conduct outreach with “no follow up” and no prior contact client households before closure of the service (*as above).
  - It has allowed Step by Step additional time to identify and refer the next wave of clients seeking emotional/psychological support.

- Challenges have included – some (limited) confusion caused across the Blue Mountains Recovery sector with the change in Step by Step closure date. Step by Step has amended its communication strategy to address any confusion across the client and services sector and to emphasize that Step by Step remains active in providing support and assistance to impacted households.
The need to amend and extend the Step by Step exit plan (*as above).

The Step by Step team has been reduced and re-structured with the Step by Step Manager returning to her substantive position at Gateway (plus maintaining Step by Step project oversight) and one of the caseworkers taking on the position of Team Leader. In general, the team re-structure has gone smoothly with little or no impacts on service delivery and team productivity.

**Human Resources – Staffing for final phase**

- The support worker seconded from **Platform Youth Services** (Nepean/Blue Mountains) completed his contract with Step by Step on May 7.
- Step by Step staffing levels were amended to (a) reflect changes in client demand and service planning (particularly in the Upper Mountains) and (b) to enable extension of the project (via a projected budgeted decrease in staffing costs).
- As at May 7 2014 – the Step by Step team consists of:

  1 x Manager position @ (7hpw)
  1 x Team Leader position @ (28hpw)
  3 x caseworker positions @ (21hpw)
  1 x client liaison worker @ (10hpw)

  *1 x caseworker positions @ (21hpw)
  *1 x caseworker position @ (7hpw – focused on the Upper Mountains)
  *

* (positions completed and closed)

**Communications Strategy – Update**

- The Step by Step Facebook page and our client E-network continue to be effective strategies for providing information, updates and recovery tips to both clients and the wider community. In addition, to providing a means for clients and the community to make contact with Step by Step at places and times that are most convenient for them. The Step by Step closure notice will be included on our face-book page (plus links) and the BMCC Recovery website and E-newsletter. In addition, postal and email notices will be distributed across the Step by Step client network, Medicare Local, Blue Mountains Schools and children’s services, libraries and Neighbourhood Centres. Notices will include the central intake number for BMCC Recovery Team along with a list of local services and their contact details.

- The Step by Step Manager was interviewed by Simon Marnie on ABC 702 (June 22) to discuss current bushfire impacted household needs and issues as well as providing Step by Step’s contact details. The interview was organised as a means to outreach to bushfire affected residents who had re-located to other parts of the Sydney metro area and beyond and as a result may have found themselves outside of the recovery communications net.
• Step by Step is collaborating with BMCC Recovery Team to schedule a series of announcements and updates in the local paper (Blue Mountains Gazette) and social media sites. Step by Step is in negotiations with BMCC to include a formal acknowledgment of the work of Step by Step from the Blue Mountains Mayor and the State and Federal local members.

• Step by Step in collaboration with BMCC Recovery Team has organised two ‘meet and greet’ morning teas to be held at Winmalee Neighbourhood Centre and Blackheath Area Neighbourhood Centre. These informal events provide bushfire affected households with an opportunity to access more information about Step by Step’s closure and to meet personally with members of Council’s Recovery Team.

• Step by Step will utilise the Recovery Wellbeing Working Group to assist in disseminating notice of Step by Step’s closure across the Blue Mountains welfare/community/health services networks.

CURRENT CLIENT STATISTICS SNAPSHOT (as at June 30)

| TOTAL No OF CURRENT ACTIVE CLIENT HOUSEHOLDS | 405 |
| TOTAL No OF CURRENT INACTIVE CLIENT HOUSEHOLDS (CLOSED) | 109 |
| *TOTAL No OF REFERRALS MADE (Nov 2013-June 2014) | 5,387 |
| No OF “no follow up” CLIENT CONTACTS | 198 |
| TOTAL No OF CLIENT CONTACTS (Nov 2013-June 2014) | 5,766 |
| TOTAL No OF CLIENT HOUSEHOLDS (Nov 8 2013-June 30 2014) | 523 |

*This total number is inclusive of –Assisted referrals and referrals conducted via email and phone.

Assisted referrals – indicates a referral process where the worker takes a more active role in linking the client to appropriate goods and services (in consultation with the client household).

STEP BY STEP CURRENT PRIMARY SERVICES DELIVERED – (TOP 5)

1) Step by Step Miscellaneous Assistance
   (includes: advocacy with utilities companies, liaising with insurance companies, providing informal & crisis counselling)
2) Donated Goods and Services (e.g. Salvation Army, Rotary, Lions, Mayoral Relief Fund)
3) Financial Support (e.g. Salvation Army Phase 2, Mayoral Relief Fund Phases 1 & 2, Centrelink)
4) Counselling (individual, relationship, family)
5) Council (e.g. D.A. approvals, information on chipping services)

*See “which services have been utilised” summary in Appendices
STEP BY STEP CURRENT PRIMARY (OUTGOING) REFERRALS

- Salvation Army – Phase 2 grants
- Blue Mountains City Council – Mayoral Relief Fund Phases 1 & 2
- Blue Mountains City Council – D.A. inquiries, chipping service, client concerns about “dangerous trees”
- Medicare Local – Special Bushfire ATAPS (Access to Applied Psychology Services)
- Generalist Counselling – (i.e. Gateway Family Services, Relationships Australia, Anglicare, Catholic Care Social Services)
- Rotary
- Lion’s Club

*See Step by Step Client Activity summary in Appendices*

STEP BY STEP CURRENT PRIMARY (INCOMING) REFERRAL SOURCES

- Winmalee Neighbourhood Centre (including client “walk-ins”)
- Blue Mountains City Council
- Gateway Family Services
- Blackheath Area Neighbourhood Centre
- Springwood Neighbourhood Centre (Community Renewal Development Project Worker)
- Habitat for Humanity
- Red Cross
- School Counsellors/ Principals (primarily in Winmalee, Lower Mountains).
- Self-referrals (via phone, email, face-book).

CONCLUSION

Step by Step remains an active and committed member of the Blue Mountains Bushfire Psycho-Social Recovery response. While Step by Step is now engaged in a process of transitioning towards closure, the service will continue to provide assistance and referrals to impacted households up to the last date of service delivery. As noted previously, Step by Step is in the process of completing contacts with the last remaining registered households who had not requested follow up in the first few weeks post the bushfires. The transition and exit plan is on track with “warm transfers” of appropriate client households to the Family worker/Counselling Team of Catholic Care Social Services about to be actioned. This will ensure that client households with persistent vulnerability and complexity factors will be able to access one-to-one, no cost assistance from professionals (trained in counselling, social work, psychology) based in the Blue Mountains.

Key elements of the Communications Strategy have commenced with the first in a series of mail-outs to the 520+ client households due to be completed by the middle of July. In addition, 2 client household mail-outs are planned for the beginning and end of August. Notice of Step by Step’s closure date has been included on Blue Mountains City Council’s Recovery Website and notices are currently being sent to all Blue Mountains Schools websites and newsletters, Medicare Local G.P. newsletters and all of the Blue Mountains Neighbourhood Centre’s websites and face-book pages. Posters (announcing Step by Step’s
closure along with Council’s contact details) have been created to be displayed in all Blue Mountains public libraries. Step by Step is confident that the strategies employed as part of the transition and exit plan will get the right information out to the right people at the right time (within 4-6 weeks of the final day of service delivery).

As indicated, this final phase of activities and operations for Step by Step are key in ensuring that our exit from Blue Mountains Community Recovery operations is conducted as seamlessly, efficiently and sensitively as possible. The Step by Step project has during the course of its operations, presented a wealth of significant learning opportunities (for both the local community and the funding body MPES) in terms of therapeutic practice, rapid service set up and delivery, communications and community/client engagement strategies, helpful ways of responding to the rapidly changing needs of impacted households, identifying and focusing on what specifically helps impacted households to take those first steps towards recovery (and what hinders), analysis of the “neurologically supportive” role of the Step by Step model of therapeutic practice…. just to name a few. The Final Report (which will be delivered after completion of the Step by Step project) will provide statistical data focused on total numbers of:

- client households assisted
- referrals made (and to whom)
- contacts made with client households

In addition, the final report will present and analyse patterns of distribution in relation to referrals; changing patterns of client needs and requests for assistance over time; client household demographics; patterns of housing re-location; analysis of the effectiveness of strategies employed by Step by Step to engage both impacted households and the network of disaster recovery service partners; and finally an analysis of the effectiveness of the therapeutic modality utilised by Step by Step in the course of their work with client households.

Most importantly, the Final Report will include a “Lessons Learned” component which will highlight both the effective elements of the Step by Step model and the limitations and areas for adjustment and improvement. It is hoped that this (and other sections) of the report will not only complement but also present new information and learning that will add to the existing knowledge base specifically related to psycho-social aspects of disaster recovery.