

Australia's bushfires are causing devastation on a scale the world has not seen before. The AASW pays tribute to those fighting the fires, those individuals and groups assisting on the frontlines, and those assisting with the recovery process. In addition to the horrendous losses being experienced across the country, we need to prepare for the less visible, but all-important recovery stage, including ongoing mental health, grief and loss and trauma responses. AASW National President Cristine Craik said, "During such harrowing circumstances we have seen incredible examples of compassion, resilience, generosity, and humanity. Our thoughts and our actions are with those who continue to be impacted by the ongoing crisis. Social workers like many others, are assisting at recovery centres across the country right now and have been since the crisis began in November last year." The AASW welcomes the announcement of that from 17 January people in bushfire-affected areas will have access to 10 immediate counselling sessions and access to more sessions without requiring a GP referral, In conjunction with other initiatives that will increase access to support for people who need it, this is an important step in rebuilding lives and communities. Ms Craik said, "The effects of trauma, grief and loss are considerable in these situations and will have long term implications for individuals, families and their communities. We must not overlook the multitude of issues people are dealing with as they rebuild their homes and lives. One of the strengths of social work intervention is the ability to case manage, advocate and work with trauma symptoms with an understanding that these people have lived through an extraordinary event. Working through this lens is such a vital skill set for ongoing recovery work with individuals, families and communities. "We know that there are many consequences of living through an event where individuals and families struggle to regain control and balance in so many aspects of their day to day life. One of those consequences which we saw during recovery work after the Black Saturday fires in 2009, is an increase in incidents of family violence. Social workers are very much aware of the need to pay attention to these power dynamics in the recovery work that they do. "In addition, we know that many existing government processes can increase the difficulty of recovery and we call for an immediate disbandment of the Cashless Debit Card, especially in those areas affected by fires, blackouts and power shortages. These cards cannot be used during power shortages and access to cash at this time is vital. The current trial sites for the Cashless Debit Card are in rural and remote areas – places that are more likely to be directly affected by fires and subsequent blackouts over this extended fire season." Along with the Australian community, the AASW is also dismayed at Australia's lack of leadership on the global stage to tackle the systemic cause of extreme weather events such as bushfires: climate change. "Decades of inaction on climate change have contributed to the increased severity of this bushfire season, a season that started months earlier than any other time in Australia's history. Our government needs to step up and recognise that climate change is real, is impacting our community, and will continue to impact our community unless we make drastic changes now and into the future," Ms Craik said. Notes For an explanation of the Medicare changes, visit: <https://www.humanservices.gov.au/individuals/subjects/bushfire-recovery-access-program>

Contacts

Angela Yin
03 9320 1005
mailto: media@asw.asn.au