

## **Weather the Storm – Women Prepare**

### Background briefing paper

This is a project of the National Rural Women's Coalition and is funded a by the Office for Women under the National Women's Alliances Special Policy Project Funding. The project will run from July 2011 to June 2012.

#### Project Summary:

This project will develop a program to work with groups of women in communities at risk of, or recovering from, disaster.

Through facilitating the awareness of potential disasters and developing women's leadership capacity, the program will support families and communities in preparing for a range of disasters. It will aim to connect together a group for ongoing support, encouragement and community resilience.

This program will develop and trial a manual and toolkit in Victoria and Queensland. The project will deliver a program over several weeks, and will be free to attend with free catering and childcare available.

#### Background:

The past decade has seen a relentless unfolding of serious disasters, both in Australia and overseas.

Natural disasters leave no room for shifting responsibility or modern solutions. They call on us to rely on ourselves in the most raw and fundamental way. They leave women and children at the mercy of nature in a world where they have been taught to rely not on themselves, but on governments and emergency services. On Black Saturday, for example, 73 of the 173 deaths were female and 23 were children.

As a society we have also created our own vulnerabilities to prolonged loss of electricity, water, food transportation and the effects of climate change.

Women have unique needs and vulnerabilities during and after a disaster. They also make a unique and vital contribution to preparation and recovery.

Traditionally much emergency management has focussed on emergency services minimising the impact of the disaster. But in large disasters most first responders are ordinary citizens. We are learning that there is much that needs be done to prepare households, and communities to manage the point of impact themselves and build resilience in recovery. This project will explore one way of doing this.

#### Project Outcomes:

The expected outcomes of the project are:

- Skills will be developed among groups of women in disaster prone areas enabling them to become a better informed, prepared, confident, aware and connected, as individuals and as groups, to the risk of disaster.
- They will be better able to engage with government and emergency service agencies around the issue of disaster preparedness, response and recovery;
- A program manual and toolkit will be developed, tested and refined during the course of the project. It can then be used in other communities, and as an online resource; and
- A report of the delivery of the program will document insights, learning's and experiences, of both the development and delivery of the program.

Project Detail:

A working group of representatives from Federal and State government departments, emergency service organisations and researchers has been established to guide the project officer in designing the process, developing the manual and toolkit and in the delivery of the program. Members of this group include: Australian Institute of Emergency Management, Red Cross Australia, Department of Sustainability and Environment (Vic), Volunteering Queensland, Office of Emergency Services Commissioner (Vic), State Emergency Service (Vic), South Australian Rural Solutions, City of Whittlesea, Mackay Regional Council, and several researchers and practitioners in the field of disaster preparedness.

The project officer will develop and trial the program in one at-risk community in VIC (Whittlesea in November 2011) and one in QLD (Eungella near Mackay in April 2012). The manual will then be revised in light of this experience and participant feedback.

A significant aspect of the process will be to support the participants to become an ongoing group that continues working together to encourage and sustain each other in preparing their homes, their families and their communities for a range of disasters

The program will be delivered over at least 16 hours. It is believed this is the minimum amount of time necessary to allow for group development and for full discussion amongst participants of the issues as well as time for some information delivery. The hours can be delivered in a number of ways and will be decided as the project proceeds.

Bringing women together and facilitating them to form a group which continues after the program is challenging. Each delivery of the program will be guided by the participants who make up the group and therefore each group will be different.

The program will trial a method of facilitating *the group* to discuss what might hold them together beyond the program (eg. Gardening, craft, preserving, other disaster preparations?) and how they might establish ongoing meeting arrangements and

ways of working. Modelling good facilitation and inclusive processes during the program will be important in this, as well as encouraging purpose, fun and connection.

The program will be delivered in settings easily accessible to women, avoiding the intimidation women may feel in some male dominated environments

The groups will be connected for ongoing discussion and support online through the National Rural Women's Network (NRWN).

Once finalised the program will be offered to any community who would like to participate.

Project Rationale:

Providing women with an opportunity to learn about all aspects of disaster risk, how to prepare and how to work through decision options and psychological issues:

- Is empowering
- Enables women to more confidently contribute to family and community decisions
- Means better quality decisions and preparations.
- Reduces women and children's vulnerability to the effects of disasters; and
- Builds individual and community resilience in recovery.
- Builds leadership capacity within communities

Project Stakeholders:

The project seeks to involve and inform a wide range of stakeholders throughout the project.

People working in gender and disaster issues, emergency management and disaster risk reduction, marginalised and at risk groups of women, as well as local government and other agencies in areas at risk of disaster, may all be interested in the development of the project. They will be able to register to receive regular project updates by email.

For more information please contact:

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