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# Emergency preparedness forums interviews video transcript

[Dominic Sandilands CEO Corryong Health speaks]

We - we - we received notice through emergency services that, on the 30th of December around about 9.00 pm, evacuation centres were being set up in Corryong and fires were active in Walwa, which is around 40km north of Corryong . So, that was the first of three fire fronts that was to come over the following two weeks.

[Tammy Bundle, CEO, Moogji Aboriginal Council speaks]

So, on December 27th, we had received text messages, telling us that we needed to leave town and for everybody to leave town and head to Bairnsdale because it was everybody east of Bairnsdale that did need to leave town.

[Dominic Sandilands CEO Corryong Health speaks]

The main fire front came at - late in the night on the 30th of December and came through right up to the - to the doorstep, I guess, of - of not just Corryong Health, but the Corryong township and had gone through a small town of Cudgewa.

[Tammy Bundle, CEO, Moogji Aboriginal Council speaks]

The fire was right there. They had fireballs shooting up in the sky. I've never seen fireballs before, but I know what they look like now and I know what it feels like to just - you have your body so hot that you need to run inside.

[Dominic Sandilands CEO Corryong Health speaks]

It had gone faster than was predicted and went against, I guess, the normal physics that was - that the fires were doing their modelling on and was devastating. It - it burnt down houses, property and it was quite extensive.

[Tammy Bundle, CEO, Moogji Aboriginal Council speaks]

So, our organisation is an Aboriginal community control organisation here in Far East Gippsland. So, we were really quite busy from December the 27th and I can say that's when it really started to pick up here because, what we discovered was, it's not as simple as just talking to people about a fire plan. Our plan actually then relied on community transport, you know, things that community needed to - to assist them to actually leave town when they didn't have transport and that's a classic example of the type of work we were doing.

[Dominic Sandilands CEO Corryong Health speaks]

So, that soon after that, there was - a State of Emergency was called on the 2nd of January by the Andrews government and, from that point, it - it triggered another phase. There was greater powers that existed in the state of Victoria for forcibly removing people who didn't have a place in the fire affected areas. So, there was certainly strong encouragement to leave town. The temperatures were predicted to be very hot and - and conducive to the fires and there was expected increasing severity on the 5th of January and that, again, came as another front on the 10th of January. So, where you normally have a disaster that - that happens in one hit. This was actually a disaster that happened over three fronts over a two week period.

[Tammy Bundle, CEO, Moogji Aboriginal Council speaks]

I actually decided to stay and it was quite interesting because our organisation does close down for a two week period and, given the severity of the fire that was actually approaching Orbost and the large scale of the fire, I had obviously made that decision to stay at home, but had also decided to play that extra role, if needed, to support communities.

[Dominic Sandilands CEO Corryong Health speaks]

The - the concern that we had was for our 40 or so resi aged care clients. The resi aged care clients - the majority of care, quite complex, you know, behavioural issues, you know, relating to dementia and other - other complex medical conditions. The other big focus and - and mission we had was to protect our staff and, as you can appreciate, over a Christmas period, there were many people who are on leave and, so, access to our resources was a - was always going to be a challenge.

[Tammy Bundle, CEO, Moogji Aboriginal Council speaks]

Even on, you know, the early hours of December the 30th, I was still at the ED, supporting people. So, anyone who needed to be taken to ED just to be checked out, I was really happy to support people to do that before we did need to leave town, which was obviously December 30 was that critical day to leave and it was really, it was really quite challenging.

[At the beginning of the year, with the focus firmly on bushfire recovery in Australia, a public health emergency with global implications was beginning to unfold.]

[The first case of the novel coronavirus was reported in Wuhan, China, in late December 2019.]

[It spread to at least 185 countries and regions around the world in six months.]

[The state of Victoria has been Australia's worst affected.]

[Dean Robertson, City of Melbourne speaks]

So, on the 4th of July, Saturday afternoon, the Premier announced that nine social housing towers in then the North Melbourne and Flemington areas would be locked down at 6 pm and that all the residents are being locked down wouldn't be able to leave.

[Peter Faulkner, CEO, Bendigo Health speaks]

We had essentially two outbreaks that occurred in meatworks within the central Victorian area. Firstly, there was the outbreak at KR Dons smallgoods factory in Castlemaine and the second in Hazeldene's chicken processing works in Lockwood and Lockwood's about 10 minutes, 10 - 15 minutes outside of Bendigo.

[Dean Robertson, City of Melbourne speaks]

So, what that meant for the City of Melbourne is we had five of those towers in our North Melbourne precinct and we were a little bit unsure exactly what we had to do to start off with but we started to engage with the local community in the area and had some meetings on the Sunday and then, from there, it was very clear that we needed to help out the community and probably the easiest and best role that City in Melbourne could play, was in relation to food deliveries into the apartments.

[Peter Faulkner, CEO, Bendigo Health speaks]

Well, I suppose we had a couple of objectives. Firstly, to stop the spread of the virus as a health service. That's what our prime objective has been throughout this pandemic, is really to stop viral transmission, to keep our community as safe as is possible. So, that was a key objective for us. The second objective, of course, is whenever we have any COVID positive cases, to ensure that they are clinically managed well and that they're are kept safe but we also had those other objectives, parallel sort of objectives, I guess, of ensuring that the supply chain, the food supply chain to Victoria was minimally disrupted. There was always going to be some level of disruption with an outbreak in an abattoir context. So, to try and ensure that that was minimally disrupted and,, of course, to have that additional benefit, I guess, to the business, that they're not significantly financially hurt by the outbreak and that the broader economy is not significantly impacted.

[Dean Robertson, City of Melbourne speaks]

So, in the 5 towers all locked down, there were 650 apartments. Some of those apartments had just one person in them. Some of the apartments were 6 or 7 bedroom apartments that had 9 to 10 people inside them and they weren't able to come out. The reason the lockdown went ahead is that there was a high rate of COVID had been detected within those towers, but the testing had been pretty low. So, it was a high rate based on a low base of testing and so there was a real push to get a lot of testing done within the towers and then we could make some more moves from there, whether the towers opened or didn't open but, pretty much, our job to start off with, was to - was to work with the community on getting food supplies into 650 apartments across 5 North Melbourne towers.

[During each of these events, all of the organisations from large to small, fell back on their Emergency Preparedness Plans as a starting point for their responses.]

[Peter Faulkner, CEO, Bendigo Health speaks]

As a regional health service, we, very early in the pandemic, I mean, we were getting information, of course, out of particularly Europe and the United Kingdom from other clinical staff communicating to our clinicians about the, you know, challenges that this pandemic or at that point, this virus, was bringing to those services. So, very early in March, we started to think about what that meant for that, reviewing our own internal management, emergency management processes and structures and, in the second week of March, we put in place a - what we termed a hospital incident management team - and we very much started off by looking at our standard code brown response, our standard external emergency response plan and thinking about how we needed to modify and adjust that, recognising that this pandemic was not going to be focal in nature. It was going to be diverse. It was going to span geography, but also that it was going to span time.

[Dean Robertson, City of Melbourne speaks]

So, we - we activated a code brown on, I think it was, 10.30 pm on the 30th of December, and that was when the fire had really come quite close to the township. In our review, we - and certainly in our policies - we have now amended that so that when we had the first idea that there was an active fire in our broader region in Walwa, you know, 40 kms away, we should have really activated code brown at that time. It would have given us precious time to make communications work because it was soon after we called the code brown, that all communications were knocked out by the severity of the fires. So, that cut out our Internet. There was no 4G network. There was no UHF radio contact either and, so, all forms of communication was really challenging from that point on. Had we had an extra hour or two hours of - of comms, we could have done a lot more preparation with identifying where our workforce was based, whether they are in harm's way, whether - whether they'd be available to work on site.

[Dean Robertson, City of Melbourne speaks]

So, all of our emergency management plans that we had in place, they were tried, they were tested, they've been reviewed. It was all exactly opposite to what we were actually faced now. So, what we were ready to - what we had planned, was if there - say, there was a big tower that might have had a fire and everyone need to evacuate, that those people would come to us and then we would have them there in front of us. This was exactly the opposite. This is where we had to provide a response to people that were locked into their towers and we couldn't see them and we couldn't have a conversation with them, you know, we couldn't do all the normal things that were in our plans. So, for some - for the first couple of hours that we were engaging with, we were really starting to find out what the problem was, find out what needed to happen. So, the basic emergency management skills and our plans were ok but the actual scenario was not something we'd ever planned for, but it took us a couple of days. The - we battled through for 48 hours and then we started to get the plan together based off our basic preparedness from the other plans.

[Dominic Sandilands, CEO, Corryong Health speaks]

When the - when the declaration of the emergency was called on the second and then preparations made for the for the 5th of January, there was less concern that the burnt areas would be a continued threat. So, the hospital was less under threat from fire and more under threat by staffing. Not being able to staff adequately our residential aged care facility and our urgent care centre.

[Tammy Bundle, CEO, Moogji Aboriginal Council speaks]

Where we found was probably the challenging the most was just the information that was coming through. So, we were really relying on the Victorian emergency app to get a lot of the information out to community and tell people what the latest updates were and I was actually putting a lot of information on my Facebook page and - but I was quite happy to do that for community and I was attending the community meetings here in Orbost. So, we actually had a few of those but any of the meetings that I went to, I would feedback back to other people and, particularly, families that are outside of the bushfire affected area so that they had some clear messaging around what was really happening here as well on the fire front.

[Tammy Bundle, CEO, Moogji Aboriginal Council speaks]

It was a real moving feast. So, the - the size and scope of the task - we spoke to the community members in an off-site meeting about 4 o'clock on the Sunday and we're hearing from the community that what was happening within the towers. What the uncertainty was within the towers. What, you know, what people's reaction had been, what they - what they really needed, what they wanted and then we moved from - that meeting was held at North Melbourne Footy Club at a premises called The Huddle. We then moved to the Bunker Hill Street Centre, which was a community centre owned by the City of Melbourne, where we started to set up a bit of a base there and we started to gather our resources and, when I arrived there, was probably 6pm on the Sunday night. So, the - the towers had been locked down for about 24 hours and there was people everywhere, including the Lord Mayor, who was unpacking pallets of food and stock that had just been sent in as per any other emergency plan that - where, you know, the stuff from the bushfires, non-perishable packs of food had been sent to the North Melbourne centre and had all been dumped on the basketball court or in the hallways and it was pretty chaotic of what was happening there and so we just started to get - using our basic emergency management tools of saying, okay, who's in charge? And then we start to appoint some roles. We started to get a bit of a feel of what the task was.

[Tammy Bundle, CEO, Moogji Aboriginal Council speaks]

So the role that we did during the bushfires, obviously, in terms of telecommunications, there was a lot more emphasis on how we could do that very differently, because the circumstances we were faced with weren't normal circumstances. We obviously had issues around telecommunications, keeping in mind that, you know, the power - we lost power after the first fire front. So, it really was about door knocking. It was about ensuring that, you know, your phone was charged so that you could actually read the current information around the emergency app so you could get messaging out to community. We - we're in contact with the Department of Health and Human Services, which was really helpful. We actually had the Aboriginal engagement manager, Craig, actually just checking in as soon as the first fire front came through. Just, you know, are you okay? Is there anything you need? So, that really did make a difference, just knowing that we had a link straight away after the first fire front. Obviously, there was a lot of confusion. It was - it was a large scale fire. So, what I did do, because it was quite extraordinary circumstances, I started to film the community meetings that they did have. So, I'd actually go with my phone and live stream it onto Facebook. So, not only that local people could see that, but people who are outside of the fire activity who are worried about fellas here left in the fire ground, they could actually say what was currently happening and if anyone then needed extra support or needed me to check on somebody, I could actually go and check on someone and say, are you okay? Would you like to leave town? Let's talk about what leaving town looks like.

[Dominic Sandilands, CEO, Corryong Health speaks]

It was probably the greatest challenge we encountered. The way that the communications had to work with the coordination components of the Department had to be on - on our terms because we had no reception. The only place I could get reception was on the roof of the hospital where I could get one bar if I stood on by tiptoes and, so, we scheduled a regular time for the Hume region, facilitated by the Department to connect. I think they might have been twice daily and then it sort of when to once daily, doing briefings and looking at the capacity to assist across all health services as well, as once the clients were transferred, doing monitoring of their status and then looking at any other supply needs across the region.

[Dean Robertson, City of Melbourne]

These towers were locked down. They were heavy COVID-positive environment. So, we had to look after the health and safety of the staff as well, as opposed to make another disaster happen and have all the people initially going in there, two or three days later come out COVID. So, we just - Sunday night was long. It was a really long, messy, food was coming in, we were trying to get whatever we could out up into the towers and then really work out what the problem was and start to document that with - with a plan for what we were going to do on the Monday.

[Peter Faulkner, CEO, Bendigo Health speaks]

With any outbreak, testing is the first critical step and being rapid in our testing is just so vitally important then very quickly followed by providing the health and social supports that are required for affected workers in a - an outbreak of this nature and then to conduct the contact tracing to ensure that we are following down, chasing down all the potential transmission risk associated with the virus. So, our internal actions really prepared us well for that, along with having, at that stage, some pretty good experience with how to conduct testing and how to then respond very quickly and very rapidly as part of a broader incident response team.

[All of these organisations were able to learn and adapt to what they faced, even while facing challenges that were often unprecedented.]

[Dean Robertson, City of Melbourne speaks]

I've reflected a lot on the lessons learnt because of the first 48, 72 hours was really hectic, really, really hectic and everyone's best endeavours on it but there's things that we could - could have done better and that we - that I would do very differently if it happened again.

[Dominic Sandilands, CEO, Corryong Health speaks]

Rarely do these things happen during normal business hours and, you know, when - when you've got everything working in your favour. It, you know, it happened in the middle of the night, during the holiday period and all our comms with knocked out. So, put yourself in that situation and then you start thinking about what could be done better.

[Dean Robertson, City of Melbourne speaks]

Everything in emergency management, nothing happens between 9 to 5 on a Monday to Friday. It all happens at 2 or 3am in the morning. So, we'd adjusted all of that, all of our plans. We are now going through and writing up the plan for this type of scenario.

[Peter Faulkner, CEO, Bendigo Health speaks]

One of the key lessons that I take out of that, is that don't be a slave to whatever plan that you've put in place when you weren't in the disaster. Be guided by it but also be prepared to modify it as you do discover things about the disaster or the incident as it unfolds.

[Dean Robertson, City of Melbourne speaks]

This was like flying an airplane and building it at exactly the same time and, whilst there was mistakes made and little mistakes made all the way through the exercise or learnings, rather the mistakes, the reactiveness of the team to actually then pick up something and say no, that didn't go well. We're now doing this.

[Peter Faulkner, CEO, Bendigo Health speaks]

They prepared to modify, be prepared to learn and be prepared to try and get ahead of the game. Think about what's going to happen or what might happen and take those steps like reaching out, making contact, doing the assessments and so forth in advance of - of kind of doomsday coming to visit.

[Tammy Bundle, CEO, Moogji Aboriginal Council speaks]

With the events of this recent fire, it really highlighted, personally, for us the strength of the community and how important it is to come together as a community and heal and - and to just celebrate us as a community.

[Dominic Sandilands, CEO, Corryong Health speaks]

The other thing I'd say is I really learnt a lot as - as a leader in dispersing leadership. Much more people who aren't in leadership roles can actually have an incredible influence from a leadership sense. So, the formal leadership roles, aren't necessarily your be all and end all.

[Peter Faulkner, CEO, Bendigo Health speaks]

Trusting us to do the things that we could do and allowing us to do that and I think that's absolutely critical. You know, recognise that some people are really good at doing some things and others aren't and let them get on and do it.

[Dominic Sandilands, CEO, Corryong Health speaks]

There were things that happened in that in that emergency period that you couldn't ask of people. People were coming and doing things that were almost superhuman. On reflection, I think adrenaline kicks in and people do amazing things.

[Dean Robertson, City of Melbourne speaks]

So, none of us had any experience in how to deal with the tasks that were presented in front of us.

[Dominic Sandilands, CEO, Corryong Health speaks]

I think I've certainly learned through now applying learnings into COVID-19 to be much more open minded about who can stand up and lead.

[Dean Robertson, City of Melbourne speaks]

But there were certain people that really took on some really heavy workloads and they did a fantastic job. They did an absolutely fantastic job all the way through. It wasn't perfect, but they made it better everyday.

[Dominic Sandilands, CEO, Corryong Health]

The workforce stood up despite all adversity coming their way and, I think, that may not have been so much by design, but certainly was the way it happened. I think it sort of showed the compassion and the care that our workforce has for the community and the clients.

[Tammy Bundle, CEO, Moogji Aboriginal Council speaks]

So, as a community member and - and, culturally, your connections to your community, you want to be able to support your community. It doesn't just finish it at 5 o'clock. Your - your community is your family and you want to ensure that everybody in the family is safe, supported. That's the reminder of what it is to be community.

[End]

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