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Submission

To the Drought Policy Review Expert Social Panel

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Community Development Program Hume Region

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Anglicare Victoria (Hume Region)

Response to the Drought Policy Review Expert Social Panel

August 2008

1. Introduction

Anglicare Victoria has been working since 2004 in the Diocese of Wangaratta which includes North East Victoria and South West New South Wales, comprising 14 local government areas in 2 states. During this time we have engaged with a large number of communities and service providers to address locally identified needs through the development and implementation of services. Services have included Emergency Relief, Financial Counselling school based programs, children and family service initiatives, contact and referral services, programs in partnership with the Aboriginal community, and finally community connection programs such as the Community Kitchens. Most work undertaken in the region has been in partnership, wherever possible, with other service providers and faith groups. The work of Anglicare Victoria in Hume Region has been funded through the resources of Anglicare Victoria with only between 10 – 15% of projects being funded by Government (Emergency Relief and special projects for which regional government bodies have approached Anglicare Victoria in Hume Region to take the lead).

In 2006 the impact of the drought was felt intensely in the region and people in need appealed for support to the CEO of Anglicare Victoria and the Bishop of Wangaratta. At this time Anglicare Victoria also received an anonymous donation from a farmer who was concerned about many people in the rural community and was seeking out an agency who could take support services directly to rural people in need. The grant enabled the employment of an officer and the development of a responsive service system to address needs. Through the provision of these services the issues confronting members of the rural community (farming and non farming) became clearer to Anglicare Victoria. Needs identified included the level of support people needed to fill out forms and apply for their entitlements, funds to meet numerous items that were not provided by any other agency, support to individuals who were suffering depression, connections to reduce increasing social isolation, support with ongoing study which was being impacted on by lack of financial capacity and basic supports such as food, groceries, feed and water owing to a lack of income and increasing costs production.

The entire Hume region has been declared in need under the Federal Government's 'Exceptional Circumstances' measures. However, the size of the region has meant that the intensity of the drought and the issues associated with it varied from area to area, depending on the type of farming taking place within each area and whether it is dry or irrigation based. Farming includes cropping, meat and dairy, orchards, vineyards, vegetables, olives, niche pursuits, timber and the terminated tobacco industry. Major tourist areas have also been impacted, as have small businesses dependent on the custom of farmers such as retail, service and engineering and on people from both urban centres as well as smaller rural communities. The drought together with the impact of the fires and frosts of 2007 have had a long term impact on most of the communities in North East Victoria and South West New South Wales.

While farming and rural people have traditionally been very resilient, it is clear that the impact of the drought has seriously challenged this sense of resilience and self sufficiency.

2. Overview

Anglicare Victoria in Hume region has been responsible for large number of initiatives which it has implemented on its own or in partnership with other service providers. These initiatives include:

1. engagement with individuals and families in need to link them with available support services and resources
2. assistance to individuals and families to understand and apply for available supports from Centrelink, the Victorian Department of Human Services (DHS), the Department of Primary Industries (DPI), mental health, etc.
3. provision of basic support services which were not being funded by any other agency such as:
 - stock troughs
 - food and groceries
 - assistance with fees and books for children and women studying
 - purchase and delivery of water and tanks to people who had run out and could not afford it
4. in partnerships with other service providers:
 - pamper days for women who as a result of the drought had become isolated and very stressed in the Shires of Wangaratta, Indigo, Mansfield, Moira and the Goulburn Valley
 - blokes nights to link farming men with support services in particular health and economic support services
 - family events following the fires and while the drought was having a major impact on communities in the shires of Wangaratta, Alpine, and Mansfield
 - coffee discussion groups for both men and women in the Shires of Benalla, Strathbogie and Moira
5. peer support for drought relief workers, particularly for many on short term government funded contracts.

The current Exceptional Circumstances (EC) Declaration came into effect in 2006. The EC Declaration has been extended and it is scheduled to end in September 2008.

In autumn 2007, the Victorian Department of Primary Industry (DPI) estimated that recovery from the drought in this area could take at least five years for many livestock farmers and horticulturalists, allowing for herds to be rebuilt and trees to be replanted. While conditions have varied across the local government areas, none have improved to the degree needed to ensure ongoing recovery, dry land areas remain in severe drought and many irrigators have not received their allocations to enable them to maintain production. Some dry land farmers have reported to us that they are now carrying only 20% of the stock they were carrying in early 2006.

Some local government areas have set up very effective drought response committees. However, this has not been consistently applied throughout the region as priorities varied within each local government area. Such committees included primary producers and representatives from the State Government, health and welfare agencies, Centrelink, water authorities, local government, faith groups such as Anglicare Victoria and the wider community.

3. Key issues for consideration

As a consequence of Anglicare Victoria's role in responding to the impact of the drought and fires in the Hume region the following priorities have been identified as being critical in addressing their debilitating effects in a holistic policy and program development framework:

1. **Long term solutions:** The impact of the drought will continue to be felt long term and farming communities, rural-based industries and small businesses will take a long time to recover. Short term solutions only result in building more pressure and are not trusted by these sectors. Support agencies and workers need time to develop trust and engage with people and communities in need. This is necessary to nurture resilience and identify long term solutions which are owned at the local level.
2. **Link with climate change:** The drought needs to be seen in the context of climate change which requires long term action and adjustment at a local and regional level.
3. **Partnerships:** No one group or agency is able to address the issues resulting from climate change and drought by themselves. The need for sound working partnerships, comprising government, non-government agencies, commercial and faith groups, is vital for addressing together shared goals and issues, strategically and sustainably.
4. **Global impacts:** The impacts of climate change are not just local but will also influence national and global markets, food sources, food security and local, national and global economies. Policy and program development must keep sight of all related issues and avoid reactive quick fix solutions.
5. **Related impacts:** Rising fuel costs and interest rates are impacting on rural production and further delaying recovery.
6. **Research and priority setting:** Support agencies in the region have considerable anecdotal information about the effects of climate change, rising fuel costs and interest rates. However, small scale research undertaken in isolation and a lack of a coordinated effort to appropriately harness all available information, make it difficult to identify the complex needs of rural communities to effectively allocate and maximise the benefits of limited resources.

To address this constrain, Anglicare Victoria initiated a region-wide meeting (held last week) of all key support agencies in Hume to clarify priority areas for research and develop a coordinated approach to researching the needs of farming families.

4. Submission to National Drought Policy Review

Education and training

What is your experience of drought and its effect on education and training services in rural Australia

Anglicare Victoria in Hume Region has identified that the drought impacts not only on the ability of farmers to support their children's education, it also impacts widely on families of regional and urban business operators who are suffering a down-turn in business activity due to the reduced spending capacity of primary producers. Our experience also indicates that:

- A large number of farming women in tertiary education have dropped out as they are no longer able to afford the fees, books or cost of transport to get to their chosen courses.
- The ability of children living in regional areas to attend extra-curricula school activities, such as school excursions, has diminished, due to a lack of discretionary spending by their parents. Many already struggle to pay school fees and buying the necessary books.
- For many families that we come in contact with, lack of funds to meet basic necessities, such as food is having an impact on children's nutrition resulting in diminished concentration and acting out behaviours at school. In addition, difficulties experienced at home are often endured in silence by children to preserve the family's pride.
- Many communities lost their sporting fields due to the drought, reducing the children's scope to be involved in sporting events at the local and regional "league" levels.
- Rural producers need support to undertake education and training to be able to diversify and put new business plans into place. Training needs to be localised and easily accessible for producers to be able to afford the of cost of participation.

In what ways could education and training programs and policies be better adjusted to address the specific impact of drought?

- There is a need for models of support such as education subsidies to rural families, through tax incentives or direct payment to training institutions, to enable rural people to access educational and other related training.
- There is a need for financial subsidies and incentives to support farming families and struggling small business owners to enable them to adequately resource their children's basic educational needs such as school fees, additional tuition when required, books and extra-curricula activities. Subsidies which are linked to Exceptional Circumstances qualified families to receive via the school the necessary resources to meet the costs associated with the above. This takes the pressure off school Principals who find it difficult to single children out who may be experiencing financial hardship at home, for fear of embarrassing them.
- Travel assistance/subsidies are required for rurally isolated and remote students (both young people and adults) who travel to tertiary courses in urban centres as part of their rural readjustment or business plans to be able to diversify their farming practice or seek alternative forms of income.

What types of successful initiatives have you or your organisation accessed or developed to overcome the barriers of drought on education and training?

Some of the initiatives undertaken by Anglicare Victoria include the following:

- First contact with people who have been impacted by the drought have been via pamper days for women and blokes nights (to develop relationships and link them in with support services) and 'Pit stops' which provided health checks to address and improve health and well being as a preventative measure.

- The “Rural Skills Connect” strategy which was trialled in the Rural City of Wangaratta and other shires has been a tremendous success. It has linked primary producers (who by their farm practices hold a wide-ranging and highly valuable skill set) with businesses in need of additional staff. The training has had the capacity to fine tune specific skills that farm businesses require of their staff in a timely and accessible manner through the local TAFE.
- The Invergowrie Foundation gave Anglicare a grant to be able to support girls whose study was compromised by the impact of the drought. The demand for this service was three times the level of funding received and it identified many hidden needs in the communities in Hume Region with which Anglicare Victoria works.

Community development and sustainability

What is your experience of drought and its effect on Community development and sustainability in rural Australia?

Many farming families have experienced levels of mental health deterioration, family break-ups, severe economic hardship, social isolation diminished health and well-being. Volunteerism has declined as people do not have the time or sense of well being to put back into the community.

Reduced rural incomes and the rising cost of petrol have increased social isolation, and often has resulted in community disconnection. In addition, sporting events have had to be cancelled or moved to distant places thus reducing participation and the natural gatherings at which rural people link to get information or support each other.

Small businesses such as hairdressers, coffee shops, masseurs, clothing stores and other non-essential services have also experienced economic downturn thus affecting their ability to participate or contribute to community events.

In what ways could Community development and sustainability programs and policies be better adjusted to address the specific impact of drought?

Mental health and rural welfare services have not been able to access the resources to link people in need with the support services they urgently require such as water and feed for stock, minor equipment items, accessible information to diversify or trusted information on how to refinance their farms. Having the resources to facilitate access to these services is a necessary prerequisite to gaining farmers’ trust and subsequently engaging with them to address serious mental health issues they may be confronting.

The need for farmers to build up trust with the welfare sector is vital to ensure they benefit from available services and resources. This can only be achieved, if Drought Relief Community workers are employed in their roles longer term to enable them to build up a relationship with farmers and provide continuity of service delivery. Current funding arrangements lasting 6 - 12 months are clearly inadequate to achieve this goal and gain an in-depth understanding of the issues confronting farming communities. Anglicare Victoria believes that Drought Relief Community workers need to be funded for a minimum of 3 years as the impact of the drought will not end in the short-term. Developing sustainable strategies with people who are under pressure takes time, and needs an informed and sensitive approach.

Farming people are traditionally self-sufficient and resilient, but the impact of the drought has changed all this and has often taken away their sense of control. Programs need to empower

and re-skill these people to be able to once again take control of their circumstances and help them regain their resilience and become self-sufficient.

The drought that has lasted for over 7 years is now being termed a climate change phenomenon. Regardless of the terminology, a lack of water to grow crops or raise livestock is a drought and its impact continues to be catastrophic in our local communities. There is little evidence that the impact of the drought has ended. Even if we had higher than average rainfall for the remainder of this year. The grain season, horticultural season, pasture growth for livestock etc, it will take many years before primary producers and those businesses reliant on successful farming enterprises manage to regain their financial viability.

The community development initiatives that have been undertaken have and are giving tremendous support to rural people. A change in terminology used, runs the risk of policy-makers down-playing the gravity of the situation and therefore reducing or withdrawing support. Without ongoing support for community development initiatives over the forthcoming years the rate of human suffering (anxiety, depression, relationship tension and unfortunately suicide) is likely to escalate.

Community development has played a major role in ameliorating the effects of the drought and other climatic influences, and it is needed during the recovery years just as much as it was required during the drought. Proactive, holistic approaches are more feasible through partnerships that develop by engaging all stakeholders. The community services sector can play a pivotal role in bringing together key players and contributing to any key policy initiatives and sustainable service responses. In this effort, they can assist stakeholders to understand and own these.

What types of successful initiatives have you or your organisation accessed or developed to overcome the barriers of drought on Community development and sustainability?

A key role Anglicare Victoria has played in Hume region has been around the development of working partnerships with Government, the funded service sector, the commercial sector and the large number of faith groups who have responded to local needs. Many of these groups had been working without links to each other. From its inception in Hume, Anglicare Victoria has given priority to forming firm partnerships with the aim of maximising access and the use of limited resources for people in need.

Sections 2 and 4.1.3 above have identified some of the types of successful initiatives used by Anglicare Victoria to overcome the barriers of drought. In this section, we identify some additional initiatives and provide more detailed information about two of those initiatives:

1. Bucket brigade water deliveries (funds were raised by women in the Anglican Parish of Albury for this purpose) and grants for small farm items and outstanding bills funded by Anglicare Victoria.
2. Advocacy via the art project "Drought through the eyes of a child" which worked with 22 schools and held 12 art exhibitions in Hume Region 4 weeks of work from over 1000 children. This exhibition continues to be shown in other parts of Victoria including Melbourne and is playing a major advocacy and awareness raising role.
3. "Rural Resilience Art program in Schools, engages and builds resilience in communities. (see details below)
4. Development of new service provider partnerships and resource sharing, e.g. water carriers, Department of Primary Industry (DPI), Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE), financial planners, stock and station agents, Country Women's Association, Victorian Farmers Federation etc.

5. Working with all government and non-government service providers to prepare Christmas Hampers for rurally isolated people who normally do not access welfare services
6. Anglicare is cognisant of the long term impacts of the drought and climate change and the need for maximising the use of limited resources to achieve sustainable benefits. For this reason, Anglicare Victoria has initiated and is leading a region-wide meeting of key stakeholders to explore strategies for sustainable responses, initially through a regional scoping exercise and followed by in-depth research into the issues.

Detailed information relating to two current initiatives, include:

1. The "Coffee, Cake and Conversations" initiative jointly undertaken with the Rural City of Benalla has been a highly successful. It brings community members together in an informal pleasant setting. Smaller communities are targeted so that isolated people of those communities can get together to discuss issues of concern. This provides useful information to the agencies involved that enable them to more appropriately target support for those communities. Behind this concept is the underlying aim of bringing isolated people in our smaller rural communities together so that they have fellowship/connectedness.
2. Anglicare Victoria's "Rural Resilience Art program in Schools" has funded an artist to work with primary school classes. Children were provided with the opportunity through the medium of art to explore issues of concern to them, including resilience. This program engaged with local communities where feasible and culminated in a celebration of their work where community members were given the opportunity to link with support agencies such as mental health, social workers and financial counsellors.

Families

What is your experience of drought and its effect on families in rural Australia?

According to our experience and anecdotal evidence from other service providers in the Hume region, families are suffering incredible financial, emotional and social hardship. The levels of anxiety, depression and relationship breakdown are high. Drought has impacted on every facet of family life. As reported in section 4.1.1, lack of money has impacted on children's ability to concentrate at school as a result of poor nutrition and their ability to attend extra-curricula school activities. Programs have been set up to provide breakfast to children at schools and emergency relief to farmers in the form of food, groceries, pharmacy bills, payment of school fees.

In section 4.2.1 we have reported that reduced incomes and rising costs have limited the ability of families to maintain contact with family and friends, which has consequently increased their sense of social isolation. Anglicare Victoria has worked with people who have experienced:

1. family breakdown
2. mental health issues, necessitating the development and use of family support mechanisms and suicide prevention strategies
3. chronic illness

4. death that is cancer related and seem to have been exacerbated through the fires of 2007 and the impact of drought .

In what ways could programs and policies be better adjusted to address the specific impact of drought on families?

Policies and programs need to be consistent and ongoing to generate a sense of confidence by rural families in the workers and the services being made available.

Section 4.2.2 provides detailed information on ways community development and sustainability programs and policies could be adjusted to address the specific impact of drought. Many of the strategies outlined in that section are just as relevant to this section:

1. Many families would give priority to programs and policies that enable them to meet the costs of their basic needs or keep their farms afloat. By developing programs and policies which provide direct support services to families, community support agencies will be able to engage with families, and canvass and address their immediate, short and long term needs. Examples of direct support services include providing resources and information to:
 - purchase feed, fertiliser and water
 - pay essential services, such as electricity and gas
 - support with the transportation of stock to markets
 - increase the ability of families to diversify
 - sustain the family farm during the drought and recovery periods
 - make decisions about leaving the land (if necessary), and
 - how to receive a more realistic purchase price for their farm, if they decide to move on. The current subsidy of \$140,000 offered to those willing to walk out of their farm, is not sufficient to even purchase a home.
2. The available Exceptional Circumstance support needs to be made available for a realistic period of time to provide families with the security to overcome the impact of the drought, likely to be felt for a number of years. This support needs to be made available on the basis of recovery time for specific farm enterprises, such as replacing and building up breeding and seed stocks. Grants for infrastructure and professional advice need to be available on an ongoing basis. Grants for infrastructure, such as the \$20,000 irrigation grant not only makes a valuable contribution to primary producers but has a flow-on effect through local business operators supplying both goods and services to these farmers.

If this support is not maintained farming families will be compelled to continue to access emergency relief support services to survive. This is now occurring in the Moira Shire and is impacting on the rural sector's traditional sense of self reliance, independence and pride.

3. As stated in section 3 above, support agencies in the region have considerable anecdotal information about the effects of climate change, rising fuel costs and interests rates. However, small scale research undertaken in isolation and a lack of a coordinated effort to appropriately harness available data, make it difficult to identify the complex needs of rural communities and facilitate a long-term holistic approach to addressing those needs. In Hume Region efforts are being made by Anglicare Victoria with the support of local government and service providers to address this

shortcoming by initially conducting a scoping exercise which will inform a more thorough research. This is needed to inform service providers of the needs of farming families and to effectively allocate and maximise the benefits of limited resources.

What types of successful initiatives have you or your organisation accessed or developed to overcome the barriers of drought on families?

Sections 2, 4.1.3 and 4.2.3 above have identified a significant number of successful initiatives developed or used by Anglicare Victoria to overcome the barriers of drought to families. An additional initiative includes developing and partnering other agencies in the region to maximise contact and create linkages with other support services. For example, Anglicare Victoria has conducted client home visits with other professionals from Centrelink, Rural Financial Counsellors and Mental Health staff as well as with other community sector agencies such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul, the Salvation Army, Uniting Care etc.

Employment and professional development

What is your experience of drought and its effect on Employment and professional development in rural Australia?

1. Many people who have worked as farm hands and seasonal workers have not been able to secure employment in the region. As a result of this, Anglicare Victoria and other support agencies in the region have seen an increase in the number of homeless people looking for support.
3. Support workers dealing continuously with families under pressure have also succumbed to stress and need support to debrief, regroup and then look at alternative methods of engaging with these families.
4. In the past couple of years all professional development for community workers has been related to skilling up workers to respond to the myriad of drought and climatic impacts, such as Centrelink payment options, farm production diversification, mental health, first aid, suicide prevention strategies, emergency relief responses for farming families, home visit skills, policy and programs, skills in responding to emergency situations such as fires, animal husbandry in drought situations and RSPCA related issues.
5. New partnerships have been forged between workers and agencies who have not worked together before to address the needs of people who have been affected by drought and climate changes. Examples of these partnerships include links with stock and station agents, Victorian Farmers Federation, Country Women's Association, Department of Primary Industries, financial planners and banking institutions, faith groups, local government, the funded and unfunded service sectors.

In what ways could employment and skilling programs and policies be better adjusted to address the specific impact of drought?

- Farmers skills and expertise need to be recognised and validated and supported to become transferable to other work options.
- Farmers have handed down their knowledge through generations on the family farm and have skilled up in the context of their own environment. If they are forced off the land this intergenerational wisdom will be lost if it is not valued and harnessed for future farmers. Policies and Programs need to incorporate historical wisdom, the need for change acceptance by the rural sector, new methods of practice, flexible attitudes

and practices, and farm diversification to cope with the climatic and economic impacts at the local and global levels.

- 'Exceptional Circumstances' classified families should be entitled to education and training subsidies to encourage them to undertake skill development and diversification.
- Policies and programs which subsidise farmers to employ labourers and make it possible for them to undertake studies to learn how to diversify and improve production while productivity in the farm is maintained.

What types of successful initiatives have you or your organisation accessed or developed to overcome the barriers of drought on Employment and professional development?

- "Rural skills connect program" providing training to farmers and linking them rapidly to available jobs.
- Work trainers' subsidy to engage a rural worker for the program "Drought (and fire) through the eyes of a Child"
- Anglicare Victoria has provided direct support and counselling to:
 - increase rural people's confidence, and
 - help them re-organise their time to be able to undertake training and employment off the farm.

Mental and physical health

What is your experience of drought and its effect on Mental and physical health in individuals or services in rural Australia?

This issue has been addressed extensively in sections 4.2.2. and 4.3.2 of this document. Additional effects include:

- High levels of male depression are prevalent and the natural inclination for males to avoid seeking medical support is true in rural communities too. Free outreach counselling services are a way in which these "hidden" cases can be assisted. These should be supported by mental health clinicians, who need ongoing and increased levels of financial support. Currently this support is being wound back.
- The deteriorating quality of sports fields has resulted in a drop in participation and this has impacted on the physical and mental well being of males in rural areas.
- Increased incidents in chronic illness and a deterioration of health and nutrition.

In what ways could Mental or physical health programs and policies be better adjusted to address the specific impact of drought?

1. There is a need for free and accessible mental health outreach services to be maintained and expanded in rural areas.

2. There is a need for increased mental health first aid training for both community support workers and volunteers.
3. Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASSIST) should be broadly available to community members in rural areas. If this program was funded or subsidised to be readily available, local people would participate in it and increase the preventative capacity of local communities to care for their own.
4. Providing resources to workers to offer practical support to rural people in need would enable those workers to engage with them and gain their trust. This is a necessary prerequisite for offering more complex support, such as mental health services, family and relationship counselling and farm restructure and diversification supports .
5. There is a need for government support to provide mental health education at pamper days, blokes nights, drought buster events and "Pit Stop" assessment.
6. Tax incentives for donations to drought relief.

What types of successful initiatives have you or your organisation accessed or developed to overcome the barriers of drought on Mental and physical health?

All of those identified in the previous section, as well as:

1. Secondary consultation from Mental Health practitioners when engaging with clients in need
2. Peer support back up by mental health practitioners
3. Mental Health first aid training for faith group leaders to skill up their faith communities to respond to local needs appropriately.

5. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Rural people who have been self-sufficient and resilient have been affected by mental and physical ill health and are less able to cope than before. The issues they are confronting are much larger than anything they have been able to control and are impacted by climate, global and economic policies over which they have little influence. This further reduces their sense of hope for the future.

Much experience and practice wisdom has been gained at the local level through engagement and service provision to farming and rural communities in response to the drought. It is important that this expertise is not lost but instead harnessed and strengthened. The knowledge of many short term contract workers will be lost when their contracts end. Action needs to be taken to prevent this loss of wisdom, experience, trust and relationship development with the rural and farming sector.

Decisions and actions taken today will have long term implications for current and future generations. Through the support of sound partnerships at all levels which generates understanding of the issues and ownership of policy and program actions it will be possible to develop a coordinated proactive approach to address the complex issues confronting rural communities and impacting on all levels of our nation. Anglicare Victoria is committed to making a positive contribution in this effort.