

Carers Victoria Submission to the Legislative Council's Environment and Planning Committee Inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria

March 2026

Introduction

Carers Victoria is pleased to provide this submission to the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria. Our submission highlights the unique challenges faced by unpaid carers in emergencies. We offer four recommendations to inform policy and practice and ensure carers' needs are recognised and addressed in bushfire preparedness, response and recovery.

About Carers Victoria

Carers Victoria is a for-purpose organisation working to make sure that the almost 1 million unpaid carers across the state are understood, recognised and supported as while it is an important role, it can also be a challenging one.

To progress our vision of a future in which all unpaid carers are recognised, valued and supported, we:

- provide them with free advice and information to help them in their role
- connect them to respite activities that allow them to take a break and recharge
- deliver events and education for carers and carer-interested organisations
- collect, analyse and release information about carers so their role and their needs are better understood.

These contribute to our purpose of advancing understanding of Victoria's unpaid carers and improving their access to assistance - whoever they are, wherever they live, and whomever may be in their care relationship/s.

Who are Victoria's unpaid carers?

In this submission we use the definition of carer in the Victorian Carer Recognition Act 2012, which defines a carer as 'anyone (including carers aged under 18 years), who provides unpaid care to another person in a 'care relationship'; who has a disability, mental illness, is an older person with care needs, or has an ongoing medical condition'¹.

At least 1 in 8 Victorians are unpaid carers and this number is growing as the population changes. The number of people needing care and assistance to remain independent at home is growing – and the complexity and intensity of care roles is increasing.

Victorian Carer survey data indicates that a third of primary carers are now providing care to two or more people, and around two thirds provide more than 60 hours of that care in a week

Every Victorian will know, need and/or be an unpaid carer at some point in their lives so the potential reach of our work is significant¹.

¹ Further information about Carers Victoria can be accessed via our website, [Home page - Carers Victoria](#).

Exploring the challenges

Unpaid carers provide critical support and are often key to the health, survival and recovery of the person/s they care for during and following an emergency, yet they are often overlooked in planning and recovery activities.

In regional areas, poorer access to services such as short-term respite creates additional pressures for carers when trying to respond to the impacts of an emergency on both their own lives and those of the people they care for.

Carers often have additional responsibilities during emergencies, including managing medications, mobility and cognitive supports, and communication for their care recipient.

These challenges mean that carers, and the people they support may be disproportionately impacted by bushfires and these pressures are intensified when emergency plans and recovery initiatives do not specifically recognise the role carers are playing and/or address carer needs.

Access to essential services during emergencies is crucial to the health and wellbeing of carers and the people they care for.

Due to their role supporting someone with health care and/or behavioural needs, unpaid carers often have greater reliance on energy and water utilities (for example washing clothes and bedding, life support systems, refrigeration for medications, monitoring systems and heating or cooling), as well as essential services like communications and transport.

Carers also often have a disability themselves with two in five (39%) Australian carers reporting a disability, compared to 21% of Australians not in a care role².

Spotlight on carers in Greater Bendigo and Mount Alexander Shires

There are over 14,333 carers in Greater Bendigo, equating to about 12% of the total population of the area.

When compared to state averages, carers in Greater Bendigo are more likely to be aged 65 years or more, to report chronic health conditions such as cancer, dementia or heart disease and access Government support for carers.

In the Mount Alexander Shire (which was heavily impacted by summer 2026 bushfires), an estimated 15% of residents are carers (2,578 carers).

Indeed, Harcourt and Harcourt North have some of the highest proportions of carers in their populations (17% and 15% respectively) in Victoria.

Carers are time poor and stressed and may need extra support during emergencies.

Victorian carers have lower wellbeing compared to other Victorians with one in two reporting high to very high levels of psychological distress.

Emergencies can increase the intensity and complexity of a carer's role. Evacuation and/or changes to normal routines exacerbate existing challenges and disrupted access to health, respite, and the social services they usually rely on may make it more difficult to support their care recipients', and their own, health and wellbeing.

The time and stress associated with providing often intensive support and the complexity of the systems they need to navigate are key challenges carers face. The time required of their caring role often means they have limited capacity to manage disruptions to services or changes to their routines.

² Australian Bureau of Statistics, Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers 2021, Victorian Tables.

During fire events, restricted access and essential-services-only protocols can unintentionally increase isolation for carers. Paid support workers who normally assist in caring roles may be unable to enter restricted areas, leaving carers without the support they rely on.

For some carers, particularly older carers, the existing administrative and mental strain associated with their caring role may make emergency preparedness more difficult and they may need additional support to apply for emergency recovery assistance.

Carers are doing it tough financially and this makes it more difficult for them to manage and recover from emergencies.

About 40% of respondents to the 2024 National Carer Survey 2024 said they spent more money than they received in a month, reflecting limited ability to accrue savings and less capacity to cushion any unexpected expenses associated with an emergency with financial reserves.

The number of Victorian carers unable to heat or cool their home or pay utility bills on time almost doubled between 2020 and 2024. Nearly two thirds (63%) of Victorian carers reported experiencing financial stress in 2025³, much higher than people who are not in care roles.

Financial constraints may make it difficult for carers to secure alternative accommodation (if required), repair their homes or replace damaged belongings.

Over-reliance on digital platforms for emergency warnings, preparedness information and recovery services may unintentionally exclude carers who are not digitally connected.

Many carers tell us they have challenges with limited digital literacy, constrained time, unreliable internet access, and heightened stress.

Taken together, these challenges mean carers often have reduced capacity to navigate or respond promptly to digital communications, increasing the risk of missed emergency notifications and opportunities to access recovery assistance.

Building on existing planning resources

The CFA and Carers Victoria combined forces in 2021 to develop and promote an online module that can help carers plan for bushfires.

This resource, available at [E-learning | CFA \(Country Fire Authority\)](#), provides a practical way to help carers think about what they would need to do, what they might need to prepare, and where they and the people in their care relationship would go if at risk of bushfire.

Guides for providers working with carers are available at [Disaster preparation and relief resources for providers - Carers Victoria](#). Continued promotion of both these resources would be valuable.

There are also resources developed in other jurisdictions, such as those produced via the Carers NSW "Care to Prepare" initiative, that can assist in proactive planning.

³ *Ibid*

Getting to solutions

Our recommendations respond exclusively to item 6 of the terms of reference, which offers an opportunity to examine bushfire related policies and resources to ensure they are carer inclusive, recognising their critical role in community resilience and recovery.

The four recommendations made by Carers Victoria are informed by the lived experiences of carers, including their experiences from recent bushfire events in Victoria, and our ongoing engagement with carer communities across Victoria.

Recommendation One: Integrate carer needs into emergency planning

Carers Victoria recommends that all emergency preparedness, response and recovery plans explicitly include provisions for unpaid carers.

This integration should cover preparedness activities, evacuation protocols, accessible and appropriately resourced shelter options and communication strategies tailored to carers' circumstances. By embedding carer perspectives in planning, authorities can better anticipate and mitigate risks for vulnerable cohorts. Some examples of things carers may need are (but not limited to):

- support to prepare their homes to reduce bushfire risk
- earlier warnings and longer evacuation windows
- digital and non-digital communications tailored to their needs
- access to relief centres that address their needs (such as appropriate storage for medications and quieter spaces to support people with dementia/cognitive conditions)
- support to claim disaster relief.

Carers Victoria supporting recovery efforts for carers during the 2026 Summer bushfires

During the 2026 summer bushfires, Carers Victoria acted to ensure carers living in fire affected communities were informed of available supports and could access timely, coordinated assistance through clear communication, referral pathways and consistent messaging. We contacted councils impacted by the fires to offer carer-specific support alongside emergency services, including:

- *helping carers find services to support their caring role during emergencies*
- *connecting carers with respite options so the person they care for continues to be supported*
- *assisting carers to access practical and emergency relief while they manage their caring responsibilities*
- *providing information, advice and referrals to other carer specific services.*

Councils were provided with links to a guide outlining carers supports and benefits specific to each local government area impacted by the fires. We asked councils to share these materials with disaster recovery teams to ensure local services were aware of these additional supports for carers.

We further recommend a review of how 'essential support' is defined for carers during emergency access restrictions. While emergency protocols prioritise essential services, many carers rely on supports such as respite, personal care, and specialist interventions to safely sustain their caring role. Without access to these supports, carers, and care recipients may experience increased risk, pressure, and isolation.

Recommendation Two: Ensure recovery centres have appropriate information and knowledgeable staff able to support carers and point them to referral pathways to supports where/if carers need them

Carers require timely, clear and accessible information during bushfire events.

Staff and volunteers in recovery centres need to be trained to ensure they are aware of the additional challenges carers face and equipped with knowledge/resources about where they should go to access tailored supports. This may include having communication materials targeted to carers available at emergency centres and staff and volunteers having a principles-based understanding of carers' (and other vulnerable cohorts') needs.

The aim of this approach is to ensure that carers are equipped to make informed decisions and to access necessary assistance promptly.

Recommendation Three: Prioritise carers in recovery resource allocation

Post-bushfire recovery resources should prioritise carers, including financial and day to day living assistance, and support to claim disaster relief and/or to make insurance claims. Where possible, access to assistance should be offered through a variety of digital and non-digital modes. Recognising carers as a distinct group in recovery policies will help alleviate stress and facilitate the restoration of care arrangements disrupted by bushfires.

Recommendation Four: Strengthen collaboration and coordination efforts between community organisations and emergency agencies.

Establishing formal partnerships between emergency services, councils and peak community organisations such as Carers Victoria as well as local organisations embedded in communities such as Neighbourhood houses can promote knowledge sharing, and joint response initiatives. This can be of great assistance in coordinating resources and provides trusted conduits for getting critical information out to support organisations and individuals impacted by bushfires.

It is important that the role of community organisations in supporting emergency response and recovery efforts is recognised and appropriately funded. With greater recognition and resourcing from government, community resilience - and the resilience of those at highest risk from disasters - would be significantly increased.

In closing

Emergencies often have a disproportionate impact on vulnerable cohorts such as carers and emergencies such as the 2026 summer bushfires are not single events, rather they are indicative of a changing climate with extreme weather becoming more frequent and severe.

In response, we need emergency planning to explicitly respond to the needs of carers and a new approach towards long-term investment in community-led adaptation, resilience, and recovery.

Carers Victoria thanks the Inquiry for considering the needs of carers in the context of the Victorian bushfires.

We urge the adoption of our recommendations and would welcome further consultation.

We stand ready to assist in the development of policies and practices that support carers during times of crisis.

The Caring Costs



1.75+ million Victorians are directly impacted by care relationships



Health and wellbeing

Victorian carers have lower wellbeing compared to Victorians who do not have a care role.

Average wellbeing

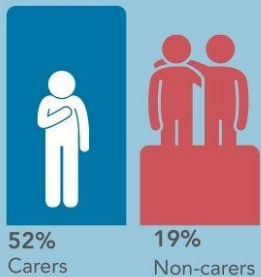


High stress



1 in 2 carers Report high to very high levels of psychological distress.

Feelings of isolation



Time commitments and financial pressures both contribute to carers feeling highly isolated.

Number of care recipients



1/3 Victorian carers care for more than one person
(National Carer Survey data)

Financial hardship

The number of carers in financial distress has more than doubled over the past three years.

Financial stress



More carers are going without meals, unable to heat or cool their home or pay utility bills on time.

Cost of living



1 in 3 carers have extra expenses related to their care role, in addition to meeting their own needs.

1/3 don't always have access to enough food.

Intensity of care roles



2/3 are either caring for more than 60 hours per week or 24/7.



1/3 of carers of older people provide this support without any formal services.