

2014

The Step by Step Blue Mountains Bushfire Support Service Qualitative Evaluation



Jane L Rich,
Angela Booth,
Prasuna Reddy
and Allison
Rowlands



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List of Acronyms

| | |
|-----------|--|
| CRRMH: | Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health, University of Newcastle |
| GFS: | Gateway Family Services |
| IT | Information Technology |
| LGA: | Local Government Area |
| MPES DWS: | Ministry for Police and Emergency Service Disaster Welfare Service |
| NDRRA: | Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements |
| SBS: | Step by Step Blue Mountains Bushfire Support Service |

Research Team

The evaluation of the Step by Step Bushfire Support Service was requested by the Ministry for Police and Emergency Services, NSW Government. The evaluation and resultant report was conducted by staff of the Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health, University of Newcastle in collaboration with the Ministry for Police and Emergency Services Disaster Welfare Branch. The research team included the following people:

Investigators

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Dr Jane Rich | Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health, University of Newcastle |
| Mrs Angela Booth | Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health, University of Newcastle |
| Dr Allison Rowlands | Ministry for Police and Emergency Services, NSW Government |
| Prof Prasuna Reddy | School of Medicine and Public Health, University of Newcastle |

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We thank Gateway Family Services for providing the *Step By Step Blue Mountains Bushfire Support Service Final Report October 2014* and Ministry for Police and Emergency Services Disaster Welfare Services, Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health, University of Newcastle and importantly our Step by Step Evaluation Research Reference Group who gave up their time freely to discuss and provide feedback.

Executive Summary

Severe bushfires burned through the Blue Mountains region in October, 2013. Starting in the towns of Lithgow, Springwood and Mount Victoria, the bushfire destroyed and damaged hundreds of properties and dwellings, leaving many communities displaced and distressed.

In November 2013, the Step By Step Blue Mountains Bushfire Support Service (SBS) was implemented in the Blue Mountains community. Available to all community members affected, the recovery service was designed to provide assistance to individuals, families and communities by providing a supplementary service to the existing local human services system.

Utilising a case management model with a solution-focused and strengths-based approach, the personalised support worker service aimed to strengthen individual and household capabilities, assist in decision making and promote wellbeing.

This report presents findings from the qualitative evaluation of the SBS service which aimed to gain a greater understanding of how the service operated, if the service achieved its objectives and if the service addressed the urgent practical and psychological needs of the community by analysing the perspectives of the clients, staff, managers and stakeholder organisations who were involved with the service.

Overall, this research found that the SBS service positively impacted the community. In particular, the service provided support that addressed both the physical and emotional needs of clients and was delivered in a respectful and supportive way. Staff, managers and stakeholders supported the use of the solution-focused and strengths-based approach and felt that SBS became a critical psychosocial service for the recovering community.

While this report illustrates the applicability of the solution-focused and strengths-based approach in disaster recovery, it also highlights the need for further rigorous evaluations to be conducted in the Australian post-disaster recovery setting to create a strong evidence base. Recommendations for future recovery services are also outlined, including suggestions regarding timeframes, communication and staffing. Importantly, the service model used by the SBS was found to be an appropriate and effective model for the recovery process and is recommended for use in future recovery services.

The qualitative evaluation of the SBS was conducted in collaboration between the New South Wales Government Ministry for Police and Emergency Services, Disaster Welfare Service (MPES DWS) and The Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health (CRRMH) at the University of Newcastle, NSW (UON).

Introduction

In 2013 Australia experienced its hottest summer on record and while Australian rural communities are aware of the increased risk and destructive effects of large bushfires, the Blue Mountains region bushfires during the summer of 2013 took the community by surprise and destroyed many homes and livelihoods.

Effective emergency response plans and preparedness of government agencies and local health and community welfare services are essential in reducing the impact of these adverse events and are vital components of increasing resilience and supporting the recovery effort of affected communities.

The Step By Step Blue Mountains Bushfire Support Service (SBS) was designed to strengthen individual and household capabilities to meet bushfire recovery needs, assist in decision-making and promote wellbeing among the affected community. Using a case management model, with a solution-focused and strengths-based approach, the support worker assisted community members by providing information, by supporting clients in making their own decision and by providing recovery resources and support.

This report presents the findings from a qualitative evaluation of the SBS service, established in response to the 2013 Blue Mountains bushfires. The collaboration between the Ministry for Police and Emergency Services Disaster Welfare Service (MPES DWS) and Gateway Family Services (GFS) in establishing the SBS is articulated, including a description of the service model utilised. Perspectives of the SBS clients, staff, managers and stakeholder organisations are also analysed.

This report provides evidence of how solution-focused theory and a strengths-based approach may be applied in a disaster recovery service. In addition, this report argues for the need for increased evaluation of disaster support services, such as the SBS. This would facilitate expansion of the knowledge base which informs disaster recovery services, developing evidence based responses to emergencies which will promote community resilience and support recovery.

Background

Fire Event

In October 2013, the Blue Mountains experienced devastating bushfires. Three fires which started in Lithgow, Springwood and Mount Victoria burnt over 65,000 hectares of land and affected many towns in the Blue Mountains region (NSW Rural Fire Service 2013). Additionally, over two hundred properties were destroyed and a significant amount of damage occurred to many houses and buildings. Many people were severely impacted by the fires; residents were evacuated and displaced from their homes, experiencing isolation, separation from people they love, fear and trauma, and dislocation from their communities and services (Curran 2013).

Establishment of Step By Step Blue Mountains Bushfire Support Service

Due to the substantial losses sustained for householders, and the significant recovery process that needed to be undertaken following bushfires in Winmalee, Yellow Rock, Mount Victoria and Bells Line of Road, a coordinated support service for people adversely affected by the bushfires was conceptualised within MPES DWS, and discussed with the Blue Mountains Recovery Committee in the days immediately following the fires. Consultation with NSW Treasury and the Emergency Management Australia Division of the Australian Attorney-General's Department, gained support for the proposal, funded through the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements (NDRRA) and administered through MPES DWS. The activation of this category of the NDRRA was unusual; generally psychosocial support to impacted communities after smaller events is managed through the existing network of human services.

The service model and detailed manual of operating guidelines and tools had been developed by MPES DWS and colleagues following a devastating fire in the Warrumbungle Shire ten months earlier, and formed the basis for SBS. It was also informed by the experience from the Victorian Black Saturday Bushfires and New Zealand Canterbury Earthquakes. The SBS team then further refined the service model consistent with the theoretical orientation of GFS's existing family support services.

GFS was contracted by MPES DWS to establish and manage a time limited personal bushfire recovery support service for bushfire affected households in the Blue Mountains. SBS commenced operating from the Springwood Disaster Recovery Centre at the Springwood Presbyterian Church Hall on 7 November 2013.

By the second week in November the SBS team had largely been formed and a mobile outreach service model was established in addition to its services at the Recovery Centre. The SBS team gradually increased in size and outlets, via the Recovery Centre, and outreach modalities via two neighbourhood centres and home visits. The SBS 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 GFS. The team consisted of workers from GFS and a seconded worker from a local youth service and operated within the framework of GFS (Crestani 2014).

Communication and referral pathways were established with other services and a psycho-social recovery model, informed by the earlier Bushfire Support Services Manual produced by MPES DWS, was developed with other local agencies.

Recognising the difficulties that lay ahead for the recovering communities, SBS was designed to assist affected individuals, families and the broader community by providing an outreach service that offered users a single point of contact to help them navigate and access the range of services they may require throughout their recovery process. Utilising a person-centred, solution-focused and strengths-based approach, SBS support workers aimed to aid bushfire recovery, decision making, and promote well-being within the community. At the time there were no other comparable services in the LGA and SBS filled a service gap arising due to the bushfire.

SBS integrated with existing community services and other recovery related services and actively participated in co-ordinated recovery activities. The SBS manager was a member of the Wellbeing Sub Committee, a working group of local community service agencies advising the Recovery Committee at local government level.

A proactive communication and consultation strategy was in place to inform the affected residents, local services and community in general of the pending closure of the service in August 2014, and to ensure that current clients were introduced to existing, ongoing services for any future needs.

SBS was operational from November 2013 to August 2014 and while MPES DWS administered the joint Commonwealth/NSW Government funding for the majority of the service during its time, the last three months of operation was funded by the Uniting Church to extend the service delivery. The closure of the service was completed with a step-down approach ensuring that current clients were connected and linked in with other community services in the local area.

Service Model

Overview of the Service Model

A range of theories, models and approaches have been used in disaster recovery responses. Commonly, case management, psychosocial, community capacity building and community development models have been used. A shift from treatment type approaches to community based and strength-based approaches are being increasingly used. Evidence suggests that in the early phase after an event or disaster, safety, support, information and resources for people affected by the event have been the most necessary (Slawinski 2006). At this time interventions should interfere as little as possible and allow for the natural recovery process to occur.

As part of SBS's establishment through GFS, SBS staff (seconded from GFS) adopted the strengths-based and solution-focused approach which was used in all aspects of their service delivery. As such no specific training on applying a solution focused approach was needed,

however due to the traumatic nature of clients' and the communities' experience monthly clinical group supervision was provided for staff by an external consultant.

The solution-focused and strengths-based approach views individuals, families and communities as capable participants in their recovery and focuses on the client's strengths, capabilities, visions, and hopes for their recovery (Ligon 2002). This approach allows the client to be in control of the recovery process and timeframes. The role of the professional is to facilitate and help the client tap into their own strengths to move ahead and seek solutions. A solution-focused and strengths-based approach requires the worker to identify the client's strengths, talents, capabilities and resources.

This approach does not place the person as the victim in their situation, but neither ignores the trauma that has occurred. It simply places the control back in the client's hands and allows them to have maximum control over their individual recovery. Words such as empowerment and resilience are key to its perspective. A focus on the client's strengths is maintained throughout all phases of intervention. Once strengths are identified, the worker encourages the client to develop and use them to work on particular goals and tasks in the recovery process (Crestani 2014).

The solution-focused and strengths-based approach incorporates the following ideas:

- the client has autonomy and choice to express their needs and make their own decisions.
- the client's values are respected and their dignity is maintained.
- the client's social and cultural identity is respected in a sensitive way.
- the client is supported to identify their goals and work towards achieving them.
- the client and SBS are partners in the process.
- clear and open communication is used.
- the approach is flexible, dynamic and individually tailored.
- the client and SBS have realistic, achievable goals, and any unrealistic expectations are clarified early in the relationship.

(Crestani 2014, p26)

The approach has been well established in social work and case management, and solution-focused therapy is used widely among different client groups (Macdonald 2011, Guterman 2014). In disaster recovery within Australia, to our knowledge, SBS's explicit and intentional application of solution-focused therapy has been an innovative and novel model in the delivery of bushfire support services.

Working with Clients

Given the crisis situation, and unexpected and non-discriminatory nature of bushfires, it was likely that many clients of SBS may not have used community or welfare services before. Figure 1 illustrates the model and integrated nature of the service delivery. It is for this reason

that a lot of thought and intention went into the process of naming the service, to make it accessible and relevant to all. The final decision to name the service “Step by Step” was a reflection of:

- 1) The need to appeal to the broad sweep of bushfire affected households (many of whom chose not to identify with needing access to welfare and charitable services previously);
- 2) Recovery from bushfires being often a long process of moving forward step by step and recognition that this process will be different for each household;
- 3) Support workers walking alongside people as they take the next steps on the path to recovery and renewal.



Figure 1. Service Model Framework
(UoN research team, 2014)

This reflects a philosophy that explicitly acknowledges the strengths, resilience and capacity of people to reshape their future, while tapping into the resources and resilience of their neighbourhoods and community. In addition, it reflects the key message that recovery will take time, may feel frustratingly slow and that there will likely be set-backs along the way. The rebuilding process is not only a period of mourning for what was lost but also a time of

transition, where new learnings, new connections with neighbourhood and community begin to emerge.

In addition to using a solution-focused and strengths-based approach Step by Step utilised an outreach, “soft-entry” model as an engagement strategy to reach affected households. The soft entry model actively utilises existing channels of connection within a community to link up with people in locations and contexts that are non-stigmatising, familiar and comfortable. Further, the service had a “no door is the wrong door” philosophy in relation to the types of needs and issues that households may approach the service with. This promoted relationship building with clients, who through experiencing the service or worker as helpful and a useful resource were more likely to re-connect with that service or worker at other points during their recovery. A conscious decision was made to avoid officious language and terminology to describe the service and its operations to both the community and clients (Crestani 2014, p25)

SBS aimed to promote individual strength and recovery in a non-labelling and non-pathologising way. When a client gained the support they needed it was appropriate that SBS initiated closure with the client. In general, the approaches used by SBS aimed to facilitate and support individuals to identify, prioritise and implement their own recovery process, as well as to link them in to local on-going support services if required (given the temporary nature of SBS).

Patterns of Service Use

The SBS service had a total of 528 clients during its operation from November 2013 to August 2014. All clients who participated in this evaluation were affected by the Blue Mountains bush fires and were registered clients with the SBS service.

The types of services SBS clients utilized over the duration of their time with SBS can be seen in Table 1, which shows that most services used were for local council, SBS financial services and counselling services. Services that were still required by clients at the closure of SBS are shown in Table 2, while Table 3 illustrates some of the changes in the needs of clients over the SBS operation period.

Table 1. Services that clients* have utilised via Step By Step referrals.

| Service Type | Number of Referrals |
|--|----------------------------|
| Local Council | 238 |
| SBS financial needs | 189 |
| Counselling - individual/family/relationship | 181 |
| Donated goods and services (e.g. The Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul) | 169 |
| Catholics Care drop in centre | 112 |
| Financial support | 112 |
| Practical support (e.g. food relief, clothing) | 58 |
| Community services | 48 |
| Community health/General Practice | 46 |
| Gateway Family Services | 32 |
| Mental health services | 24 |
| Legal services | 23 |
| Public works | 23 |
| Other | 15 |
| Government services | 13 |
| Housing | 10 |

*Unable to contact 143

Table 2. Services still required at closure of Step By Step

| Service Type | Number of Clients |
|--|--------------------------|
| No services required | 187 |
| SBS miscellaneous assistance | 74 |
| Local Council | 58 |
| Counselling - individual/family/relationship | 47 |
| Donated goods and services (e.g. The Salvation Army) | 44 |
| Financial support | 40 |
| Other | 25 |
| Practical support (e.g. food relief, clothing) | 21 |
| Community health/General Practice | 17 |
| Catholic Care drop in centre | 14 |
| Mental health services | 13 |
| Facebook (SBS) | 11 |
| Legal services | 11 |
| Gardening/clearing/landscape assistance | 9 |
| Dangerous trees | 8 |
| Gateway Family Services | 6 |
| Government services | 5 |
| Housing | 4 |

Table 3. Change in assistance required by clients over time

| October – December 2013 | January – March 2014 | April – June 2014 | July – August 2014 |
|---|---|---|--|
| Temporary/emergency accommodation. | Elderly/frail clients needing assistance to move debris and waste to front of their blocks for Council's kerbside clean-up. | Increased contacts received from clients (with total loss) who had not accessed any prior assistance. | Incoming calls and emails from clients in response to Step by Step's announcement of closure. |
| Essential goods (i.e. clothing, blankets, furniture). | | Clients reporting financial hardship. | Residents calling to double check their eligibility for grants and financial assistance and to request support for specific needs before the service closed. |
| Finances/income support. | Increased contact from households with complex needs. | Clients seeking information regarding potential exemptions from paying stamp duty. | Increase in requests for assistance with garden clean up and regeneration. |
| Assistance with Insurance Companies. | Increased "1 st time" contacts from fire affected residents not registered on DWS database. | Clients reporting an increased sense of sadness and awareness of the losses they have experienced. | Calls and emails coming from clients wanting to express their appreciation and thanks for support received from Step by Step. |
| Replacement of lost documents (i.e. birth certificates, passports) | Increased reports of households facing severe financial stress. | Clients reporting increased anger and frustration in particular the financial set-backs. | Increased number of clients expressing an interest in accessing emotional support through counselling. |
| Access to telephones, printer/fax, computers/internet. | Increased requests from households for assistance with block clearing and dangerous tree removal. | Increasing number of clients reporting sub-standard work being completed by builders/tradespeople. | Continuing inquiries from clients reporting concerns about trees on their blocks that they consider dangerous. |
| Clearing of blocks and removal of debris, asbestos and dangerous trees. | Increasing number of clients self-reporting an increase in "strong emotions" and "angry outbursts." | Clients requiring assistance with completing Development Applications for rebuilding. | |
| Toys, food hampers, vouchers and resources for the Christmas/school holiday period. | Client inquiries regarding BAL rating of their property. | Client concerns regarding capacity to meet increased costs of rebuilding to the required standard. | |
| | Continued stress related to level of insurance pay-outs and capacity to rebuild to required building standards. | Contacts from clients who have moved out of the area and still requiring assistance. | |

(Crestani 2014, p3)

Qualitative Evaluation of Step By Step Blue Mountains Bushfire Support Service

Aims

This project aimed to gain a greater understanding of how the SBS service operated, if the service achieved its objectives and if it addressed the urgent practical and psychological needs of the community. This project aimed to assess the perceived usefulness of and satisfaction with the support service from various perspectives involved with receipt of the service and service delivery, thereby giving the participants an opportunity to contribute and share their knowledge directly with the research team and provide feedback to SBS managers and funding bodies (MPES DWS). This enabled authentic feedback which can further contribute to future disaster recovery services.

Objectives:

Overall this qualitative evaluation aimed to:

- Gain insight into the perceived effectiveness of the service.
- Gain insight into the perceived impact of the service.
- Contribute to the importance of service evaluation in order to enhance future recovery service implementations.
- Ascertain client satisfaction with SBS service.

Outcomes from this evaluation have ramifications for the wider communities involved in disaster support including research, policy and practice. It was, therefore, important that the research and evaluation team acknowledged and appreciated the lived experience of those involved in the service.

Participant Group Aims:

Specifically this qualitative evaluation aimed to examine the service through interviews with the various participant groups involved with the SBS service as outlined below:

1. SBS Clients

- a. Did clients feel the service was useful to them?
- b. Was the service responsive to client needs and respectful?
- c. Was the relationship with the SBS worker important to the client?

2. SBS Managerial Staff

- a. Understand the process of establishing and running SBS including capacity of host agency (GFS) and staff (e.g. skills/training, relationships in community, service model and communication).

3. SBS Staff

- a. Understand staff members' experience of SBS, including its establishment, service model, skills, workload and personal impact.

4. SBS Stakeholders

- a. Understand stakeholder relationships with SBS, the impact of SBS on stakeholder agencies' workload, and the communication processes involved.

Methods

The evaluation drew on quantitative data collected by the SBS service in order to complement the qualitative findings and provide further details. Researchers at the CRRMH led the qualitative evaluation of SBS while the MPES DWS team conducted the mail out and sampling of participants from their database and supported and provided feedback through the process.

As a large component of this research is to evaluate the users' and providers' perspectives of the SBS service and the processes involved in a disaster recovery service, open-ended semi-structured interviews were conducted with SBS clients, staff, managers and stakeholder organisations, with interview questions being targeted to each group.

This study was completed retrospectively and responses to interview questions have directly contributed to the recommendations and conclusions of this final report.

Ethical approval was granted by The University of Newcastle Human Research Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of the project in June 2014 (approval number H-2014-0173). Participation in the evaluation was voluntary and all participants were required to return a signed consent form to the research team at the University of Newcastle prior to undertaking their interview with the researcher.

Participants

This study included four separate participant groups, each with differing involvement and experiences with the SBS. The participant groups were as follows:

- 1 SBS Clients: were bushfire affected community members who had used SBS.
- 2 SBS Staff: the 'on the ground' workers, who worked with the clients and liaised with other local service providers.
- 3 SBS Managers: responsible for overseeing the SBS staff and managing relations with stakeholders. SBS managerial staff were from the host agency, GFS.
- 4 Stakeholders: agencies that SBS may have referred their clients to. Stakeholders also included agencies and organisations involved in the disaster recovery of the Blue Mountains bushfires.

Figure 2 illustrates the relationships between participant groups.

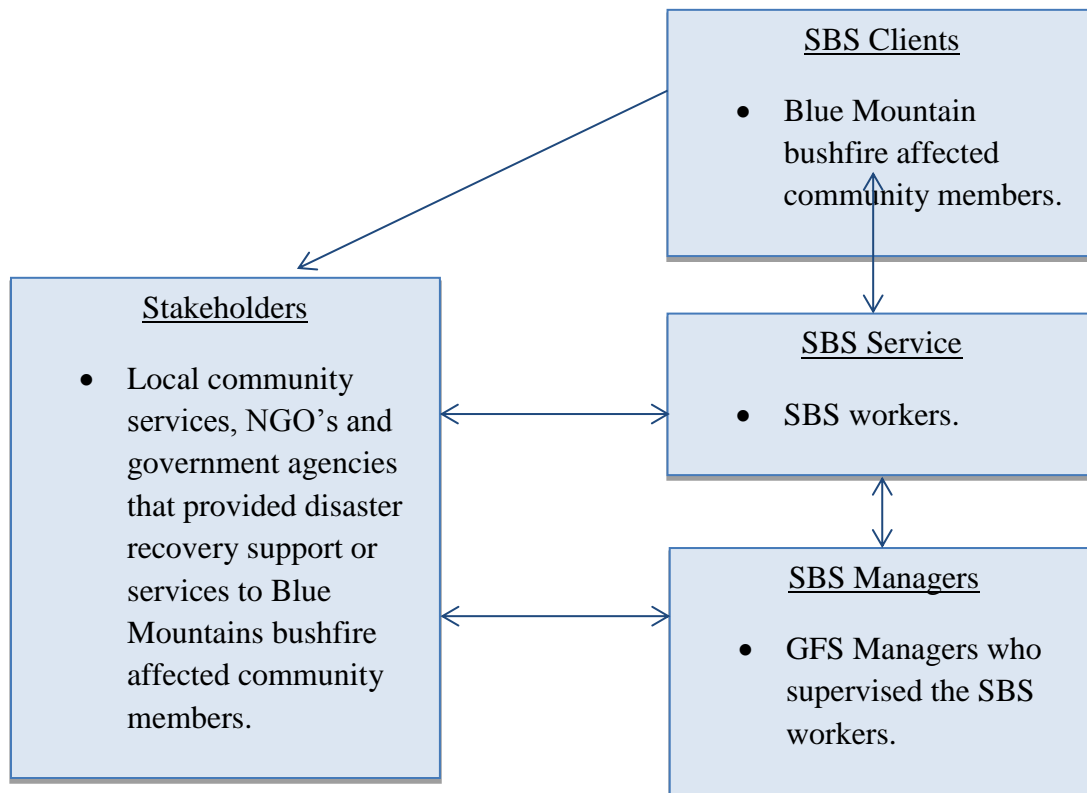


Figure 2. Step By Step Participant Group Relationship Flow Chart

In order to capture diverse experiences for this evaluation, MPES purposefully selected a sample of clients, SBS staff, SBS managers and stakeholder agencies. The variables used to identify a diverse sample of clients included: geographical location, family structure, age, insurance status, nationality, occasions of service and period of service. Invitations to participate in the research were mailed in randomly selected batches from this selection of potential participants. The invitation pack included an invitation letter (to participate in a semi-structured interview which focused on their experiences with SBS), information sheet, consent form and a reply paid enveloped addressed to the research team at The Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health. Reminder letters were sent out one month after initial invitations were sent and if no reply then there was no further follow-up. Reminder letters were purposely sent to participant groups with the lowest response rates to ensure the distribution among the participants was as equal as possible.

In total, 59 invitation letters were sent to potential participants with a total of 24 invitees consenting to be in the study by posting their signed consent forms to the research team. As participation in the study was voluntary only those that mailed back their signed consent form to the research team were eligible to participate.

Data Collection and Analysis

When a consent form was received a member of the research team contacted the participant to arrange a suitable day and time to conduct the interview.

Interview schedules were developed for each participant group to reflect their unique experiences (see appendices A to D). The interview questions were designed in alignment with the aims of the research project, ensuring that questions asked were going to provide answers that addressed the aims of this study. In designing the interview questions special consideration was given so that the questions were focused on evaluation rather than asking people to re-tell their potentially traumatic experience. The final question in the interview schedule for each group asked participants to rate their level of satisfaction with the SBS on a scale of one to five, where one represented being not satisfied at all and 5 represented being totally satisfied

After receiving participants' signed consent forms, interviews were scheduled. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted by Jane Rich and Angela Booth from the Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health at the University of Newcastle via telephone. Data collection commenced in May 2014 and continued until the end of November 2014.

Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and then imported into NVivo (QSR 2012) to facilitate analysis. A thematic approach was utilised in analysing the results. Any discrepancies in coding were discussed by the researchers and a consensus reached. Thematic findings were discussed among the research team and with the Step by Step Evaluation Research Reference Group who contributed their thoughts on interpretation and meaning.

Qualitative Evaluation Results

Each participant group is presented separately in this section with a further analysis of the main findings presented in the discussion section on Page 54. In total 24 interviews were conducted, transcribed and analysed. Eight clients, four staff members, four managers and eight stakeholders participated in interviews.

Results from Step By Step Clients

Eight SBS clients participated in this evaluation, consisting of 2 males and 6 females with the average age of these participants being 51.5 years. SBS records show the types of services and assistance required by the sample of clients who participated in this evaluation project. Service use differed throughout client engagement with the SBS service. On average clients used the service for 8.3 months and Table 4 shows the change in assistance and services required by clients over this time and what was still required at the closure of SBS.

Table 4 Services and assistance required by participating clients

| Services initially required | Services that have been utilised | Service needs at closure of service |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Financial assistance | Community services | Catholic Care drop in centre |
| Dangerous tree removal | Council | Community Services |
| Waste removal | Donated goods and services | Council |
| Clothing | Financial support | Counselling |
| Food | Legal services | Donated goods and services |
| Accommodation | Practical support | Legal services |
| Clothing | SBS miscellaneous advice | Mental health services |
| Electrical services | Community Health | Practical support |
| | General Practice | Community Health |
| | Counselling | General Practice |
| | Facebook (SBS) | Financial support |
| | Dangerous tree removal | SBS Finalised needs |
| | Electrical services | |
| | Gateway Family Services | |
| | Parent group | |
| | Public Works | |

Tables 5 presents the themes and their definition based on the participants' experiences with examples of quotes by SBS clients. Each of the three main client themes and their sub-themes are then described in detail.

Table 5 Results from Step By Step clients

| Theme | Definition | Quote |
|---|--|---|
| 1. Client Needs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ immediate and long-term | Clients' needs throughout their disaster recovery period, including physical, such as assistance with accommodation, and psychological, such as a friendly face to talk to | <i>"So all my needs, immediate needs were met within the first say two or three months. Now for me I'm still in need but things are more under control."</i> |
| 2. SBS Service: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Relationship with worker ○ Communication ○ Locality of staff ○ Outreach ○ Practical assistance | Usefulness of service to clients | <i>"There was nothing unhelpful. They were extremely helpful. They helped me - I can't describe the immense support that they provided us."</i> |
| 3. Service Use: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Referrals and use ○ Closure of SBS | What clients used service for and how they used it | <i>"Also just like times when I felt that I just needed a break, to have a coffee with somebody, I would just call into the office and sit down and have a coffee with one person."</i> |

Theme 1 - Client Needs

Clients described how their needs changed over time.

"Well, our immediate need was accommodation. I don't know what you're interested in but when we went to the recovery centre in Springwood, you're a bit dazed. There's an awful lot of people there helping but you don't really know what you need. You don't know what to ask for. You don't know what you need. So there was a social worker there who came over and spoke to us. We told her that we had insurance with GIO. She just contacted them for us and organised two weeks emergency accommodation."

Most clients spoke about their immediate needs in terms of accommodation, clothes and food and talked about how they needed their community at that time.

“As you can imagine, coming home and finding out everything you own has been destroyed, there were [a lot of] requirements. I needed clothing, I needed accommodation, I needed money” and “even that first month, first couple of months, we just needed each other. All the people needed each other.”

Although the immediate needs described above were met for the clients early after the disaster it was clear that clients felt they required ongoing support and described how needs changed to psychological support.

“I think the needs have now become more psychological.”

“So there's still a lot to be done, but somehow I feel that pressure has lessened.”

Theme 2 - SBS Service

When asked if clients felt valued, respected and if their individual needs were addressed by SBS all participants said “yes” or “absolutely.” Overwhelmingly clients felt that the service was responsive to their needs:

“Very much so, very valued. I was very much an individual. They helped with my individual needs”

“...absolutely, yes. I felt almost like they were part of the family. It was very good.”

Relationship with worker

In addition to this clients felt that the relationship between themselves and the worker was important with all clients explaining how their relationship with the worker developed and the important role the SBS worker played in their lives:

“Yeah, it developed quite quickly to the point where she [SBS worker] was actually quite emotional about all the things that were coming to fruition. She herself couldn't believe the response that she got when she asked for help for us. She was even overwhelmed - we had one visit where everything was charred and black and all the kids' toys had been burnt and the kids were too scared to go outside, and then on her last visit she saw that all the kids had toys outside and the bikes were everywhere. She stood at the front of the garden and started crying. She started crying to see that the kids have actually - not trapped in the house anymore and that they're actually playing. She was quite emotional. Well I was too actually [laughs]. She was quite inquisitive. She was saying I don't just want to know about the fire, I want to know how you guys are. What are you coping, what do - how are you coping, what do you need, what can I do for you, where would you like to go, what would make the kids smile? She was quite persistent.”

Other clients described the worker as becoming “good friends” and how the relationship itself was healing:

“Yes and it's healing and anyway [SBS worker] was very loving to us and she became a friend.”

Communication

People heard about the service in different ways. Many people saw SBS set up in the Recovery Centre at Springwood and others found out about the service via a friend, flyer, email, phone call or through another agency. As communication within a disaster area is problematic a client suggested what may work in a community which doesn't have access to regular post/mail:

“I think maybe if they can't post things to people to say whether you need help, I think maybe community announcements would have helped, because I do read the paper and listen to the local news station. I just didn't - yeah, it would be nice if they advertised themselves a little bit more maybe. Not for my benefit but for the benefit of everyone like me who thought oh well at least I didn't lose my home, so I should consider myself lucky.”

Local staff

Most clients felt it was important that the worker was from the Blue Mountains region as there was often an unspoken understanding of the community:

“Because it's just anyone in the mountains understands the threat of bushfires. They've often gone through fires before. It doesn't matter if you get hit or if someone else does, you feel for the whole community. So someone from the community is helping the community means you don't have to explain what it feels like. This is not across the board, but with Step by Step I found them very sympathetic to bushfire victims. It's just home and you just know. They already know.”

However, some clients felt that being local was not overly important:

“...to tell you the truth, it would not have made a difference to me because a lot of the people who came in were from other areas.”

Outreach

As SBS was an outreach support service, workers often met with clients at various locations which clients found useful and reported that this informality was good:

“Well having a cup of coffee was taking away from the environment, where - so that was nice. I liked that, to meet up with people wherever was good. Because that made it a little bit more informal, little bit more relaxed. But it was good, it was very good.”

Although the service was flexible with its delivery not all clients used it in this way. Some clients had to move out of the area and found it easier to go to the service's physical location when they were in the area:

“Well it probably was, but it just never worked out for us. We moved four times after the fires and so - and we were quite far away, so I think it was just easier for me when

I came back up - because we commuted for about nine months, bringing the children back up to school. So I just saw them at Springwood. So that was okay. That was fine. But I thought it was a very good idea for people who needed to see them at night, that they could visit them at seven o'clock at night. I thought that was a very helpful thing. It just didn't really work out for us like that."

When asked if they would recommend the service to a friend all 8 interviewed clients said "yes."

As SBS used solution-focused and strengths-based theories to guide their work with clients this was often unseen and clients did not speak about SBS as a formal counselling service. Rather, they spoke about the caring, respectful, and guiding way they were dealt with:

"Counselling it's different to what Step by Step did. I'm aware it sort of was counselling but it was different to making an appointment and sitting down and talking to somebody with a cup of tea or something, it was quite different to that, if you know what I mean. Even them coming to your house, it was private and yet it was sort of more casual than sitting down opposite somebody and talking. It's different when they come to your house and you make them a cup of tea and chatting."

Other clients described their experience as a friendship:

"...to tell you the truth, I don't know what sort of recipe they [SBS] used, but I just can't explain it, I think it was just being there for us and being lovely to us that that's how Step by Step carried us through. It was really good because we spilt our guts differently to what we would have if it had been a friend as such, do you know what I mean? We just knew that everything we said was confidential and would not be passed on. I think that was part of the issue, the confidentiality, it was like friendship, but a very confidential friendship."

Practical assistance

Clients spoke about the workers in terms of the practical work they did each day and found the service to be very accessible:

"...they were always accessible, that was one of the things that was really important."

Many clients valued that they spoke to the same person regularly in the service:

"That's what we found terrific, the constancy of it. It wasn't that we were seeing different people all the time....it was really good having the consistency of seeing one person regularly, bit like having your family doctor."

The ways in which the service provided information to clients was explored during the interviews and clients felt that SBS was professional in their approach:

"They didn't let anything slide. It might have taken a couple of days because they were very busy but they always contacted you and said they'd gotten your message, if

you'd left a phone message and that they would - either you'd come in and talk to them directly or they'd come over to the house. Then they'd sort things out."

"That's what it turned out - it turned out to be such an excellent service because they were able to contact people we didn't even know existed. Gee, it was just wonderful."

In general clients felt overwhelmingly grateful to the workers of SBS and found the service to be extremely helpful:

"I think they should all get a medal. I think they are wonderful. I think they are really - yeah, just really - they're very - obviously extremely organised people, which is what you need because you're not, but just their empathy and their kindness. I know they were dealing with people from all sorts of situations, so I think they did an amazing job, and I hope they're there for every person that ever has a fire. I just really do, they were just amazing. If it could go a bit longer than the 12 months, like maybe even 14 months would be really helpful I think. No, I really wish they could all get some sort of credit in some way. They're amazing."

"Yeah. I don't think that we would actually be functioning today if it hadn't been for them"

"Look, I could kiss the ground where they are. They were so good."

"Well, like I said, they hold your hand when you're getting upset. I just think that was a wonderful thing to do. Not many people can do that. They were just very comforting and genuine people who really, really believed in what they were doing and did it well. I can't think of anything else."

Theme 3 - Service Use

Clients used the service in various ways and at varying times through their recovery.

Referrals and help in sourcing goods and services included organising transport, providing contacts for medical advice, local council, organising trades, counselling, and household items including clothing and blankets. SBS also provided other support in other ways which was described by clients as:

"So pretty much they looked after us physically, practically, emotionally and medically they intervened on different levels to relieve some of the pressures that we had prior to the bushfires. We hadn't recovered from the storms of the previous year. So they arranged for voluntary people to come over and reopen our driveway so that we had a route of escape in case of another fire."

SBS was described as a haven, a place of respite and care:

"They were very good. They - I think they did the very best they could, I mean it's a very hard situation. You can't really have people who have had fires to help someone else, because they're in distress, but Step by Step was certainly a haven or a refuge or a place I could go, to get information if you needed it, or support. But I think after the

initial part, they were definitely even more helpful because I was obviously more relaxed and it was just more talking about things, not this manic trying to get things done. It was unbelievable; trying to reclaim your life is very hard. It's just - it's such a mess and you've got to get all this documentation done and - yeah, it's just crazy."

Closure of SBS

When discussing the closure of the service clients perceived the lack of SBS as a "gap" in the system. Although some clients felt confident in their ability to access support on their own many felt uneasy about doing so and felt that bushfire recovery support was still needed in the community:

"...knowing that that service was there at the end of the phone gave me peace of mind during my most difficult time and I guess that's what's hitting now, knowing that the service is going or gone. It takes away some of my peace I guess."

"Yes. I'm a different person than I was 12 months ago. As I said, I've turned my thinking around and probably [SBS worker] has helped that as well. But I think now that I have more confidence to access whatever help I can get, but I feel that I have - there's a lot of people out there that need help."

Most clients recommended a service like SBS be open for longer and when asked about improvements for the future the length of service operation and adequate staffing were the only comments clients made:

"To me they just need whatever funding is needed to do what they do for at least two years after a natural disaster like this. They've got to have the people. It's no good having one person when you need three. They seem to do well with the numbers that they have. It just needed to go on longer. If you're asking me about what things I think they could do to help us, other than what I've pointed out, I don't know."

Adequate staffing was spoken about in terms of access to a worker five days per week:

"I would have liked to have been able to have accessed a case manager - to have access to my case manager five days a week as opposed to I think she only worked two or three days a week. So that was a little bit of an issue because if I contacted her with a request on the last [day that she] [unclear] I would have to wait until the Monday to get a response; in the scheme of things it's not that lengthy a time to wait, but it would have been better to have had access five days a week."

Results from Step By Step Staff

The themes identified by the four SBS staff are explained below. Table 6 provides a definition of each themes based on the analysis of staff members experiences with SBS, with examples of quotes. Each of the six main themes and relevant sub-themes are then described in detail.

Table 6 Results from Step By Step Staff

| Theme | Definition | Quote |
|--|--|---|
| 1. Challenges/Rewards | Aspects of role explored and described in various ways including challenges and rewards | <i>"Probably the most challenging thing was when I got home and just had to keep going with daily life."</i> |
| 2. Communication <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ New Relationships○ Service Establishment○ Support○ Locality | Connecting with stake holders | <i>"...have a meeting where the people who are involved are all there together. So it makes it easier for making that inter-organisational communication happening."</i> |
| 3. Community Needs | Staff's view of community needs in disaster recovery | <i>"I think it's important for the clients to be able to trust you and to have some sense of an awareness that you're on their - you're from their tribe kind of - you know their stuff, and you can navigate the services."</i> |
| 4. Disaster Response Improvement | Resources, future response | <i>"Think it would be important to have a centralised information hub or something, where people - the organisations posted exactly what was going on."</i> |
| 5. Delivery of the Service | Positive, negative, solution-focused and strengths-based approaches, establishment, outreach, closure, recovery centre | <i>"Some people were more comfortable to be seen at their homes, some were more comfortable to be more active and go out and do it themselves - like contact the organisations themselves. So as a service we were able to provide what the residents wanted rather than having one set way of doing things."</i> |
| 6. Staffing Considerations | Impact, support, skills, workload, take on role again | <i>"It was astounding seeing people's resilience and strength, and I found so many of them just incredibly inspiring, and just seeing the love really that exists, and the hope that exists."</i> |

Theme 1 - Challenges and Rewards

Many staff discussed the challenge of having to “navigate the system” for their clients as most agencies they communicated with were established in response to the disaster. This involved establishing new relationships with key stakeholders and forming new contacts and sourcing of information:

“Not being necessarily familiar with all of the services, or knowing the kind of intricacies of the networks around all that kind of health and community services, and then having to kind of do quite a bit of research into that stuff, in order to get something to happen.”

The balance of doing this and coordinating the role was difficult at times:

“It’s kind of like, how do I navigate that, and at the same time be taking calls and making calls and meeting people, and then just trying to fit that - it’s kind of like you’re juggling quite different roles somehow.”

Staff also spoke about the personal challenges they experienced in working with clients and the surrounding devastation of this disaster:

“Challenge there was to look beyond what was in front of me and say well okay, how can I assist these people to see the resources within them and see them grow in resilience and hope. So I guess that was the challenge, one of the challenges.”

Staff spoke about the difficulty in this particular disaster:

“It was so devastating. It was just, it was like something I haven’t seen before. I mean I’ve worked with people who have been sexually assaulted, who have been tortured but seeing this was just horrific.”

Personal challenges included not always being able to provide the support or help needed:

“...the challenge is walking away because it was so darn hard to do that. I wished there was something - but his situation was just huge.”

Another challenge was the shift between doing your job and being able to leave it at work:

“...to be honest, didn’t find this too challenging. Probably the most challenging thing was when I got home and just had to keep going with daily life.”

While there were challenges working in this environment staff also experienced many rewards and most spoke about the ways in which the community supported each other:

“...it was really rewarding seeing how people supported people and could ask and could reach out to their intimate and wider community.”

Staff spoke about the reward of seeing the resilience and change in strength in their clients – seeing the change in their client’s ability to cope was often spoken about during interviews

and staff felt extremely proud to be a part of the recovery process. Many staff felt privileged to be a part of that healing process:

“You can have so much thrown at you and you can still find ways of making small steps forward. So whether it was people's inner resilience or outlook, on life - so it gave me I guess a very humbled experience of seeing how people can just keep going through very difficult times”

“Seeing people get hope again, get hope in their life, seeing that blossom come through.”

The spirit within the community was often discussed as a reward of the role:

“...so it was that sense of community was so rewarding.”

Generally staff were moved and inspired by their clients and the wider community and felt this was a reward of the role:

“Rewarding... you know ...I would never have met the people that I was in contact with in normal circumstances.”

“...seeing them pick up the gauntlet and move on themselves”

“[I've] been really inspired by the strength”

“[I] go away sometimes just feeling tearful because they're really opening their hearts out to you.”

Theme 2 - Communication

Participants spoke about the various aspects of communication including establishment of SBS, stakeholder communication and communicating with the community and their needs.

New Relationships

Staff discussed that most relationships with other agencies were new, as many support services were established to assist in the disaster recovery:

“...it was a new relationship for most of it actually, and a lot of the projects have only just come up out of the fires.”

While it was a challenge to develop new relationships with agencies, staff felt that in the early days location was an important way to connect and develop these necessary connections. Some staff felt that when they were located at the Recovery Centre it was easier to connect with other agencies due to the close proximity:

“We were all in there together, so at that point it was quite easy to go and sit at someone's table and go, hey what are you doing here”

“The recovery service centre – that was where we all met and that was where all the other services were in the same room. Being there was ideal because if you got a

phone call, then you could just go out to someone who is representing another service and say look, we got this call from a client, what can we do? So when we had that recovery centre, I think that was where we were able to see face-to-face as well. That was important. See face-to-face the other workers from the other services.”

When the service moved to a different location it made these connections harder:

“When we moved to the neighbourhood centre and it was just us, it was trickier”

“You didn't have those same connections, so you kind of had to ring the main line and then there would be that kind of backwards and forwards, trying to get onto someone who could help you.”

Of equal importance was meeting with agencies and providing information about SBS service to the community and agencies:

“...we kind of set up meetings with council where we'd sit and kind of share stuff and let them know what we were doing.”

Service Establishment

At times staff felt that other agencies may not have been aware of the service they were providing. Some staff spoke about the difficulties that other agencies had in the beginning in understanding the service delivery model and the transparency of how SBS was established because the model was different to what these agencies provided at the time:

“I think we were fairly open but you know what we found, and yeah I might as well be honest I guess. What we found with some of the services were a bit cheesed off that we got the deal rather than other services.”

Upon reflection staff recognised that involvement in meetings with stakeholders may have been beneficial in developing the new relationships required:

“I guess the only thing is perhaps having more interactions between the organisations that are involved. So we had either [managers] going to the meetings. That's really helpful because in the community, putting a face to a name is really what gets people to know about the organisation and wanting to engage. I think that, for example, having the neighbourhood centres know who the Step by Step workers are - because sometimes the first port of call is the neighbourhood centre. I think for the neighbourhood centres in the upper mountains, that is what happened. Like the neighbourhood centre got in touch with me and said look, I heard that you're the Step by Step worker. Can we meet? So I guess if we were able to just have, even at the beginning, have a meeting where the people who are involved are all there together. So it makes it easier for making that inter-organisational communication happening.”

Support

Internal communication was often spoken about in terms of support within the team. Staff spoke about the support provided by formal clinical supervision and regular individual meetings and felt supported by their managers and by the team:

“I think as a team I think we worked amazingly well considering most of us didn't know each other. We had good communication and we also had good supervision.”

All staff spoke about support within the team and management in positive ways and the importance of this to the team:

“So the team support was great. The management support was great and the supervision was great”

“...important to have a broader model for supervision.”

An example of this support was explained by one staff member and highlights the importance of support within the team:

“We even had what we called a stress less day where we just didn't book any clients in and we actually went out to the movies. Do you know what? That was so helpful.”

Community

Communication was also spoken about in terms of the accuracy of information provided to community members and what they needed:

“So, often people would ask the question [to stakeholders], what am I entitled to - and they'd do this quick means tested thing, or whatever and then they'd say, well actually nothing. That wasn't the case at all.”

The effect of incorrect information being given out by agencies was also spoken about:

“...what it did was it gave people the impression that there was no point applying for, or looking further afield on that initial first week or two.”

Locality

Staff also discussed the importance of workers being local to the area and the physical locality and accessibility of the service:

“...the availability of having somewhere where people - an informal space where people can come and just kind of download in a fairly - it was great to be able to tell people that we were there between nine and four, five days a week.”

When asked about critical things to get right for supporting families in terms of communication in a disaster most staff spoke about the provision of the correct information, uniformity of information, a centralised point to access services and the need for services to be sensitive to how that particular community works:

“Critical things are getting the information right. Particularly around the timing of when certain funding’s were available.”

“...the crucial point is making sure that the information is provided in a uniformed way.”

“...just having a centralised point I guess where if you get your information from this centralised point then this is the true facts and they haven’t outdated.”

“...being sensitive to what the community wants. Being sensitive to what works for them and work on that”

“[In] terms of a recovery service, noticing those things and addressing how that community works is important. Rather than a sort of one fits all kind of service.”

During this particular recovery event, staff felt that being aware of this difference in demographics of the communities within the two areas of lower and upper Blue Mountains was important:

“...noticing the demographics as well [was important] because in the upper mountains there were less families with young children.”

Theme 3 - Community Needs

Staff also explained their views and experience on what the needs of the community are during and after the bushfire. Staff noticed that the fires intensified some people’s existing issues:

“...often people would come in and the fires had kind of exacerbated existing relationship problems, or problems with their teenagers at school, or behavioural stuff.”

Staff noticed how this impacted on their client’s ability to cope with the fires:

“...people just felt that the fires were those tipping points and felt kind of too overwhelmed.”

Staff explained that clients used the service in different ways from needing help with practical items to helping them work out where to start:

“Clients that I work with, they really were interested in the practical things of what was being provided.”

“...even just kind of prioritising - like, knowing what order to do things in, or knowing where to start I think was often difficult.”

Staff noticed that many clients often wanted the worker to make enquiries on their behalf:

“So in just about every case when you say to people, would you like me to make that call for you - they say, yes.”

“...it was kind of surprising how many people were happy to not have those direct conversations, and for them to be relayed back, if that makes sense.”

Theme 4 - Disaster Response Improvement

When asked about disaster responses in the future staff spoke about the establishment of a service from within the service system and the importance of having existing relationships in the community service sector and an increased integration of disaster organisations was desired:

“...to have an agency that already has relationships existing with other agencies, and to know what programs there are, but I think also to look at who comes on board and what model that they're using.”

“The partnerships is definitely very important.”

“...perhaps having more interactions between the organisations that are involved.”

Staff reported on how funding was allocated to community members and felt that a centralised system for funding may work better:

“Rather than separate agencies having the ability to make judgemental decisions about the money, based on judgement.”

“...so I guess perhaps there could be some way of having an over-riding or arch of committee about having more knowledge.”

Staff described how they felt it was important to have professional staff that are trained in a psychosocial therapeutic model and in disaster response, on the ground. This became a challenge when working with volunteers who have generously donated their time and energy but may not be skilled:

“Using volunteers who are not - don't really have an understanding of psychosocial needs for people in trauma.”

It is also important to highlight that staff acknowledged how services need to be aware that traumatic events may bring up other emotional issues/problems for community members:

“...being mindful that there are possibly other dynamics that may be happening in their lives and not being pushy about something if it's not the right time for them.”

In terms of the timeframe in which SBS was established most staff believed that the service could not have been up and running any sooner as elements needed for establishment happened quite quickly, considering also that this was the first time this service was set up:

“Look I don't think it could have happened any quicker. We got on the ground as fast as we could really, in terms of trying to find a team of people that could work straight away. I think we were on within three weeks or something, so yeah.”

Although most staff agreed that the service was set up within an appropriate timeframe they did talk about resources that, if the event happened again, would allow them to respond sooner, as well as accurate information for services to use:

“[If] we’d had the database already set up, there would have been a lot of time saved just pumping that stuff straight in.”

“[With a] database, putting people’s names straight on that, an organisation or a project like Step by Step could just get straight in there. They’d have their name, their address, be able to contact them ASAP and be able to follow-up too after a little while. I think having services on the ground much quicker; there seemed to me a little bit of confusion about what was available and what wasn’t.”

Theme 5 - Delivery of the Service

The delivery of the service was spoken about by most staff who explained how they used the solution-focused or strength based theories and approaches as a way of working with their clients. Staff members described this approach as:

“...recognising the strengths”

“...we’re walking alongside you, you tell us what you need.”

“...it’s very much putting the ball in their court.”

This approach directly addressed clients’ specific needs identified by themselves.

The clients were often viewed as capable individuals who were able to be in control of their lives, amidst the disaster, and being available to support them through their recovery:

“So our philosophy was that people are all capable and resilient and able to make their own decisions. So we kind of used that kind of model in the conversations that we had, but we made sure that we put it to them as if we were having a chat, because we didn’t want to make it sound like we were doing therapy or counselling, because most people were not up for that at all. So we kind of couched it as, would you like to have a chat.”

Staff described how they would listen to their clients; their aspirations and what practically was needed and worked:

“...listening to their hopes and dreams.”

“You tell us what works for you and if there is information that we can get for you then we’ll do that. If there are any other specific needs, like for example, transportation, then we can provide that too.”

“...what’s working well and seeing how we can help to get more of that happening.”

This emphasis on listening meant that during their time with clients staff would be:

“...on the lookout for where strength-based conversations come in.”

Staff expressed their appreciation for both themselves as a practitioner and their clients:

“Personally I like strength-based umbrella and the solution focus because it looks at the clients and they start to see, hey, I do have a strength in this area. I can do this. Whereas often I think our natural reaction is I can't do this”

“...strengths-based; I think that that's really good because that's tapping into where the person, where their strengths lie and be able to work around that, which was quite interesting because a lot of people say I don't have any strengths.”

Staff spoke about other positive aspects of the service in terms of the flexibility and outreach service provided to their clients:

“[I] think that was one of the best things I found. I could meet them wherever the client felt comfortable and that was really important because their whole world had been turned upside down and to be somewhere.”

The way the service focused on supporting clients in a non-judgemental way was described by staff as important:

“...my clients said that it was just really important having someone who wasn't involved in the community and making judgements on them.”

Theme 6 - Staffing Considerations

Generally staff spoke positively about the support they received in this role. Although staff performed a lot of outreach work and may not have necessarily been located together they felt very supported in their roles from the management and other colleagues of SBS:

“...really supportive.”

“...if I had concerns, I felt I was able to express them.”

“...consistently supportive, they've all been amazing.”

“...our manager was really fantastic. She was always available and made it very clear that she was always available if we needed anything, and the same went for our team leader as well, and over-riding like Gateway Family Services.”

Staff explained the impact the role has on them personally and spoke about needing to be flexible and to prioritise. Staff described the positive impact their role has had on them in their community as “really fortunate”:

“I just can't stress enough how privileged I feel to have been able to do this work, and work with the community. I think it's really strengthened my belonging in the community as well, and just a deeper connection. I've been really fortunate to actually meet the people that I've met.”

Staff were amazed by the resilience and ability of the affected communities to deal with this disaster:

“It was astounding seeing people's resilience and strength, and I found so many of them just incredibly inspiring, and just seeing the love really that exists, and the hope that exists.”

“Their strengths and their - I think for them was suddenly opening their lives out and I think that was the generosity of spirit, generosity of - even though they had lost things, what came out was their generosity.”

When asked if they would take on this role again all staff interviewed said “yes.”

Staff shared their thoughts on what kinds of skills/training was necessary for this role:

“...it's critical for all the workers to have a sense of some kind of solid, but a good sense of the basic counselling skills, so just being able to listen, to not have any judgement, to have empathy, to be warm, to be engaging.”

Staff had frequently used their counselling skills in adolescent, family, relationship, and grief and loss. Other skills and attributes mentioned as important aspects of this role included empathy, listening, honesty and dedication to supporting their clients.

Although they recognised the difficulties in having qualified professionals in all services, generally they believed it was important for all persons dealing with disaster affected people to have basic training in these skills:

“I don't think it's necessary to have psychiatrists who are there - kind of diagnosing people or anything, but I think it's definitely important to have people there who do have some understanding of, ‘I think this person's really on the edge’.

Staff presented their concerns for volunteers who may not be well trained in dealing with people going through a disaster. SBS staff were cautious of the role that volunteers have within recovery teams and the recovery information volunteers pass on to the public. In this one example, the information presented was incorrect due to a lack of qualified training in the significant role they played and consequently caused further distress for the client:

“it's a nice idea to have volunteers who can sit and chat, but we had some terrible stories about people who'd gone to the [service provider] and just got someone who was really judgemental, and just really totally terrible... [a worker] who thought they knew what they were doing in terms of being a counsellor.”

Some staff explained that the location of where staff lived and how the knowledge of the local area and the community was important in having a shared understanding and platform to work from:

“...at least someone from the Blue Mountains. Because I think, for example, that knowledge of - your own local knowledge of the services can sometimes provide insight and input into how that could support the family.”

“[if they were] from the mountains then there was already a connection that you understood the sense of what was happening. You were part of the community and you understood,” and the shared understanding of “what it means to live in the bush,” could already established, thus a shared platform to work from.

Results from Step By Step Managerial Staff

The themes identified by four SBS Managers and the definitions of themes are in Table 7 along with example of quotes. Each of the four main themes and their sub-themes are then described in detail.

Table 7 Results from Step By Step Managerial staff

| Theme | Definition | Quote |
|--|---|---|
| 1. SBS Service <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Establishment and Closure○ SBS Service Benefits | Need and benefits, operational, lessons learned. | <i>"A lot of clients like to meet in a café because it gives them a bit of respite. We couched our meetings in terms of a chat over a cuppa or whatever it might be, we didn't call them interviews or assessments or anything like that."</i> |
| 2. Stakeholder Relationships <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Pre-existing relationships○ Local | Establishment of, MPES DWS and GFS involvement, stakeholders. | <i>"From the get go, had to maintain and strengthen those connections and those partnerships. I would say Step by Step worked very, very collaboratively with the service system."</i> |
| 3. Solution-Focused Approach | Models and theories used for service delivery. | <i>"...to walk alongside them [clients] in a realistic way, to provide links to the services where they need them and help them to access the support they need. But also to be able to use those therapeutic moments to help people to reflect on exactly what their experience has been and how they've actually got through to now, and how they might get through the next little bit."</i> |
| 4. Staff and Skill Set | Support, skills. | <i>"If we didn't have the quality people we couldn't have achieved what we achieved."</i> |

Theme 1 - SBS Service

The theme SBS Service explored many aspects of the delivery and logistics of the Step by Step service. Aspects of the service related to closure, future roll-outs, technology, the name, organisational stress, reputation and mobile outreach were explored and discussed during interviews with managerial staff. The paragraphs below explore these issues and how they related to the service delivery of this bushfire disaster recovery support service from the managers' perspectives.

The managers interviewed discussed a range of operational issues, including the naming of Step by Step and how they felt it was appropriate and important to brand the service in terms that describe achievement and strength.

"Step by Step [as a name], was very apt, because it just helped people in little chunks, little bites of things, they could make a decision, I could do this, or I could do that, or this would help me, or that might help me. So empowering people, I think was an important outlook."

With this as a foundational view point the managers then described actions that staff were involved in. Some of these actions included providing regular contact and connecting clients with other appropriate agencies. Managers described how staff would audit the entire client database and call each client to check-in and engage them in available recovery services:

“Structured follow-ups... they [staff] would do a regular phone around, go to entire client base and do a regular phone around. It could be fortnightly, it could be monthly, it could be every six weeks depending on the client's preference.”

Being able to practically support clients was a key aspect of the service. Managers discussed how often this support was

“...around trees getting chopped down and all that other stuff.”

Yet in drawing on the solution-focused foundation of this service managers said that:

“...for a while we might actually sit with them or walk with them we might just loan them a little bit of our capacity to see through the trauma, and do some of that practical stuff.”

One of the challenges in being able to practically support their clients was initially around mobile phone access, which was vital to the outreach and operational aspect of SBS service delivery. Managerial staff explained that mobile phones were not provided by MPES DWS and that this would have been helpful. Mobile phones were available through the recovery centre, however, they were seen as inadequate for the job:

“...they were pre-paid phones which didn't have that [enhanced coverage] blue tick, so they didn't have good range...you can't have a pre-paid phone that might cut out of credit when you're in the middle of a conversation or a disaster”.

Establishment and Closure

In thinking critically about the delivery of this service managers were able to explore some of the lessons learned and also their thoughts for future implementations of the Step by Step model. In general, participants felt that given their circumstances Step by Step was activated in a timely manner:

“To do it in the week that they did, when the community itself was in trauma, I think was a remarkable thing. I don't think it could have been done much quicker than that.”

However, there were suggestions that future implementations could occur within a shorter activation timeframe :

“...we would suggest that a Step by Step service needs to be established from day one, which means that the appropriate protocols and MoUs [Memorandum of Understanding] and all those sorts of things need to be organised in the background.”

They also suggested that future implementations could occur within a shorter activation timeframe if the considerations of this roll out are taken into account. For example, managers felt that next time Treasury might be able to respond quicker to budgetary issues given the experience of this roll-out:

“[Service activation] might actually be a little bit quicker next time if [agency] is able to respond more quickly and say, yes that's a reasonable cost for that and that's a reasonable cost. So that's a kind of an issue in terms of the financial aspects of it.”

Managers also explained that “we would suggest that a Step by Step service needs to be established from day one, which means that the appropriate protocols and MoUs [Memorandum of Understanding] and all those sorts of things need to be organised in the background.” In being established from day one, managers also felt it could have been very useful to be based at the evacuation centre:

“Ideally I think what you want to have is to have Step by Step actually there in the evacuation centres. I realise that just wasn't doable in this instance. We were up and running within about two weeks of the fires. But, I think ideally you would want to have Step by Step on the ground, in the evacuation centres from that point onwards.”

The closure of the service was also widely discussed by the managers interviewed. Across the interviews there was clear consensus that the service ideally would have operated for an entire 12 month period, if not 18 months. Particularly important was the need to remain open at least until the first anniversary of the bushfires. Managers were grateful that extra funds were received from the Uniting Church which enabled Step by Step to receive an extension; however, this did not extend to the 12 month anniversary:

“But we also had a grant from the Uniting Church of \$70,000 which enabled us to continue for two months. If we'd had to finish in May when it was the first stage - because Treasury would not extend our funding even though MPES argued for it. They wouldn't extend the funding. If we had had to close then I think that would've been a very poor decision.”

One manager spoke about the importance of understanding where the clients were at in terms of their emotional recovery and argued that it was important to extend the service for the clients:

“Now it feels like a natural end whereas in May it would not have felt good. It would've felt like you were just leaving people quite high and dry. Because some people were only getting in touch with some of their real feelings of grief and loss three months, four months into that.”

There was also discussion around how to begin the service closure. Managers employed a step down approach and explained that it was necessary to engage clients with other local services for the continuation of their care and support:

“We called it the Continuity of Care and Connection Plan... now that you've connected people you can't disconnect them. So it was really about once we connected with people we then had to connect them to other people.”

However, there was great concern expressed by the managers about the clients facing the 12 month anniversary without the familiar supports and rapport that was established with the Step by Step workers:

“Those people [staff] that they've [clients] cried and laughed with aren't there. I think to have seen it go to the end at 12 months would have been very beneficial to the local community. But I realise it's all dollars and cents at the end of the day.”

“I really would have liked to have seen the team there for the anniversary, because I think with anything that happens in a life, whether it's a death in the family, any major thing, that first 12 months is the biggest. There are going to be a lot of emotional things happening come up at the end of October, and the rapport that a lot of the clients have built up with the Step by Step team isn't there for them. Now they're going to have that 12 month anniversary and those familiar faces aren't there.”

SBS Service Benefits

The SBS Service theme also explored the benefits of the service. Managers were clear in their opinion that Step by Step did provide benefits, not only to the clients but to the community sector more broadly. Managers felt that for clients:

“Step by Step gave them one point of call to know where the best place was to go and get information. Whereas I think people might have ended up at some of these other agencies and it might not have been quite the right place for them to get what they needed.”

Therefore, navigating the support sector with the client ensured more efficient and appropriate access to support services.

Managers also explained the benefits of Step by Step for the service sector:

“...the stress on the referral pathways and therefore, all of the general services would've been just so much higher. The fact that Step by Step existed meant that there was one single point of contact that agencies could refer fire affected people to.”

However, one key aspect to the efficiency of this referral process was relationships with other agencies and stakeholders.

Theme 2 - Stakeholder Relationships

The theme of Stakeholder Relationships explored a variety of aspects related to stakeholder working relationships, including the importance of localised and embedded service networks and the value in maintaining strong on-going relationships with the community service sector in the area.

Local

One of the most important elements of this Step by Step model as explained by the managers interviewed was that the service was local, with local workers who understood local networks and were involved in inter-agencies in the Blue Mountains region. This gave the service an inherent knowledge that they could then share with clients:

“You need to be embedded within your local community and within your local community broader community services sector. So you need to be well connected with the community sector. You need to be well connected with the mental health services, with the education, particularly with the counselling services within the education system, with the local schools, public and private, at all levels.”

Managers also mentioned the importance of having strong existing networks and relationships with potential stakeholders before the event of disasters, remaining connected and involved in the community sector:

“We had to maintain and strengthen those connections and those partnerships. I would say Step by Step worked very, very collaboratively with the service system. We just knew that we couldn’t achieve what we’ve achieved without that.”

Pre-existing relationships

The managers described that most of the relationships with stakeholders were pre-existing relationships which they felt certainly enabled a conducive and effective platform to then implement Step by Step:

“There were certainly different relationships that the hands on team certainly built up between other local community groups...although Gateway already had a lot of contact with neighbourhood centres and outreach projects and local schools through all the different groups that they run... like Blue Mountains Family Support and Connect and that sort of thing ...we could all tap into that [those existing networks].”

Managers described the new learnings in working with the government agency, MPES:

“This was a new agency to us, as far as the Gateway goes. It was - Gateway was recommended to them from another service, a government service that we deal with. I guess the liaison and connection that we built up with staff at MPES, and for them to be very hands-on in their approach was also very good... they made themselves very available and accessible along the way as well.”

Some conflict was raised in the discussions with managers, conflict that was successfully resolved but highlighted the importance of communication and strong support systems. For example, ensuring that all involved are on-board and aware of the theoretical approach required monitoring and open communication from a managerial perspective:

“I think the model needs to be very clearly articulated and I think that if an agency doesn't have an understanding of that ...then there could be difficulties.”

Theme 3 - Solution-Focused and Strengths-Based Approach

It was clear through the interviews with the managers that the solution-focused theoretical approach was embedded in the service, through all areas of service logistics. This theoretical approach was not just drawn on by the staff of the service; it was foundational to the entire delivery model – from the managers right through to the staff working closely with the clients. The model was described often throughout the interviews:

“It’s a capacity building model.”

“...recognising that people are or can be the experts in their own lives. We recognise resilience as part of our strengths framework, we recognise the importance of sharing power so that we don't hold onto power in those relationships; the client needs to have the power.”

“purposeful conversations”

“It’s really about tapping into people's pre-existing resourcefulness.”

The strengths-based model was described as absolutely critical to the way SBS was able to do the disaster recovery work. Managers emphasised that recognising capacity and hope in people’s experiences gives them the opportunity to self-determine their own personal recovery. This approach is described as a non-deficit model:

“Obviously I'm absolutely wedded to strengths-based values and understanding them in a sophisticated way. Because you never find anyone that says, oh no I prefer to work in a deficit model.”

One particularly poignant quote that describes this model in-action explained how the worker might recognise or appreciate the inherent strength of their client:

“You know if people were presenting to us well, there is a whole back story behind that because somebody had made a decision ‘we're going to go in there [evacuation centre]’. Somehow they'd managed to get out of bed, wherever they were staying, and decide ‘we're going to go to this recovery centre, we're going to go in there and we're going to try and find something’. To us that's evidence of pre-existing resourcefulness.”

Theme 4 - Staff and Skill Set

In adhering to the solution-focused framework managers expressed their responsibility of ensuring that staff members were aware, educated and understood the application of this approach:

“...while this model of service delivery is not a counselling model per se, it's heavily dependent on people having sophisticated counselling skills.”

Managers described the importance of having a team with strong, professional skills who were competent to work in a post-disaster setting:

“Certainly qualified counsellors, social workers and so forth, who are familiar with the kind of theoretical framework, with strength based practice, trauma informed care and so on - would be absolutely essential. They don't necessarily have to be, as I think Step by Step proved... But they do need to have as a basis for how they practice.”

Along with technical and interpersonal skills the importance of drawing on local human resources was also essential from the managers’ perspectives:

“Ideally locals, who know the local community, who are on hand so to speak, well trained, experienced in that level of practice, ready to start at a moment's notice - which is not easy.”

Along with staff’s localised community knowledge and professional skills Managers also described the importance of a skill-mix among their team. For example, it was absolutely necessary that there was a professional Information Technology expert in the team. This role was vital in supporting, progressing and maintaining rigour in the client database as well as general IT support for staff.

In general, the managers described the Step by Step staff with the upmost admiration and pride in what they had accomplished. Managers felt rewarded and supported in their roles and also felt that the right mechanisms were in place to support their staff, including clinical supervision, duty of care policies and recognising worker burnout:

“Having that opportunity to have clinical supervision, opportunities to debrief is very, very keen and very important for all of those reasons apart from assessing for vicarious trauma, burnout - particularly in this kind of team. The fatigue hits really, it really does hit. Emotional fatigue, physical fatigue and mental fatigue. So you really need to have good management and clinical supervision in place that assists workers to manage that and to prevent burnout.”

Having managers who were aware of these aspects was vital in the sustainability of the staff and team. One manager described an example where managerial intervention could prevent or reduce worker burnout:

“I also looked at where their [staff] leave entitlements were as well. I always knew where their leave was up to and I might discreetly have a chat with a worker and say look, we've got things under control I want you to think of taking a day off in the next fortnight.”

Ensuring that there were proper functions in place to manage worker burnout and provide care for the staff was discussed frequently during interviews with managers. On reflection, the managers described the heavy workload that their staff (and themselves) faced but critically they described the qualities that their staff drew on in order to support their communities through the bushfire recovery process:

“Very satisfied with the team on how they ran, how they approached things, how they communicated. I think that anyone who would have had dealings with them would

have had a good interaction. Very patient, as well - when they were trying to do a task and things probably weren't as easy."

Finally, one manager described the staff with great commendation:

"I had the best team I could have ever possibly had and that made all the difference to be honest with you. I called them the dream team."

Results from Step By Step Stakeholders

The themes identified by the eight stakeholders who participated are provided in Table 8 along with definitions and example of quotes. Each of the five main themes are then described in detail.

Table 8 Results from Step By Step Stakeholders

| Theme | Definition | Quote |
|---------------------------------|--|--|
| 1. Communication | How stakeholders found out about SBS, communication with SBS, reporting. | <i>"I think just the way that they went about their information and proceeding that through was very good."</i> |
| 2. Community Needs | Stakeholders' view of what community needed. | <i>"Having a coordinated plan and a coordinated response from State Government, local council and the local organisations who will be working in bushfire recovery from day one would be, I think, actually the most important thing in supporting residents."</i> |
| 3. Future | Future preparedness, characteristics of agencies in disaster recovery. | <i>"My experience has been - that there's been no standard response. That some people in the very beginning really needed the emotional support, some people really just needed the practical stuff. That's a bit of a cycle like with grief, it's sort of up and down, there is no one size that fits all."</i> |
| 4. Service | Stakeholders' view of how SBS operated. | <i>"That just the logistics of negotiating the paperwork and having to provide the information over and over again, to have someone that could work with them and ease that process a little bit has made a huge difference to people."</i> |
| 5. Stakeholder Role Involvement | Referral pathways, communication. | <i>"Referred people to them and they referred people to me, so it was a two-way communication."</i> |

Theme 1 - Communication

When speaking about communication stakeholders explained how they first heard about SBS. Many reported learning about the service through the recovery meetings, the recovery centre and Facebook:

"...through the bushfire recovery committee initially and then just through working with them."

"I befriended them on Facebook as well, so I got a feel for what was - what kinds of things, issues, were presenting."

Some agencies were not aware that GFS was providing the service, saying that:

"Initially I didn't realise that it was actually Gateway that was providing the service. I thought - I just identified it with Step by Step rather than as a Gateway service."

Stakeholders communicated in various ways with SBS and reported that email was often the most effective way to communicate:

“...generally we've settled into email as being the easiest way to communicate. People can pick it up from their phones when they're out with somebody.”

It was noted that when referrals were received by stakeholders from SBS the information they provided was extremely helpful:

“If they were referring anything through they've done a thorough job of getting all of the information they could possibly get. Which allowed us to make - obviously a very quick and informed decision and were able to get back to the customer then with some relevant information rather than having to ask all the same questions again. I think just the way that they went about [unclear] their information and proceeding that through was very good.” In general stakeholders found communication and sharing of information with SBS very good: *“their - the communication has been great. The information share has been really good.”*

Stakeholders spoke about learning about SBS through the recovery and subcommittee meetings and valued the reports prepared by SBS that were shared at these meetings:

“...reporting about Step by Step is up to in terms of its general planning and what it's delivering at particular points in time is useful - was useful information. ”

Also they commented on how this expanded other agencies' knowledge:

“Obviously on that recovery committee the discussions were - when it came to the social and wellbeing - the Step by Step service always gave an update on people coming through the recovery centre and people that they were dealing with.”

Theme 2- Community Needs

When asked about their views/experience with what the community needs after a disaster stakeholders spoke about having a coordinated approach from services:

“Having a coordinated plan and a coordinated response from State Government, local council and the local organisations who will be working in bushfire recovery from day one would be, I think, actually the most important thing in supporting residents.”

The provision of accurate information was also spoken about and getting this information to the community via different methods:

“So I think that the message needs to be fairly consistently delivered. So that - and it's then delivered in all sorts of different ways. So with some people it just wasn't feasible that you could email them information. Whereas for some people that's what worked because they could actually sit and read the email and then come back to it the next day and read it and process it a bit more.”

It was considered important to have a range of services available, including physical and emotional support and how the SBS was able to provide assistance in all three:

“Emotional, financial and physical are the three.”

“...people needed organisations like Step by Step to understand what they were going through and Step by Step could give them the compassion and the emotional support they needed and the direction to seeking professional help where it was needed.”

In supporting families, stakeholders believed that having many support options and integrating families back in to the community is important:

“To have as many options for family support as possible. What fits one family is not going to necessarily fit another family.”

“...for families it's all about getting back into the community and connecting with the school, really; getting the kids back into school with their friends.”

The importance of accurate and prompt information dissemination was also raised in relation to obtaining contact details of those affected by a disaster:

“...getting information flow out to families and to people quickly I think is really important.”

Agencies highlighted that sharing of information from services would help get support quicker to families/community members:

“...important to know who the key agencies are at the local level and what their kind of relationship and interface might be early on and to have people really plugged into information.”

This also raised the issue of privacy:

“[There] has to be respect for privacy and some people are not going to require support at all or want it or deal with it well either. So it should be an individual choice clearly.”

Although stakeholders felt privacy needed to be respected they believed it would be helpful to:

“...get contact information really clearly right and to know whether families are happy for their contact details to be passed on to other agencies.”

Theme 3 - Future

After their experience in the 2013 bushfires stakeholders explained their views on a future response to a disaster, which included elements of agency and worker characteristics, service preparedness and SBS service and governance.

Recommendations for the characteristics and skills required of an agency to best be able to deliver an effective recovery support service included the practicality of having services in one location and having agencies link in with each other as early as possible:

“...having all the support services either in the same place or at least making sure that everyone is aware of what else is available.”

“...one key thing that we could do and that is very quickly link our senior customer service staff in with someone like Step by Step so that we're in a position that we are from the very start sharing knowledge and sharing resources if you like.”

An organisation that has local knowledge was also raised:

“...connections within the wider community for support at a psychological level [are needed]”

“I think there needs to be definitely local knowledge. I don't think it can be the - run by effectively from an organisation that doesn't actually have some knowledge on the ground already.”

The placement of the host organisation in terms of independence from religious or government agencies was highlighted as an important characteristic:

“...a group that's independent of government and religious organisations. I think they need of course to be trained psychologists or counsellors of some form, social workers and the like. I think they need to be very flexible”,

An agency with the capacity to support staff who take on the role was also seen as vital:

“If you are local like a lot of us are, they're your friends and people you grew up with and they're the parents of your childhood friends or it's people that you know.”

“...part of that service delivery, [is] to be on top of your game all the time and to not let it get the best of you, you need somebody, a support person within that organisation who can look after that staff.”

The capacity of staff to take on this role led stakeholders to discuss what they saw as required worker skills for this role. Most suggested the need for trained professional staff and also spoke about personality characteristics:

“Obviously having experience and be qualified as a family support worker or a counsellor or someone who has experience in emotional support, qualifications in that area is pretty important I would say.”

“Secondary is you also need to have knowledge around basic disaster psychology and, yeah, training, the kind of thing that we have just had training in, which is great for disaster recovery.”

“They need to be available and they need to have empathy and have the ability to actually get out and address people face to face sort of thing.”

“Be very empathetic, they've obviously got to be very good listeners and they've also got to be able to take a lot of knowledge on board because they're obviously referring people through, all the time, to other agencies - that whole personality whereby they get on with people.”

Having a range of services to help affected people was also spoken about:

“So people required a bundle of different things and it needed different agencies to come in around those different roles.”

It was recognised that the SBS team facilitated the recovery process well:

“[The SBS team] was very, very easy to get on with any of those members of staff that were doing that and providing that service [SBS]. I think that makes a massive difference. They're very open, very easy to deal with and to talk to. At the end of the day I think there was a common goal in that people just wanted to help out. So I think that was critical and I think they did an admirable job.”

The importance of local services being prepared for a disaster response and the need for services to stay connected and informed with each other was discussed by stakeholders, who suggested:

“Perhaps one of the lessons we've learnt is that there ought to be some preparedness amongst that sector of qualified people.”

“[We] meet whether there's a tragedy or not, so that there are relationships and connections already made for when something does happen.”

Clarity around the government's response to a disaster and how organisations can respond was also considered necessary:

“Well, it's difficult because we don't know - there's no indication that I'm aware of so far what the state government's plan is and that's had a massive impact on how the local organisations can respond and what role they can play. So for example, obviously Gateway Services and hopefully ourselves will have capacity to respond with a Step By Step type model but that doesn't - it really does depend on the State Government.”

Although stakeholders felt uncertain about their preparedness for a future disaster they were clear on the need for the role of SBS:

“To tell you the truth, the staff that have been at Step by Step really are perfect for the role. They really have been - I haven't heard a negative comment about any of the staff.”

“If there is a Step by Step that is created, and we are strongly encouraging that that happens from the very, very beginning, that whoever is running the recovery is constantly getting that information out there to the Step by Step worker who is then able to make sure that people are aware of what's going on.”

Agency learnings are important to highlight and it was clear that agencies could see the value in how SBS delivered their service:

“For our service we are now trying to replicate the Step by Step model because we [now] see that as being best practice in disaster recovery for individuals. So I think that's a pretty good indication of how we see it”

“...the individual one-on-one support that Step by Step does – now we're trying to do as well.”

Theme 4 - Service

The service theme explores how the service operated within the sector. There was a consensus of opinion from stakeholders that the role of SBS was essential in disaster recovery:

“...everyone's got a role to play and they had a quite important role to play from a psychological perspective.”

“[SBS were] absolutely critical during that period.”

Stakeholders felt that the service “filled a niche” and spoke about how beneficial the service was to the community:

“I think it was beneficial for people who required more emotional, mental health related kind of support. They also acted as a really key information and referral one-stop shop for people in terms of say linking in with council or with Salvation Army or other groups who had material aid for emergency funds and things like that. They were on top of the grants process and were able to assist people around applying for money from council and for that kind of assistance.”

Stakeholders also spoke about how SBS was beneficial to them:

“...there were sometimes issues that they were able to resolve just by having a bit of a heart-to-heart with an affected resident. Which is good because those affairs wasn't our area of “expertise.”

Stakeholders noticed that the service was capable of meeting the variety of needs for community members, describing the skills of the SBS staff:

“They've got the background to be able to understand that people would be having strong reactions.”

And SBS staff understanding of the system,

“...they clearly understood the whole recovery system quite well and were able to point people into the right direction and do the kind of follow-up.”

The flexibility of how the service operated was discussed:

“A lot of the time people are in such a state of distress that they really need that constant contact. They need someone to be able to follow-up with them, rather than them having to ring and say, oh maybe - can I get help with this?”

Stakeholders described that they were confident that when referring community members to the SBS service they would be looked after:

“To be confident when we were referring people that they were actually going to get looked after. That there would be some responsibility for keeping in contact and not letting people fall off the radar.”

It was also recognised that when community members presented with emotional distress other services had somewhere to refer the person:

“The beauty of actually having the Step by Step referrals there, is that when people came in, in states of emotional unravel I guess, that we could refer them on to someone that was more skilled in dealing with that. Was more able to provide that.”

Stakeholders also spoke about a future disaster and felt that SBS is well known now and would be needed in a future event:

“I'm hoping now that if there's another event [unclear] within the next five years, that they keep that name and that service because word will get around if it happens in another area.”

Not only was there consensus in the need for a psychosocial service but consensus around the approach SBS used in dealing with affected community members:

“It wasn't a known organisation or a known name, a known entity, people weren't sure really in the beginning. Once they, once they realised what the concept is I think it's been brilliant. I really do, I think it's been absolutely fantastic.”

Stakeholders reflected positively on the approach of SBS:

“[It is] a bit of an art form and it takes a special type of person to be able to do that and they were very good at it.”

Stakeholders, in particular, spoke with great respect and admiration for the role that the SBS staff played during the recovery. Stakeholders described staff as being *“perfect for the role”* and *“I haven't heard a negative comment about any of the staff.”*

Stakeholders also appreciated the SBS staff:

“[SBS staff] were good communicators and I think they were well chosen, the people who were doing the jobs I think were the right kinds of people and with the right kinds of backgrounds. [SBS worker] I thought was very impressive and working locally, as were the other people who played a coordination role. So I think they did well. They kicked in with a complex process really quickly. Yeah, so I would have a very positive comment to make about it.”

From the stakeholders’ view, the service and staff responded to the disaster in a compassionate yet pragmatic manner:

“I think just the level of support they provided. I don't think I ever had a bad conversation with any of them - whilst they were dealing with really quite horrible situations sometimes - they were always positive, they were always trying to help; they were always trying to look out for us.”

The Recovery Committee and subcommittees were spoken about and stakeholders found the committees a great place to share information and received information from other services:

“We were on that committee, we got to know each other and we could immediately say, that's a job for them. So it gave us somewhere to go and we didn't have to reinvent the wheel and we knew that they were trained, qualified.”

Stakeholders also felt that being on the committee was “very useful” and informative:

“...anyone who sat on that committee had a good idea as well about what was happening.”

Theme 5 - Stakeholder Role Involvement

When asked about the impact SBS referrals had on their agency’s workload surprisingly most stakeholders explained that SBS referrals did not increase their workload:

“So it wouldn't necessarily been seen as raising our work levels it would just be seen as our core business really.”

Rather SBS referrals were viewed as adding to the efficiency of the agency being able to respond:

“...they didn't add to our workload, they complemented it. I couldn't have done it without them is what I'm trying to say.”

Stakeholders also expressed their belief that often SBS eased the pressure on the service system:

“So I suppose they were able to actually lighten the load of some people. In terms of they were able to address problems that maybe otherwise would have had to go elsewhere or to another agency.”

Stakeholders also explained that the referral pathways were a two way street and that this worked well:

“[Stakeholders] referred people to [SBS] and [SBS] referred people to me, so it was a two-way communication.”

Satisfaction with Step By Step Blue Mountains Bushfire Support Service

The final question for each interview asked participants to quantify their level of satisfaction with the Step By Step service on a five point Likert scale where a one indicated not being satisfied at all and a five indicated being totally satisfied. The results for each participant group are outlined below.

SBS Clients (n=8)

Six SBS clients rated the service five out of five and two clients rated their level of satisfaction as four out of five. The mean satisfaction score for SBS clients was 4.7 out of 5.

SBS Staff (n=4)

One SBS staff member rated their satisfaction of the service as five out of five, one rated the service four and a half and two staff members rated the service four. The mean satisfaction score for SBS staff was 4.5 out of 5.

SBS Managers (n=4)

All of the SBS managers described their level of satisfaction as five, the highest rating of satisfaction with the Step by Step service.

SBS stakeholders (n=8)

Three SBS stakeholders rated the service five out of five, two rated it four and a half and three rated it four. The mean satisfaction for SBS stakeholders was 4.5 out of 5.

Discussion

Overall this qualitative evaluation aimed to:

- Gain insight into the perceived effectiveness of the service.
- Gain insight into the perceived impact of the service.
- Contribute to the importance of service evaluation in order to enhance future implementations.
- Ascertain client satisfaction with SBS service

This evaluation found that SBS was an effective and supportive service for those affected by the bushfires. The findings presented insights from a variety of perspectives involved with the service including management, stakeholders, staff and importantly clients. The results revealed the importance of including the variety of perspectives in evaluation as insights were provided from across the lifespan of the service including initial setup, funding, implementation, service delivery, service receipt and then closure. From across each of the perspectives it was highlighted just how successful SBS was. Each participant group expressed their feelings of success and reward about the service through various themes. The themes discussed in the results sections indicate that communication, connection, integration, planning, understanding, and respectful characteristics were integral to the roll-out and conduct of the SBS service.

More specifically, each participant group raised issues that were specific to their experience and role. Managerial staff discussed themes that were related to operational and logistical matters such as the naming of the service, and the importance of a step-down closure that ensured clients were connected to other services. Managers were also concerned for their own staff and discussed the implications of staff burnout and the practices that were in place to support their staff. Staff also raised issues of logistics including the need for efficient IT systems and databases. However they also raised personal challenges such as managing their own personal work-life balance, and the importance of appropriate trauma training when working in this disaster recovery field.

The clients interviewed explained some of the impacts of the bushfires and how their needs were met by SBS. Clients highlighted the importance of well-trained staff who understood trauma and they expressed appreciation of the solution-focused and strengths-based approaches. Stakeholders discussed themes related to communication and agency integration as well as the importance of consistent sharing of information across all those involved in the service. Stakeholders also suggested that SBS did not necessarily increase their workload but complemented the management of their workload. Each of the groups expressed specific themes relevant to their roles, although collectively the participants suggested that in future it would be best if the service could remain open for a minimum of 12 months. The anniversary was a significant occasion and SBS support for the community, at this time, would have been desirable.

In asking all participants about their level of satisfaction this evaluation has been able to determine that across each participant group of clients, staff, managers and stakeholders each felt highly satisfied with the service. The results ranged from 4.5 to 5 out of 5, excellent findings and feedback from those involved in the service.

The findings discussed in the results sections have implications for future implementation of SBS and similar service models. This section will further explain some of these implications in reference to the model and theoretical framework employed and the ongoing need for evaluation of government initiatives. Future recommendations are suggested and limitations are highlighted.

Models and Theories

Disasters can disrupt everyday lives and activities for people and the community in which they live. A priority for governments and emergency management planners is to restore the community to its “normal” state as quickly as possible post-disaster (Lindell 2013). While services and resources are made available to affected communities (which aim to support individuals and communities through challenging time) there is a paucity of research reporting on the degree to which these services help or hinder the recovery process (Grealey 2010).

A range of services and assistance are required after disasters. Understanding the important role of providing psychosocial support in all stages of disaster recovery is vital (Cronstedt 2002). In particular, the importance of psychosocial support to promote individual and community resilience has become more widely recognised. A report that investigated the medium and long term impacts of the 2003 Canberra bushfires, highlighted the centrality of communities to the recovery process and that access to physical, mental health and psychosocial support is necessary in the months and years following a disaster (Camilleri, Healy, Macdonald, Sykes, Winkworth and Woodward 2007, p167). Our findings support this conclusion as clients, staff, managers and stakeholders expressed that people affected by this disaster needed both physical and emotional support at different times throughout their recovery, which is also shown in Table 3.

Hobfoll argued (Cited in, Gunderson, Crepeau-Hobson and Drennen 2012) that the principles of hope, safety, calming, efficacy and connectedness should be used to inform recovery service efforts, with the outcome being a high level of wellness and resilience within the affected community. It has also been noted that interventions aiding disaster recovery should interfere as little as possible with, and allow for the natural recovery process to occur (Slawinski 2006). The Victorian Psychosocial Recovery Framework outlines principles for effective disaster recovery which include advice that “interventions will be based on enhancing existing strengths of the individual, family and community on building resilience” (Department of Human Services 2009).

Solution-focused and strengths-based approaches capture some of the above mentioned principles and in addition, views people in the light of their capacities, talents, competencies, possibilities, visions, values and hopes. The approach aims to restore hope, focuses on a

person's efficacy to achieve their goals and connects the person to the service system (Saleebey 1996).

The solution-focused and strengths-based approaches view people as capable participants in their own recovery and focus recovery efforts on the strengths within that person and their goals. As described by Gunderson (2012), a community's ability to recover from a disaster relies heavily on the people within the community's ability to cope. It seems a logical fit that this new approach in early crisis interventions be applied to disaster recovery (Slawinski 2006). The above approaches were adopted by the SBS service and findings from the current study show that clients felt that the relationship with the SBS worker was important to them, that their individual needs were met and many described how they felt valued and respected during their interactions with SBS staff.

Although there is limited research on the models used in disaster recovery, the report produced by Camilleri, Healey and colleagues in 2007 who interviewed people affected by the 2003 Canberra bushfires, found that many participants preferred to see themselves as a 'survivor' rather than a 'victim' of the fires and that having a sense of control helped them to move forward. Clients also explained that non-judgemental, emotional support, being allowed to process what had happened, being able to make a plan, and feeling positive towards this, was helpful (Camilleri, Healey et al. 2007). A specific aim of the solution-focused and strengths-based approach is the way the client is viewed, not as a victim but as a person with strengths and capacity.

Those feelings are similar to what was expressed during the current study, in that participants of the SBS service valued the way the SBS team sub-consciously viewed them as capable participants in their own recovery and as a client described, "*carrying them through*" their recovery. In addition, Camilleri, Healey et al (2007) recommends that the "use of assessments and interventions that are strengths-focused and that they promote hope and optimism, adaption and a sense of control and empowerment for resilience and recovery" (Camilleri, Healey et al. 2007, p165). Staff and managers also expressed their support for this approach.

A case management and outreach service model also worked well in assisting clients who are often using community welfare services for the first time, due to the disaster. Clients and staff spoke about the benefits of SBS being an outreach service. In particular, clients felt the resultant flexibility was important while staff indicated that it made the service more accessible.

Managers and stakeholders said one of the benefits of SBS was that it was a one stop shop and that it filled a niche and was a critical psychosocial service. In a 2012 report it was found (Camilleri, Healey, Macdonald, Nicholls, Sykes, Winkworth and Woodward 2012) that affected community members: "...appreciated the 'one-stop shop' model which provided access to most services under one roof and through a personal recovery worker as case manager and community worker" (p.12). Stakeholders expressed that they were able to refer people who presented in distress to the SBS service with complete confidence that they would be well supported. This 'one stop shop' model has been useful in other disaster

recovery settings, particularly in reaching vulnerable people and people who are in need (Camilleri, Healy et al. 2012, p12).

In addition to the literature (Grealey 2010) our evaluation also found that knowledge of the local area by SBS staff was important, with all participant groups expressing how important it was that the staff of SBS were local to the area. Clients felt that it gave an unspoken understanding of what it was like to live in the area and a better understanding of the loss that they were going through and what it was like to live “*on the land*.” This view was supported by staff who found it easier for them to understand what their clients were going through as they were locals. Managers felt it was important for staff to have localised community knowledge and knowledge of the service sector to improve service delivery/provision.

Clients and stakeholders heard about the SBS service predominantly at the Recovery Centre and it was acknowledged by staff that this location was beneficial in meeting people and increasing access. Managers acknowledged that location of the service at the evacuation centre would be good next time. Staff also felt when developing new relationships with stakeholder agencies it would be beneficial for staff on the ground, as well as managers, to meet face to face with other agency staff before they start working alongside each other. Locating services together in the initial days following an event may prove effective in building these new relationships and reaching clients.

Staff felt having a centralised point where the public could access the service and information would be beneficial and this was also found by Camilleri, Healy et al. (2007). A centralised point may also be beneficial for information sharing and service understanding as staff felt it was challenging when other services didn’t know about SBS and its service model and again staff thought location in initial days may help this in the future. Some stakeholders were not aware of the service model initially but once they realised the concept, they thought it was essential. They also said they learned about SBS through the Recovery Committee and felt that the recovery committee was a good place to share and gain information about other services.

Need and Evidence for Evaluation

Although many services adopt the approaches discussed above there is limited evidence on the effectiveness of their use in disaster recovery settings. Moreover, while there is support of the use of solution-focused and strength-based approaches there are few or no rigorous evaluation reports of this approach. This evaluation report is contributing directly to the calls for evidence and embedded evaluation research processes. Learning from this research may provide important insights into ways forward and evaluations of disaster support services in the future.

In the Australian context, there have been very few evaluations of government initiated interventions aiming to aid recovery following a natural disaster. One Australian post-natural disaster service evaluation was implemented in relation to the Victorian Bushfires Case Management Service (VBCMS) following the 2009 Victorian Bushfires (Grealey 2011). Although this evaluation identified an overwhelmingly positive community response to the VBCMS, it also noted that “the quality of the evidence available to guide governments and

policy makers in responding to disasters is limited” (Grealey 2011, p2). There is also limited research available on the role local agencies play in community recovery from the perspective of how welfare agencies operate pre, during and post disaster (Webber and Jones 2011).

As evaluations of these services occurs post-event it has been suggested that planning for evaluation research needs to be embedded in the initial planning stages of an emergency response (Dufty 2013). It has also been suggested that funding bodies need to support longitudinal follow up and outcome studies to be ready to use at the time of a future event (Camilleri, Healy et al. 2007). Further, the role of government assistance in post-disaster intervention is not well understood, despite research which indicates the necessity of governments to be at least ‘evidence-informed’ in implementing post-disaster community services (Grealey 2010). This current qualitative evaluation project of the SBS support service was completed post-disaster, however, on reflection if the research questions and methods were designed and embedded earlier it may have enabled greater capture of relevant themes to provide evaluative feedback. Given the sensitive nature of having experienced a disaster it may not always be possible for research to be embedded early in the disaster management process.

The potentially devastating impacts of natural disasters on communities and the likelihood of future natural disasters mean that there is a need to evaluate interventions and increase the evidence base for different recovery models. This will improve the government delivery of disaster management services that can be strategically implemented following a natural disaster and ultimately improve the outcomes for residents of communities impacted by natural disasters.

Limitations

This evaluation has some important limitations. Firstly, this evaluation only included participants who accepted the invitation to participate, leading to potential participation bias in the sample and the likely exclusion of important information. It is probable that those with a positive view of the service were more likely to volunteer to participate than those with a less positive experience.

Secondly, there may have been recall bias given the delay between the disaster experience and the conduct of interviews. Therefore, some issues may have become less of a concern to participants over time.

Thirdly, this evaluation was qualitative in nature; therefore this evaluation has not numerically measured the effectiveness of the SBS service. However, the rich insights provided from participants from across the lifespan of the service explain the SBS experience in a more nuanced way. Experiences of bushfires and other natural disasters are not simple and straightforward; this evaluation has been able to authentically present the complex natures of service delivery and disaster recovery from an individualised perspective.

One other limitation was that the research team was not involved from the very beginning of service set-up. Given that the research team became involved after the service had begun,

some data gathered by the SBS team could not be shared with the research team for ethical reasons as interviews were conducted after the closure of SBS.

Recommendations

As a result of the findings from this evaluation recommendations are provided in four key areas: timeframes, communication, support for service model and staffing.

Support for Service Model:

- Continue to implement the community outreach used by SBS.
- Design a flexible service model with a solution-focused approach in order to tailor services to fit with client preferences and individual circumstances.
 - The solution focused approach used in this application of SBS proved to be effective and appreciated by those interviewed in this evaluation; as such it is suggested that this be a key component to future service implementations.
- Actively engage with the philosophies and strategies of a strengths-based approach in all elements of the disaster preparedness and recovery service system. This includes the education and mentoring of emergency services, local council, business, and health/community/education sectors.

Timeframes:

- Gain insight into the perceived effectiveness of the service.
- Gain insight into the perceived impact of the service.
- Contribute to the importance of service evaluation in order to enhance future implementations.
- Ascertain client satisfaction with SBS service
- Gain insight into the perceived effectiveness of the service.
- Gain insight into the perceived impact of the service.
- Contribute to the importance of service evaluation in order to enhance future implementations.
- Ascertain client satisfaction with SBS service
- Activation of support service:
 - Establish relationships between Government bodies which co-ordinate disaster responses and potential disaster recovery service providers so that some of the preparation work for disaster management can occur before the disaster i.e. using memorandums of understanding
 - Ensure host organisation is well embedded within the community welfare sector of the local community to enable efficient and fast implementation of support service.
- Service Closure:
 - Implement transition plans and a step down approach ensuring that existing clients are linked in with necessary services.

- Establish strong relationships between stakeholders, who play a significant role in the step down and transition of clients, and the disaster recovery service provider.
- Operate the disaster recovery service for a minimum 18 months to ensure the needs of the community are addressed through the first anniversary time.
- Build in evaluation of disaster management support services as part of establishment of services to allow timely evaluation.

Communication:

- Continue the use of the one-on-one case manager model for service delivery.
- Embed IT training and on-going support in the service.
- Make available mobile phones and technology suitable for the local community (i.e. coverage).
- Enhance communication and information dissemination for staff and stakeholders involved in service delivery through participation in interagency and networking meetings (for example: attendance at recovery sub-committee meetings).
- Deliver service information via a variety of media including online, letter drops, newspaper and radio broadcast advertisements.
- Establish a service presence in the evacuation/recovery centre.
- Ensure transparency through the interagency networks involved with coordination and implementation of disaster recovery services in relation to the establishment process, including funding allocation. Wider dissemination as to the background to the establishment of such disaster recovery services may prevent tensions among inter-agencies that may not fully understand the process.

Staffing:

- Recruit local, skilled and professional staff who have an understanding of the strengths based and solution-focused approach.
- Recruit staff who have a broad range of therapeutic skills and experience in trauma or emergency response and are embedded in their local community welfare sector and who are willing to work in a case management model of service delivery (one-on-one).
- Employ adequate IT and administrative support.

Conclusion

This research aimed to evaluate the usefulness of and satisfaction with the Step By Step Blue Mountains Bushfire Support Service (SBS) from the perspectives of clients, staff, managers and stakeholders. Overall, findings show that SBS positively impacted the community. In particular, SBS achieved this by providing support addressing both physical and emotional needs of clients, addressing clients as ‘survivors’ rather than ‘victims’, being a flexible and accessible ‘one-stop-shop’ and employing local staff. SBS became a critical psychosocial service for the recovering community.

While there is little evidence to support theoretical models of recovery in practice, the psychosocial approach utilised by SBS appears to have worked well for clients, staff members and stakeholders. This has also been noted by other evaluations of disaster recovery services. Nevertheless, rigorous evaluation of disaster recovery services is essential to develop the theoretical knowledge base and its practical application to affected individuals and communities. For this to be successful, evaluation methodologies need to be ‘built in’ to disaster recovery service models to facilitate the development of research protocols prior to the onset of disaster. This would allow evaluations to occur alongside the roll-out of recovery services, rather than being conducted retrospectively.

Importantly, this report provides recommendations for future recovery services, based on the responses of participants. This information is invaluable in informing the development of future disaster recovery services employing the solution-focused and strengths-based theoretical perspective embodied by SBS. While there is still much to be done, this research begins to fill the gap in the disaster recovery service literature.

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Appendices

Appendix A - SBS Client Semi Structured Interview Questions

1. How did you first come to know about Step by Step?
2. At the time there was a range of services for people to use, can you tell me why you used Step by Step instead of other service and did you know about the other services?
3. Did Step by Step help you access/contact other services? For example did they point you in the right direction of where to get help or the support you needed?
4. With the services that you did get referred to from Step by Step, did any stand out as extremely helpful or unhelpful?
5. What services or referral provided by the SBS did you use? For example did you need help with property clean up or housing, did they organize household items for you or council contact details.
6. Can you tell me about if/ how your needs varied or changed throughout the recovery process?
7. Did you feel respected as an individual during your interactions with the SBS?
Prompt for optimism
8. Do you feel that the Step by Step worker was responsive to your individual needs or values?
9. Was the relationship between you and the Step by Step worker important to you? Can you tell me more about your experience/relationship?
10. Was it important that the Step by Step staff were locals of the Blue Mountains? Can you explain your feelings on this?
11. Was it helpful that the service could come to you and meet at various locations, e.g. café, office, community space etc.
12. As Step by Step is a temporary service and ceased in September 2014 without the Step by Step service do you feel confident that you could access any support that you might still need?
13. Would you recommend SBS to a family member/friend?
14. On the whole, did you feel satisfied and valued with the support provided by Step by Step?
15. What if anything would you change about the Step by Step service? For example how could it be improved?
16. In general, how satisfied were you with your experience with the Step By Step service? Please rank your Level of satisfaction on the scale below, with (a description of the scale e.g.1 being not satisfied at all and 5 being totally satisfied (tick one only).
17. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your experience?

Appendix B – SBS Staff Semi Structured Interview Questions

1. Do you feel the Step by Step program was helpful to the community? Can you provide examples of this?
2. Do you believe Step by Step was activated within an appropriate timeframe? Y/N why or why not?
3. What would you say are the critical things to get right in planning for support to families following any future disaster?
4. How would you describe the level of communication between Step by Step and other agency's involved in disaster recovery at that time, for example agencies who you had to refer people into.
5. What would you say has been the impact of the Step by Step on your regular workload and the other services your agency deliver? For example did you gain new clients or did focus shift to disaster support.
6. We are interested in understanding your approach to working with clients for example did you apply any theory or therapeutic frameworks in dealing with clients.
7. In a disaster recovery response in the future, would you make any changes in your service after having been involved with Step by Step?
8. As the Step by Step program is a temporary service what do you consider to be the most important aspect to get right in disaster response?
9. As a service what would you say are the essential skills and characteristics needed for an agency like Step by Step to be able to deliver a service like this in the future? For example are there any specific set of skills that all employees should have.
10. As a Step by Step worker what skills/training did you rely on most when working with clients in the Step by Step program? And in the future what skills/training would you suggest are needed?
11. What were the areas that were the most rewarding?
12. What were the areas that were the most challenging?
13. As a Step by Step worker, how well have you been supported in your role at Step by Step? What could be improved?
14. How do you feel your involvement in Step by Step had a personal impact on you and can you explain?
15. Do you think it was a good idea to have local people work in Step by Step?
16. Would you take that role on again?
17. In general, how satisfied were you with your experience with the Step By Step service? Please rank your Level of satisfaction on the scale below, with (a description of the scale e.g.1 being not satisfied at all and 5 being totally satisfied (tick one only).
18. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your experience?

Appendix C - SBS Managerial Semi Structured Interview Questions

1. We are trying to understanding the process of setting up Sep by Step in an existing service like Gateway, could you talk about your experience and the steps involved in this process?
2. In rolling out Step by Step did it require the development of new relationships with other agencies or did relationships already existing through Gateway?
3. Do you believe Step by Step was activated within an appropriate timeframe? What are your reasons for this?
4. What impact did Step by Step have on any other services your agency delivers? Did it reduce, increase or divert demand for some services by providing help directly?
5. What would you say has been the impact of Step by Step on the service sector? – for example, if step by step didn't exist what do you think would have happened.ie other agencies picking up the slack.
6. Will Gateway change how is operates/or anything it does in future disaster support as a consequence coordinating the Sep by Step service?
7. Did you feel your normal work role (i.e. not Step by Step work/what you were doing before the bushfires) was “sacrificed” during the set-up and establishment of Step by Step? If Yes, how was it impacted.
8. What theory or way of thinking do you believe would be most helpful in helping communities/individuals recover from a disaster .
9. What would you say are the essential skills required of an agency like Step by Step to be best placed to deliver a service like this in the future? For example are there any specific set of skills that all employees should have.
10. Did Step by Step have a system to deal with worker burnout, counselling/debriefing sessions and staff rotation? If so, can you explain?
11. Did management take into consideration the implications of local staff members working in Step by Step? If so what were the considerations?
12. Would you take a service like that on again within your agency?
13. Do you have any reflections on the wind down process of Step by Step.
14. In general, how satisfied were you with your experience with the Step By Step service? Please rank your level of satisfaction on the scale below, with (a description of the scale e.g.1 being not satisfied at all and 5 being totally satisfied (tick one only).
15. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your experience?

Appendix D – SBS Stakeholder Semi Structured Interview Questions

1. How did you hear about the Step By Step Service that was being run through Gateway Family Services? E.g. before your agency's involvement with them?
2. In what capacity were you involved with Step by Step?
3. How would you describe the level of communication between your organisation and Step by Step?
4. Do you feel a support service like Step by Step was beneficial or helpful to the community during bushfire recovery? Can you give some examples of these benefits?
5. What impact did Step by Step referrals have on the regular services your agency provides?
6. What would you say has been the impact of Step by Step firstly on your agency and secondly on the wider bushfire support service system?
7. What, if anything, will change in your agency in a future emergency response after being involved with Step by Step?
8. What would you say are the skills and characteristics required of an agency to best be able to deliver an effective recovery support service after a disaster?
9. What would you say are the critical things to get right in planning for support to families following a bushfire in the future?
10. In general, how satisfied were you with your experience with the Step By Step service? Please rank from 1 to 5, 1 being not satisfied at all and 5 being totally satisfied.
11. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your experience?

The Step by Step Blue Mountains Bushfire Support Service Qualitative Evaluation report

"I don't think that we would actually be functioning today if it hadn't been for them [SBS]."

(Client Participant)

"Step by Step provided an opportunity for people to just gather their thoughts when something was so overwhelming for them and they weren't in the capacity to think about how to take the next steps forward, when there was so much to deal with. So, from doing that they could then take the next step and the next step and the next step, and it broke down that sense of being so overwhelmed."

(Staff Participant)

"I said, look we want to be part of this; we're very happy to be part of this. But we want to add to the evidence base. We don't just want to do the job; we want to do the job in a way that adds to what happens. That was our intention from the very beginning and I think we've achieved that. I think what we've done will certainly add to the evidence base and the understanding of what works best in disaster recovery."

(Managerial Participant)

"It wasn't a known organisation or a known name, a known entity, people weren't sure really in the beginning. Once they, once they realised what the concept is I think it's been brilliant. I really do, I think it's been absolutely fantastic."

(Stakeholder Participant)

Jane L Rich,
Angela Booth,
Prasuna Reddy
and Allison
Rowlands