



## **ALIA submission to 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission**

*7 December 2009*

### **Summary of main points**

ALIA is the peak body for the Australian library and information services sector, representing 6000 members, and the interests of over 12 million library users. It is also one of the pillar groups supporting Blue Shield Australia, the cultural equivalent of the Red Cross.

Libraries, through ALIA, have responded in a number of ways to the Victorian bushfires:

- The role of fixed and mobile libraries in the affected areas has been to provide a safe community space, a haven from the reality of the disaster.
- In the reconstruction and recovery phase, libraries have been seen as a welcome sign of a return to normality.
- Library staff have helped sort donated books to enable more than 27,400 volumes to be distributed to people who lost their homes in the fires.
- Libraries across Australia have held fundraising events to raise cash for book vouchers to help people Rebuild with Books.

The bushfire experience has once again demonstrated the role public libraries can play as part of the emergency management process and has reinforced their contribution, not only to information and learning, but also as a 'third place' – not home, school or work, but a shared community space.

## **1. Library and partner organisations**

In the case of recovery work following on from the bushfires, ALIA led a collaborative effort which involved library services in the affected areas (most particularly, Yarra Plenty Regional Library), Arts Victoria; Public Libraries Victoria Network; State Library of Victoria and School Library Association of Victoria. Partners were the Australian Booksellers Association and the Australian Publishers Association. Advisors and supporters included the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority; Municipal Association of Victoria; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, FOLA

Full details to supplement this summary paper are available on the ALIA website at [www.alia.org.au/disasterrecovery](http://www.alia.org.au/disasterrecovery).

## **2. Library services affected by the bushfires**

The bushfires covered areas served by 11 library services

- Eastern Regional Libraries
- Goldfields Library Corporation
- High Country Library Corporation
- Latrobe City Library Service
- Mitchell Shire Information and Library Service
- Murrindindi Library Service
- Upper Murray Regional Library
- Wellington Shire Library
- West Gippsland Regional Library Corporation
- Wimmera Regional Library Corporation
- Yarra Plenty Regional Library Service

Three school libraries were destroyed in the blaze but public libraries were spared and were able to play an important role in providing respite for families caught up in the disaster.

The library services in the worst affected areas were Murrindindi, which covers Kinglake, Marysville and Flowerdale, and Yarra Plenty, which includes Whittlesea. These library services played a key role in supporting the communities through the immediate aftermath of the fires and as they began reconstruction and recovery.

## **3. The Murrindindi library experience**

In the first few days and weeks, the library at Alexandra stayed open long hours, offering tea and coffee and a place to recharge mobile phones; putting kids down in front of a movie while parents rang banks and insurance companies; staff providing a listening ear and helping people to get the information they needed from the internet on the library's PCs.

At this stage, roads were blocked and the mobile library team unable to reach the more isolated communities. As soon as it was safe and practicable to do so, the mobile library service was restored.

The drivers reported returning to their old parking spot, surrounded by a blackened landscape, to find a queue of people waiting for them. They spent hours sitting on the floor with the children, listening to their stories as they ate grapes and tried to understand their loss. Then there were the people who came to the mobile library to

exchange news, discover what had happened to their neighbours, share their experiences.

The public libraries and mobile libraries became focal points for people rebuilding their communities:

- People wanted to get out of their tent/caravan/wrecked home and go somewhere normal, somewhere they used to go before the fires – libraries and mobile libraries provided a gentle route back to a more settled existence.
- The mobile library gave users a chance to catch up with friends and regroup.
- The relaunch of the mobile service in St Andrews was the opportunity for a modest celebration, with a children's party held alongside the relief centre.

People are still travelling great distances to be there for the mobile library visit where they can reconnect with neighbours, with something other than their shared experience of the disaster to focus upon.

In library buildings, rhyme-time sessions attract parents and carers with babies and young children who are living in temporary homes outside the area but want to stay connected with other families, as they plan eventually to return.

#### **4. Rebuilding with Books**

An immediate reaction by people after the fire was to donate books. To give some idea of the scale, there were 182 pallets, 450,000 books in the Bushfire Relief warehouse in Clayton.

##### Stage 1

Yarra Plenty Regional Library undertook the Herculean task of matching books to readers by inviting bushfire affected families to register their wishlist on a special website, the BAC wiki (<http://bacwiki.wikidot.com>).

The team sorted through 8000 boxes of books, finding the best quality, then making up cartons with the genres requested – a lot of cookery, gardening, self-help, adult fiction, children's books, etc.

More than 150 people took up the offer, but as the number increased, a new way was needed to distribute books through local centres.

##### Stage 2

ALIA arranged for 72 volunteers, mostly from libraries, to spend 10 days in the Bushfire Relief warehouse in Clayton, in October. In that time, they sorted through 137,000 books (57 pallets-worth), extracting 27,400 new and good quality second-hand books.

These books have been delivered to Healesville library, Yarra Junction library, Drouin library, Hurstbridge relief centre, Hurstbridge hub, the Salvos warehouse in Whittlesea, Myrtleford library, Kilmore library and Alexandra library, where they are available for people who want to Rebuild with Books.

Also in October, libraries and bookshops held fundraising events to raise cash to buy book vouchers so people can choose their own special books. These vouchers will be distributed at the end of November.

## **5. Documentation**

The experiences of the Yarra Plenty Regional Library team in the immediate aftermath have been recorded and published on the ALIA website (<http://www.alia.org.au/disasterrecovery/ALIADRPReport19July09.pdf>).

ALIA has used the bushfire experience to update disaster planning guidelines and advice for libraries around Australia.

## **6. Issues and considerations**

Public libraries' experiences of the Victorian bushfires raised several issues and confirmed others.

- Libraries need to have emergency plans in place to minimise damage to their own property and collections
- It would be beneficial for galleries, libraries, archives and museums in the same area to work in partnership, providing practical support to each other, for example a safe repository for books, artefacts and valuable items under threat
- At each location, the safety of staff is imperative, both physical safety and mental well-being
- Libraries contribute to the well-being of the community in a way that extends far beyond the bricks and mortar, vehicles, books and computers
- Cultural institutions can play a useful role in helping communities reconstruct themselves after a disaster. In the immediate aftermath, the focus will be on food, shelter and clothing, but in the longer term, books on a shelf, photographs in an album, letters and other personal papers, are an important way of retrieving lost memories

## **7. Key recommendations**

- That public library managers should be invited and encouraged to play an active part in local government emergency planning
- That the library's potential as a safe haven in a disaster zone should be recognised and factored into local government emergency planning
- That libraries and other neighbouring cultural institutions should plan their disaster response both individually and in partnership

Sue Hutley  
ALIA Executive Director  
[sue.hutley@alia.org.au](mailto:sue.hutley@alia.org.au)