
MEDIA RELEASE

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Report calls for increased role of legal community in disaster planning

A research report prepared by the National Pro Bono Resource Centre has called on Australia's state and territory legal communities to adopt disaster response plans to deal with emergencies such as those which decimated parts of Queensland and Victoria earlier this year.

The research report - *Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Planning for the Legal Profession in Australia* - is endorsed by the Law Council of Australia, and includes a step by step guide on how to create a disaster response plan.

President of the Law Council of Australia, Mr Alexander Ward said the research report was significant in highlighting the crucial role the legal assistance sector plays in any emergency response process.

"I commend the National Pro Bono Resource Centre for taking the initiative to research and develop this significant piece of work which I am sure will be of great benefit to not only the legal profession but to the general community," Mr Ward said.

The research report includes extensive input from the experiences of people who organised and delivered legal assistance responses to the Victorian bushfires of 2009, the flood and cyclone emergencies in Queensland, and the Western Australian bushfires.

Director of the National Pro Bono Resource Centre, Mr John Corker said the report highlights some significant findings in relation to disaster response plans.

"The confusion in the aftermath of the recent Queensland floods demonstrates the important role the legal profession plays in disaster situation—for example, many of those affected did not recognise insurance as being a legal issue in Australia," Mr Corker said.

Some other key findings in the report include:

- having a strongly branded and coordinated legal response to the disaster is important to ensure that there is minimal duplication in effort. This results in a more robust and efficient response to victims with specific legal needs;
- the immediate and the longer term legal assistance required are different and the response needs to vary accordingly;
- managing the large number of lawyers who volunteered to help with relief efforts presented a challenge for those coordinating the response; and
- members of the Australian legal profession have undertaken thousands of hours of legal work to support victims of these disasters much of it without charge to the client.

“The Insurance Council of Australia figures show between 7500-10,000 people had their insurance claims rejected in the past twelve months, but less than 1000 of these have sought a review by the Financial Ombudsman Service.

“There are probably a lot more people out there who just don’t know they have a right of review or how to pursue it,” Mr Corker said.

Law Council of Australia President Alexander Ward added the legal profession was an essential part of the emergency response process to any disaster.

“People disadvantaged by disaster situations often don’t know where to turn, particularly in a time of great personal stress.

“The tremendous response of the legal communities in Western Australia, Victoria and Queensland is proof that the legal profession must be an integral part of any emergency response process.

“By establishing disaster response plans in each of the nation’s states and territories, the legal profession and governments will be in a much stronger position to assist citizens in need of urgent assistance,” Mr Ward said.

A copy of the research report - *Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Planning for the Legal Profession in Australia* is available at www.nationalprobono.org.au

Assistance is still available to people with outstanding legal issues arising from this year’s flood or bushfire disasters:

Nationally	www.insurancelaw.org.au/	(p) 1300 663 464
Queensland	www.legalaid.qld.gov.au/floods	(p) 1300 65 11 88
Victoria	www.disasterlegalhelp.org.au	(p) 1800 113 432
Western Australia	www.lawsocietywa.asn.au/bushfire-legal-help-and-information-sheet	
	<i>Western Australia Legal Aid information line</i>	(p) 1300 650 579

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