



# Beyond Blue submission to the inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across Victoria

April 2026

## Summary

- Beyond Blue recognises the profound and lasting mental health, social and emotional, and economic impacts of the 2026 summer fires on individuals, first responders, local businesses and communities. These impacts are felt both by those directly affected and by people across the state who experience fear, uncertainty, disruption or distress due to previous climate- or disaster-related events.
- Bushfire impacts can endure long after the fires. Appropriate mental health support, during and far beyond the immediate aftermath, must be at the core of bushfire recovery and planning for future events, ensuring that people and communities are supported and that nobody carries the long-term impacts alone.
- Beyond Blue continues to provide free mental health support to people impacted by bushfires, other climate-related disasters or concerns about climate change across Australia. This includes our free 24/7 support service, dedicated information and advice on natural disasters, promoting early help-seeking through our digital channels, supporting the supporters, and targeted support to schools and early learning communities.

## Recommendations

In responding to the impacts of the 2026 summer fires across Victoria, the report should:

1. Embed long-term mental health and wellbeing as a central objective, including measures that strengthen social connection and support. This should include five-year measures that provide accessible and appropriate mental health support over time, consistently promoted in local resources and service pathways. The mental health needs of communities should be assessed annually to ensure services remain responsive and meet local needs.
2. Build on existing plans and frameworks through establishing a playbook of existing mental health services and supports that can be rapidly activated, resourced and coordinated to respond to major emergencies during response and recovery. This should also include opportunities for community co-design and local ownership once the immediate impacts have passed.
3. Ensure recovery communications promote access to existing, nationally available supports to complement local services and support earlier intervention and recovery.

## Climate change and health

- Climate change is contributing to the increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events and disasters. Australia is experiencing longer and more dangerous fire seasons as a result of climate change.<sup>1</sup>

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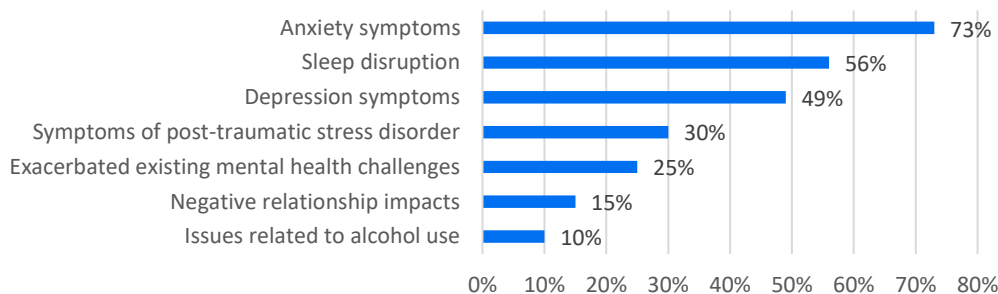
<sup>1</sup> Climate Council (2023). [Climate trauma: the growing toll of climate change on the mental health of Australians](#). Gergis J, Blashki G, Gardner J and Bradshaw, S.

- The World Health Organization has identified climate change as a fundamental threat to human health.<sup>2</sup> Climate change has both direct and indirect impacts on the mental health of people in Australia, expected to grow as climate-related events become more frequent and intense.<sup>3</sup> In Beyond Blue's *Australia's Mental Health and Wellbeing Check 2024*, nearly 1 on 5 (18%) Victorians reported that climate change had quite a bit or an extremely negative impact on their mental health.<sup>4</sup> **Strong, practical action on climate change is essential to addressing a significant driver of distress and protecting the mental wellbeing of people in Victoria.**

### Mental health impact on the community

- Bushfires are associated with mental health challenges and psychological distress in Australia.<sup>5</sup>
- A 2022 national survey by Beyond Blue and Climate Council found that 51% of people who experienced a climate-related weather disaster since 2019 reported an impact to their mental health, with one in five (21%) describing the impact as major or moderate.<sup>6</sup>
- People impacted by climate-related disasters report a range of mental health impacts (figure 1), as well as feelings of helplessness and despair (57%), worry about the safety of their family (57%) and concern for their own personal safety (51%).
- Notably, one in four people in Australia with direct experience of a climate-related event met the screening criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>7</sup>
- Mental health impacts are likely to be greater for people experiencing risk factors for poor health,<sup>8-9</sup> who are more likely to experience anxiety, depression and distress following climate-related disasters.<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 1:** Mental health impacts reported by people exposed to climate-related disasters



Source: Adapted from Climate Council (2023).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization (2023). [Climate change](#) [fact sheet].

<sup>3</sup> IPCC (2022). [Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#). Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA. doi:10.1017/9781009325844.

<sup>4</sup> Beyond Blue, The Social Research Centre (2025). *Australia's Mental Health and Wellbeing Check (2024)*. [unpublished data].

<sup>5</sup> IPCC (2022). '[Chapter 11: Australasia](#)' in *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA.

<sup>6</sup> Climate Council (2023). [Climate trauma: the growing toll of climate change on the mental health of Australians](#). Gergis J, Blashki G, Gardner J and Bradshaw, S.

<sup>7</sup> Patrick R, Snell T, Gunasiri H, Garad R, Meadows G and Enticott J (2023). [Prevalence and determinants of mental health related to climate change in Australia](#). *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*. 57(5):710-24.

<sup>8</sup> To P, Eboime E and Agyapong VI (2021). [The impact of wildfires on mental health: a scoping review](#). *Behavioral Sciences*. 11(9):126.

<sup>9</sup> Li A, Toll M, Martino E, Wiesel I, Botha F and Bentley R (2023). [Vulnerability and recovery: long-term mental and physical health trajectories following climate-related disasters](#). *Social Science & Medicine*. 320:115681.

<sup>10</sup> Varshney K, Makleff S, Krishna RN, Romero L, Willems J, Wickes R and Fisher J (2023). [Mental health of vulnerable groups experiencing a drought or bushfire: a systematic review](#). *Cambridge Prisms: Global Mental Health*. 10:e24.

<sup>11</sup> Climate Council (2023). [Climate trauma: the growing toll of climate change on the mental health of Australians](#). Gergis J, Blashki G, Gardner J and Bradshaw, S.

- Exposure to bushfires can have a long-lasting impact on people’s mental health, persisting for years after the immediate event.<sup>12-13</sup> After the 2009 Victorian bushfires:
  - One in four (26%) people from highly impacted communities met the criteria for a probable mental health condition after three years.
  - Over one in five (22%) people in highly affected areas had a probable mental health condition a decade later, which is twice as high as communities who experienced low or no impact.
  - Many people (18.6%) who were impacted and did not meet the threshold for a diagnosable condition were still experiencing issues with adjustment over the 10 years following the fires.<sup>14</sup>
- Without support, these concerns can escalate over time.
- Recovery efforts must include a focus on community empowerment and resilience through community-based recovery planning, social connection and support. Social support is a protective factor for mental health trajectories following exposure to climate-related events.<sup>15</sup> For people whose homes have been damaged or destroyed by climate-related events, high community participation prior to the disaster was a significant protective factor for mental health.<sup>16</sup> Conversely, the same study found that a lack of community attachment prior to the disaster is associated with a greater risk of mental health challenges. Investment in local programs and places that strengthen community connection, social support and resilience is therefore essential in increasing protective factors.
- **Short-term, time-limited recovery responses are poorly matched to the long-term mental health needs of the community.** It has previously been recommended that a five-year framework should be implemented after climate-related disasters to account for the long-term mental health impacts, supporting recovery, resilience and community connection.<sup>17</sup>

**Recommendation 1:** Embed long-term mental health and wellbeing as a central objective, including measures that strengthen social connection and support. This should include five-year measures that provide accessible and appropriate mental health support over time, consistently promoted in local resources and service pathways. The mental health needs of communities should be assessed annually to ensure services remain responsive and meet local needs.

### Mental health efforts to aid response and recovery

- Demand for mental health support increases following bushfires. Temporary Medicare items introduced for people affected by the 2019–20 bushfires saw an average of 498 services claimed per week between 19 January and 11 October 2020.<sup>18</sup> Notably, people impacted by bushfires may also have been supported through other existing Medicare mental health items.
- **In the immediate aftermath of climate-related disasters, too many people cannot access the mental health support they need, limiting opportunities to intervene early.** Beyond Blue and Climate Council’s national survey found that more than a third (37%) of people who experienced climate-related disasters reported too little support, while a similar proportion (36%) stated that support was

<sup>12</sup> To P, Eboreime E and Agyapong VI (2021). [The impact of wildfires on mental health: a scoping review](#). *Behavioral Sciences*. 11(9):126.

<sup>13</sup> Zhang Y, Workman A, Russell MA, Williamson M, Pan H and Reifels L (2022). [The long-term impact of bushfires on the mental health of Australians: a systematic review and meta-analysis](#). *European journal of psychotraumatology*. 13(1):2087980.

<sup>14</sup> Gibbs L, Molyneaux R, Harms L, Gallagher H C, Block K, Richardson J, Brandenburg V, O’Donnell M, Kellett C, Quinn P, Kosta L, Brady K, Ireton G, MacDougall C and Bryant R (2020). [10 Years Beyond Bushfires Report](#). University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia.

<sup>15</sup> Li A and Leppold C (2025). [Long-term mental health trajectories across multiple exposures to climate disasters in Australia: a population-based cohort study](#). *The Lancet Public Health*. 10(5):e391-400.

<sup>16</sup> Li A, Toll M, Martino E, Wiesel I, Botha F and Bentley R (2023). [Vulnerability and recovery: long-term mental and physical health trajectories following climate-related disasters](#). *Social Science & Medicine*. 320:115681.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2020). [Australian bushfires 2019–20: exploring the short-term health impacts](#). Cat. no. PHE 276. Canberra: AIHW.

‘just enough’.<sup>19</sup> People in rural areas were more likely to report insufficient support (41%) than people living in metropolitan areas (33%). Only one in ten (11%) felt that mental health services were widely available in their area following a disaster, with many describing them as quite (23%) or extremely (18%) difficult to access.

- Investing in mental health support following bushfires delivers social and economic returns. An economic study estimated that Australian bushfires impacting approximately 150,000 people would cause an annualised economic burden of \$337 million.<sup>20</sup> The study also found that for each dollar invested in a mental health program, there is an estimated return of \$1.40.
- Given the limited access to support during recovery, supports must be made available to intervene early and prevent distress from escalating. Bushfire recovery occurs in the context of ongoing mental health workforce constraints in regional areas, increased population movement following climate-related disasters,<sup>21</sup> and distress among people who live outside of the impacted area, including those who have been exposed to bushfires in the past. Complementary to locally delivered mental health support, which is critical to communities after climate-related disasters, recovery approaches must include mental health supports that remain widely available. This includes telephone and online mental health support once infrastructure is restored. Widely available mental health supports remain an important part of the recovery landscape, complementing local services and ensuring that people can access support when and where they need it, long after the immediate impacts of the bushfires.
- Beyond Blue continues to provide free and confidential 24/7 mental health support through our Beyond Blue Support Service, providing immediate support online and over the phone, as well as our online peer support forum. Additionally, Beyond Blue has accessible digital content that [supports mental health and promotes early help-seeking](#) after a climate-related disaster; and evidence-based tools that promote personal wellbeing and protective factors, such as the [PACE app](#).

#### Activating existing mental health services and supports

- Victoria’s emergency management and recovery plans provide important frameworks for response and recovery. Victoria’s State Emergency Management Plan (SEMP) identifies agency roles and responsibilities, including addressing medium- and long-term health and psychosocial needs.<sup>22</sup> It identifies the Victorian Department of Health as responsible for providing mental health information and advice, and promoting mental health services during and after major emergencies. While the SEMP primarily focuses on government departments and agencies, it also includes roles for some non-government organisations. Alongside the SEMP, Emergency Recovery Victoria’s Recovery Framework details the departmental responsibilities and principles that underpin recovery work, which includes people managing their physical and mental health as a key recovery outcome.<sup>23</sup> It also notes the Department of Health’s responsibility in maintaining community access to mental health and wellbeing services. While both documents highlight the need to coordinate non-government agencies and community organisations to provide mental health support, a comprehensive list of agencies and organisations is not provided.

**Recommendation 2:** Build on existing plans and frameworks through establishing a playbook of existing mental health services and supports that can be rapidly activated, resourced and coordinated to respond to major emergencies during response and recovery. This should also include opportunities for community co-design and local ownership once the immediate impacts have passed.

<sup>19</sup> Climate Council (2023). [Climate trauma: the growing toll of climate change on the mental health of Australians](#). Gergis J, Blashki G, Gardner J and Bradshaw, S.

<sup>20</sup> Phoenix Australia (2022). [Trauma experienced by Australian communities following a natural disaster: preliminary economic assessment](#). University of Melbourne.

<sup>21</sup> Bacquet-Carlier S, Bernard A and Perales F (2025). [Weathering change: longitudinal patterns of residential mobility following extreme weather events in Australia](#). *Global Environmental Change*. 94:103050.

<sup>22</sup> Emergency Management Victoria (2024). [Victorian State Emergency Management Plan](#). State of Victoria.

<sup>23</sup> Emergency Recovery Victoria (2023). [Recovery Framework](#). State of Victoria.

## Supporting schools and early learning communities

- Beyond Blue provides targeted support in key community settings, including through Be You, which supports schools and early learning communities. The Be You Bushfire Response Program (see case study 1) supported educators and staff in Victorian schools and early learning services who were impacted by the 2019–20 bushfires.

### Case study 1: Be You Bushfire Response Program

In response to the 2019–20 Australian bushfires, the Be You Bushfire Response Program provided targeted mental health support to more than 485 schools and early learning services impacted by bushfires across Australia, including in priority regions in Victoria. Building on the established infrastructure of Be You, the national mental health in education initiative, the program supported learning communities through recovery planning, connection to community support services, educator wellbeing sessions, webinars and interagency meetings. The program recognised the role of educators in supporting children and families in bushfire-affected communities, often while managing their own recovery. Resources and tools developed through the program have been embedded into Be You, including in professional and accredited learning modules, supporting educators to respond to climate-related disasters.

## Supporting small businesses

- Small businesses are central to Victoria’s economic and social infrastructure. Victoria is home to more than 718,000 small businesses employing over 1.3 million people, nearly 20% of the state’s population.<sup>24</sup> Particularly in regional communities, people rely on small businesses for essential services and access to employment. Despite this, micro-, small- and medium-sized businesses and their employees are often at greater risk of climate impacts.<sup>25</sup>
- Small business owners who report mental health challenges following a climate-related event highlight that the lack of certainty about their future can be a significant challenge.<sup>26</sup> After the 2009 Victorian bushfires, major life stressors, such as a loss of income, were associated with poorer mental health outcomes.<sup>27</sup> Anecdotally, business owners exposed to bushfires have reported low levels of hope in the immediate aftermath, business downturn and reduced income related to reduced tourism, closures and complex application processes for financial relief.
- Beyond Blue provides targeted early intervention mental health support designed to meet the needs of small business owners (see case study 2). Since 2021, NewAccess for Small Business Owners (NASBO) has received over 3,000 enquiries from people in Victoria, with 67% reporting recovery from a mental health condition. Following bushfires in Victoria’s Grampians region in 2025, Beyond Blue distributed digital resources to small business owners, promoting access to free, confidential mental health support through NASBO.
- **Resources currently provided to small business owners after climate-related disasters predominantly focus on financial wellbeing and general mental health support. There is an opportunity to ensure that these resources promote tailored mental health supports for small business owners.**

<sup>24</sup> Business Victoria (2025). [World Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises Day 2025](#). State Government of Victoria.

<sup>25</sup> Australian Climate Service (2025). [Australia’s National Climate Risk Assessment](#). Australian Government.

<sup>26</sup> Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman (2022). [Small Business Natural Disaster Preparedness and Resilience Inquiry](#). Australian Government.

<sup>27</sup> Gibbs L, Molyneaux R, Harms L, Gallagher H C, Block K, Richardson J, Brandenburg V, O’Donnell M, Kellett C, Quinn P, Kosta L, Brady K, Ireton G, MacDougall C and Bryant R (2020). [10 Years Beyond Bushfires Report](#). University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia.

**Case study 2: Beyond Blue's NewAccess for Small Business Owners (NASBO)**

NASBO is a free, evidence-based mental health coaching program tailored to the needs of small business owners and sole traders and does not require a GP or other referral. NASBO is available nationally by phone or online, delivering six confidential mental health coaching sessions and two follow ups. Over nine in ten small business owners have said that NASBO helped them better understand and address their challenges. While NASBO is not a crisis service, it provides structured support to help small business owners navigate ongoing challenges during long-term recovery.

**Recommendation 3:** Ensure recovery communications promote access to existing, nationally available supports to complement local services and support earlier intervention and recovery.