



An Australian Government Initiative

# **Emergency Response Pathways for Primary Health Care**

### Acknowledgement of Country

Gippsland PHN acknowledges the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people/s as the traditional Custodians of Country across the Gippsland region.

We acknowledge the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people/s continuing connection to Land, Water and Community.

We pay our respects to the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander People/s, Cultures, and their Elders past and present.

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## Definitions

**Control Agency (CA):** the agency with responsibilities closely aligned to the specific emergency, such as Victoria State Emergency Service (SES) for floods or Country Fire Authority (CFA) and Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMVic) for fires, that is nominated to oversee the response during the emergency.

**Emergency Response Planning Tool (ERPT):** a cloud-based tool which assists general practice in better preparing for, responding to and recovering from the impacts of emergencies and pandemics.

**Field Clinic:** a temporary medical clinic with doctors, nurses and/or pharmacists set up near an evacuation centre to treat the injured during major disasters. To be initiated by Victorian State Department of Health if required.

**Incident Controller (IC):** the individual nominated by the Control Agency during an emergency to control the operational aspects of the response and provide leadership either at the Incident Control Centre (ICC) or the incident location.  
The IC oversees all deployed activities and personnel involved in resolving the incident.

**Incident Control Centre (ICC):** single geographic location where an incident (emergency) is controlled from.

**Primary Health Care:** first point of contact within the health system including general practitioners, nurses, pharmacists, allied health and mental health providers, and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander health practitioners.

**Priority Populations:** cohorts or communities that are most vulnerable in the event of a disaster.

**Support Agencies (SP):** SAs provide services, personnel, or materials to support the CA or community.

**Vulnerable Persons List (VPR):** The Vulnerable Persons Register (VPR) is a local list of people who may need consideration in an emergency. The Vulnerable Persons Register (VPR) is maintained by agencies that provide personal care, support and case management services to people living in the community in partnership with Local Councils.

## Background

The World Health Organisation (WHO) describes climate change as the most significant threat to public health in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century<sup>1</sup>. Climate change, as a social determinant of health, disproportionately affects the health outcomes of vulnerable communities and exacerbates the effects of the other social determinants of health for those who are already at risk. Rural and regional areas are at greater risk of escalating individual, social and economic costs from future natural disasters due to the higher levels of social disadvantage, fewer services and supports, geographical barriers and health workforce challenges.

However, healthcare organisations are well placed to be a significant part of the solution by ensuring that health systems are resilient to climate change and can assist in protecting patients, clients, customers, and the broader community, especially priority populations, from the negative impacts.

As stated in a recent Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (ACRRM) article, “Rural and remote doctors and their teams are critical players in emergency and disaster response efforts. As frontline responders they provide immediate care for their own patients and others.”<sup>2</sup>

The National Health and Climate Strategy (2023)<sup>3</sup> states that “*Primary Health Networks (PHNs)... have a vital role to play in disaster preparedness and response. Their role includes coordinating with existing providers to ensure continuity of access to primary health care and commissioning new services to meet emerging needs.*” Recommendations were also made through the PHN Cooperative White Paper (2020)<sup>4</sup> and the Royal Commission into National Disaster Management Arrangements (2020)<sup>5</sup> to increase the role of PHNs in coordinating a strong primary health care response and reduce pressure on the acute sector.

In a media release in July 2024<sup>6</sup>, the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) has called on all local health authorities to empower General Practitioners (GPs) to volunteer and practice as part of response teams in evacuation centres during disasters in a letter and urged GPs to work with them to coordinate care.

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organisation (2023). Climate Change. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health>

<sup>2</sup> ACRRM. Australia's Disaster Resilience. <https://www.acrrm.org.au/about-us/news-events/media-releases/article/2024/05/02/australia-s-disaster-resilience>

<sup>3</sup> Australian Government. Department of Health (2023). National Health and Climate Strategy. <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/national-health-and-climate-strategy?language=en>

<sup>4</sup> PHN Cooperative (2020). The role of Primary Health Networks in Natural Disasters and Emergencies: A White Paper. <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/reports-and-pubs/files/alternative-commonwealth-capabilities-for-crisis-response-discussion-paper/phn-cooperative-redacted-pa.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Australian Government, Royal Commissions (2020). Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements. <https://www.royalcommission.gov.au/natural-disasters>

<sup>6</sup> 2024 Royal Australian College of General Practitioners. Media Release. [July 2024](#). GPs should be able to act when disasters strike. HPE Number: DOC/24/15922

The RACGP's [Key recommendations for the inclusion of GPs into evacuation centres](#) propose:

- Local Primary Health Networks can play a critical role in establishing lists of GPs and other medical personnel who can assist in emergencies ahead of time
- General practices be designated and prioritised as essential services during disasters
- Dedicated funding be allocated to general practices for preparation, response, and recovery from disasters
- Reductions in red tape that affects GPs in emergencies, including Medicare compliance activities
- The RACGP and PHNs be included in national, state, territory and local government disaster and emergency planning groups and committees.”<sup>5</sup>

The Pharmacy Guild of Australia also states that “community pharmacy has an essential role to play in ensuring pharmacy services are available throughout an emergency situation to provide those affected with adequate care.”

GP practices, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and pharmacies can be the first point of contact in a disaster if people have evacuated without their medication or prescriptions.

Community health, including allied health, also provide direct contact points with community members, especially vulnerable cohorts, throughout geographical areas including via outreach services, and therefore similarly play a significant role in building community resilience in the face of climate change and disasters.

## Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that PHNs and primary health care providers have vital roles to play prior to, during and after disasters.

Whilst not having a mandated role in emergency management, Gippsland PHN commission disaster recovery services, coordinate a volunteer list of health care professionals willing to volunteer at Field Clinics, keep a list of practices and pharmacies willing to scale up during an emergency, collaborate with local government, work as a conduit between State Government and primary health care providers during a disaster, and provide emergency resources.

Likewise, primary health care providers currently do not have an official role in State or Commonwealth emergency management arrangements, however providers:

- Often share the disaster experience with their local community, providing them with deep understanding of the healthcare needs and real-time effects of the disaster in community.

- Have the expertise and connection with community to minimise the negative health impacts of disasters.
- Are often willing to scale up to respond to an emergency.
- Often have individual medical practitioners, pharmacists or health care professionals who are able to respond in emergencies.

This pathways document has therefore been created to:

- Illustrate where primary health care sits within the broader emergency management system.
- Demonstrate the connection that primary health care provides in supporting priority populations pre, during and after disasters, building community resilience to disasters.
- To better integrate primary health care into disaster preparedness planning through the establishment of a co-designed action plan that can be embedded within Gippsland's complex health and disaster response systems.
- Provide resources for primary health care to be able to prepare for, respond to, and build their resilience in the face of natural disasters including links to Gippsland PHN specifically developed tools such as:
  - a Contact Guide that can be utilised by emergency management and primary health care providers to provide emergency messaging to priority populations.
  - the comprehensive and interactive [Geospatial Gippsland Climate Vulnerability and Risk Map](#) to be utilised for identifying high risk areas and communities in relation to environmental factors for improved emergency planning.

## Gippsland Emergency Management System Responsibilities and Pathways

### State Government Responsibility

In the event of an emergency or disaster *it is the primary responsibility of state and territory governments to safeguard life, property, and environment within their jurisdictions.*

The State Emergency Management Plan (SEMP) is authorised through the [Emergency Management Act 2013 \(External link\)](#) (EM Act 2013) which contains provisions providing for the mitigation of, response to and recovery from emergencies, and specifies the roles and responsibilities of agencies in relation to emergency management (EM).

The [Gippsland Regional Emergency Management Plan | Emergency Management Victoria \(emv.vic.gov.au\)](#) was developed to provide direction for emergency management arrangements for mitigation, response and recovery; and defines the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders at the regional level. It supports efficiency and effectiveness on a platform of shared responsibility and interoperability to deliver community centred outcomes.

The Gippsland Regional Emergency Management Plan (REMP) seeks to build safer and more resilient communities through dynamic engagement and connectedness with the individuals, groups and broader society that makes up the Gippsland region. The plan supports holistic

and coordinated emergency management arrangements and is consistent with the [Victorian State Emergency Management Plan \(SEMP\) | vic.gov.au \(www.vic.gov.au\)](https://www.vic.gov.au). It ensures a coordinated and integrated approach focusing on community involvement in planning aligned with the 'all communities all emergencies' approach to emergency management. It is a subordinate plan to the SEMP as per Figure1.

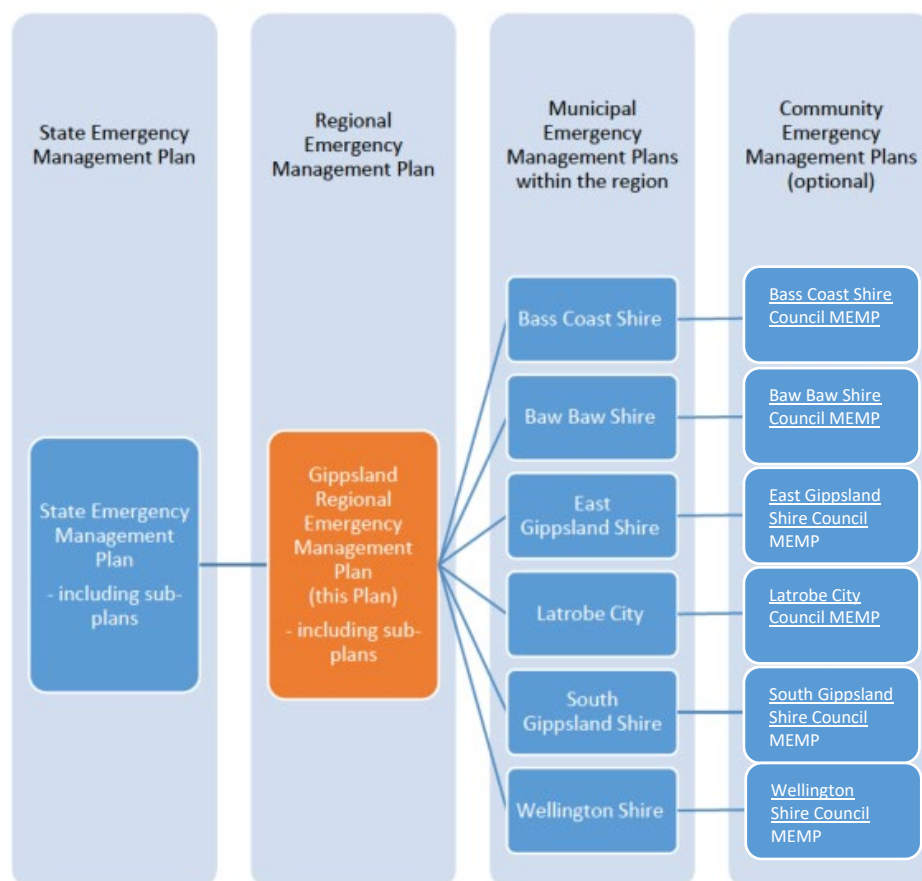


Figure 1. Gippsland Regional Emergency Management Plan, Plan hierarchy, version 2.0

## Actions During an Emergency

Based on an incident's type and location, the State Emergency Management Plan (SEMP) designates a Control Agency (CA) to oversee response efforts.

The CA may change as the emergency progresses or is clarified. The CA is based on the effect of the incident/event rather than the cause, and control can be transferred when the effect of the incident/event reduces, and another effect becomes more important. It is the



responsibility of the CA to formulate action plans for any given emergency in consultation with Support Agencies (SAs). SAs provide services, personnel, or materials to support the CA or community.

When required, incident management and control will be set up and activated by the CA at a predetermined Incident Control Centre (ICC) that supports communication with incidents within its 'footprint'. The CA appoints an Incident Controller (IC) who assumes responsibility for leading and managing the incident response.

### *Emergency Response Coordination at the Incident Control Centre*

The Incident Control Centre (ICC) serves as the focal point for managing response activities, led by the Incident Controller (IC) and the Incident Management Team to facilitate seamless cooperation among all responding agencies. The ICC adheres to the Australasian Inter-service Incident Management System (AIIMS) structure, embracing a standardised terminology and approach. AIIMS principles ensure clarity in roles and responsibilities across the emergency management effort, with flexibility for adaptation to the specific incident, operations, or consequence area. AIIMS encompasses functional areas such as Control, Planning, Intelligence, Public Information, Operations, and Logistics.

### **Health Specific Responsibilities**

In emergencies, the **Victorian Department of Health (DH)** activates the Health Emergencies Sub-Plan (HESP)<sup>7</sup> and coordinates health emergencies including:

- Providing whole-of-health leadership and direction, to mitigate, plan and prepare for health emergencies.
- Engaging with community, state and local government and key partners in the health sector to prepare for public health emergencies.
- Developing and implementing public health plans, guidelines and advice that raise awareness about health risks and how to mitigate the risk.
- Providing a coordinated response during a health emergency.
- Issuing and approving public information and warnings.

In turn, Gippsland PHN has an agreement with the Department of Health to:

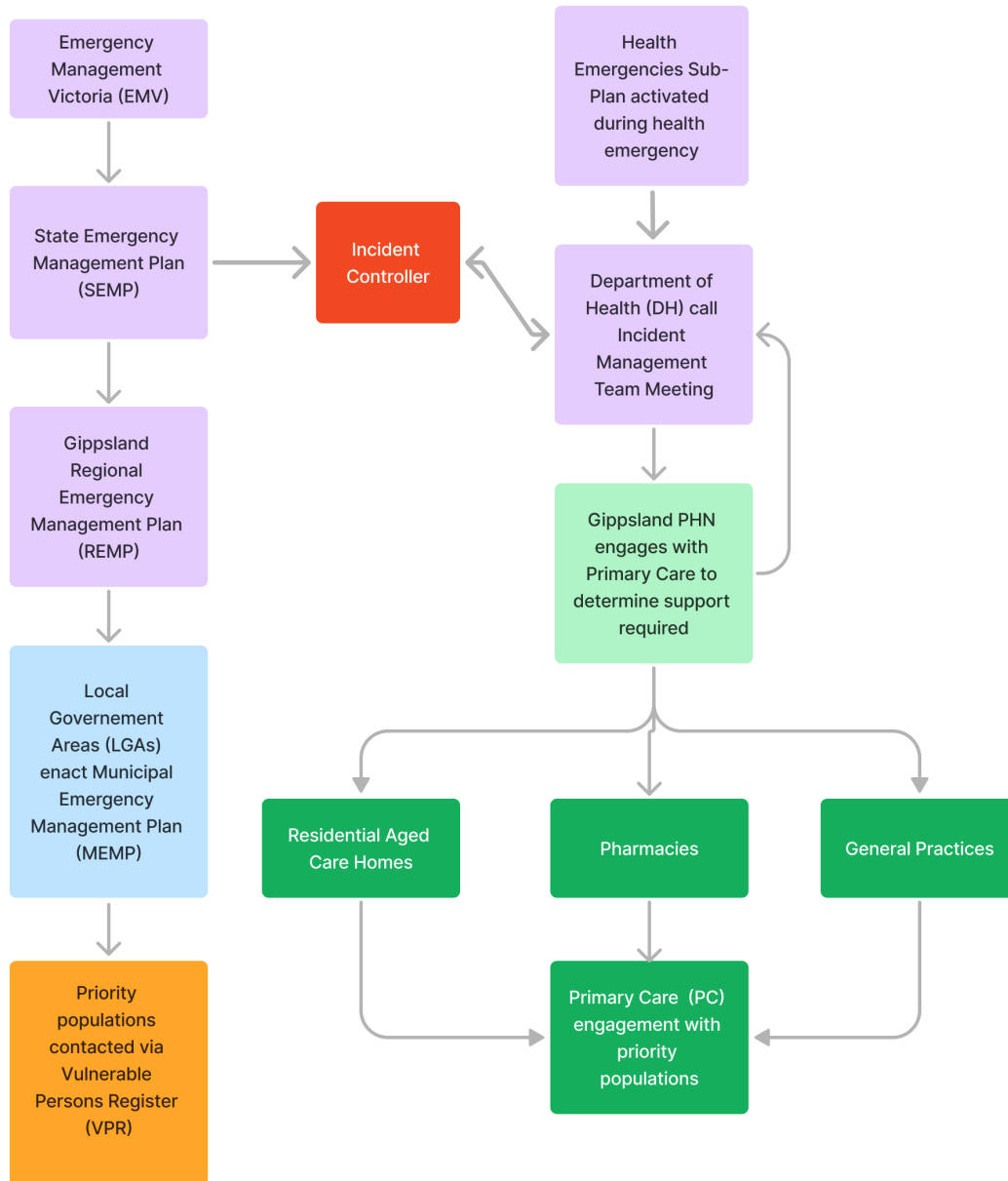
- Participate in local, regional and health service emergency planning.
- Conduct the following in the event of an emergency:
  - Facilitate access to primary health care providers in emergencies by keeping a list of those providers that are willing to scale up during an emergency and those that wish to volunteer should a field clinic be set up.
  - Establish and facilitate communications with the primary health care sector.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://files.emv.vic.gov.au/2022-12/SEMP%20Health%20Emergencies%20Sub-Plan.pdf>

- Provide intelligence on local factors affecting the delivery of primary health care in affected areas.
- Work collaboratively with the department in the provision of recovery services following an emergency.
- Identify potential opportunities for co-commissioning in response to emergency events, including primary health care, pharmacy, mental health and AOD to support response, relief and recovery for an emergency.
- Assist in learning and review after an emergency to improve the response to emergencies, with a particular focus on the role of primary health care.

Refer to [Figure 2](#) for an Overview of Emergency Response Pathways to Primary Health Care and Priority Populations



*Figure 2. Overview of Emergency Response Pathways to Primary Health Care and Priority Populations*

## Gippsland PHN Responsibilities

Emergency preparedness and emergency response are key areas of scope within the National PHN Strategy (2023-24)<sup>8</sup> which identifies three priority areas:

- **Primary health care in emergency preparedness:** Facilitate primary health care and mental health integration into emergency preparedness and response efforts.
- **Prepare for mobilisation:** Maintain capacity to mobilise primary health care and in disaster scenarios.
- **Primary health care emergency response:** In emergency settings, operationalise and implement primary health care response as required in regions.

## Gippsland PHN specific roles:

- **Preparedness**
  - Plan, test, and maintain internal policies and procedures.
  - Build awareness and engagement of disaster management.
  - Liaise with commissioned service providers and the primary health care providers to support preparedness and build capacity.
  - Monitor potential emergencies, assess risk and threats and plan to respond if needed.
- **Response**
  - Coordinate internal decision making with external direction from Local, State and/or Federal Governments to stand up response.
  - Act as a conduit of information and localised knowledge between Local, State and/or Federal Governments and primary health care providers.
  - Maintain transparent and responsive communication with staff, primary health care providers, commissioned service providers, key stakeholders and community (as appropriate).
  - Facilitate ready access to primary health care providers through a Volunteer List for Field Clinics.
  - Provide advice to DH on clinics that can scale up.
  - Enact relevant procedures to initiate response.
  - Raise risks with Local, State and/or Federal Governments.
- **Recovery**
  - Coordinate internal decision making with external direction from Local, State and/or Federal Governments to stand down response.
  - Facilitate return to business-as-usual activities as per relevant procedure.
  - Initiate quality improvement activities, including review of policies and procedures, in response to internal and/or external debriefings.

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<sup>8</sup> Australian Government. Department of Health and Aged Care (2024). [PHN Strategy \(2023-24\)](#).

- Work collaboratively with Local, State and/or Federal Governments and relevant recovery agencies in the provision of recovery services following an emergency, if applicable.
- Consider community needs when commissioning recovery services and advocate for additional resources as required.

### **Primary Healthcare Provider Responsibilities**

Primary healthcare providers are inherently involved in their community's disaster response and recovery processes. During emergencies, the demand for healthcare services typically surges and care providers rise to the occasion, to the best of their knowledge and capacity, ensuring individuals in need receive prompt and compassionate care.

Primary healthcare disaster preparedness plays a crucial role in guaranteeing continuity of care and responding to the health needs of priority populations during disasters. There is a diversity of available resources to assist primary health care in disaster preparedness (see 'Resources for Primary Health Care' section in this document).

Primary healthcare providers can support their community in an emergency by:

- Developing an Emergency (Disaster) Management Plan, including a specific Communications Plan.
- Preparing physical premises, including having relevant physical resources available for a disaster.
- Preparing patients/clients, for example, ensuring their 'My Health Records' and client notes are up to date, and medication lists are printed.
- Registering with Gippsland PHN to scale up during an emergency (disaster).
- Attending emergency preparedness, response and recovery related webinars.
- Participating in emergency (disaster) response training.
- Raise any risks or concerns during an emergency with Gippsland PHN.

To assist with furthering primary care's preparedness, Gippsland PHN has led the development of an action plan, co-designed by local primary healthcare providers and the Gippsland Municipal Emergency Management Enhancement Group, with a commitment to strengthening the role and resourcing of the Gippsland primary healthcare system.

Refer to [Table 3](#) – *Primary Healthcare Disaster Preparedness and Response Action Plan*

For more information on how you can prepare for an emergency please feel free to reach out to [primarycareresponse@gphn.org.au](mailto:primarycareresponse@gphn.org.au)

*Table 3 – Primary Healthcare Disaster Preparedness and Response Action Plan*

**Primary Healthcare Disaster Preparedness and Response Action Plan**

ACTIONS	RESPONSIBILITY
<b>Preparedness</b>	
Create an emergency response plan Refer to <a href="#">‘Resources for Primary Health Care’</a>	Primary Health Care
Provide primary health care with tools/links to emergency scenario testing	Gippsland PHN
Test your emergency response plan by undertaking emergency scenario testing	Primary Health Care
Undertake emergency skills courses and core emergency management training via RACGP and/or ACRRM - optional	Specific to General Practitioners
<b>Physical location - Practice/Business</b>	
Prepare facility for power outages You could do this by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Purchasing a generator, solar and solar battery system</li> </ul>	Primary Health Care
Put a plan in place to continue operations whilst there is a power outage Ensure you have: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Paper prescription pads</li> <li>Medical Certificate pads</li> <li>Paper radiology and pathology forms</li> </ul>	Primary Health Care
Ensure additional supplies of fuel, water and medical supplies are in storage	Primary Health Care
Communication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider purchasing satellite internet</li> <li>Consider purchasing satellite phones</li> <li>Develop/purchase non-IT methods to communicate with the community</li> </ul>	Primary Health Care
Eliminate hazards around buildings	Primary Health Care
<b>Patients/Clients/Customers</b>	
Provide webinars/training regarding how to access and utilise Gippsland Pathways	Gippsland PHN

Identify, prioritise and prepare priority patients. You could do this by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensuring their MyHealthRecord is up to date</li> <li>Printing a current list of medications and conditions for them to keep aside for emergencies</li> </ul>	Primary Health Care
Make accessible community preparedness, response and recovery resources via Gippsland PHN webpage	Gippsland PHN
Provide vulnerable patients and clients with <a href="#">community preparedness, response and recovery resources</a>	Primary Health Care
<b>Professional Care</b>	
Provide links to resources for mental health support for clinicians and workers *See 'Resources for Primary Health Care' section	Gippsland PHN
<b>Emergency Management Integration</b>	
Look into the best way primary health care can inform Gippsland PHN of needs and issues during a disaster	Gippsland PHN
Register to be on Gippsland PHN's Volunteer List to either scale up during a disaster or volunteer	Primary Health Care (GPs, Pharmacists and Nurses in particular)
Further develop mechanisms to better link primary care with emergency management	Gippsland PHN
Develop a plan to provide coordinated primary health care services from within practice/service during a disaster	Primary Care

## Resources for Primary Healthcare

These resources are a guide only. Please head to Gippsland PHN's Primary Healthcare [Response Webpage](#) for more resources and information.

- [Contact Guide for Priority Populations](#)
- [Gippsland Pathways](#) – go to Public Health and then Disaster and Management Planning
- Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (ACRRM) [Natural Disaster Readiness and Recovery](#)
- [Natural Disasters - RACGP](#) (Royal Australian College of General Practitioners)
- [Pharmacists' Emergency Management Resources](#)
- [Approach to Care – Natural Disasters](#) Online course for ACRRM Members introducing the public health and psychosocial issues associated with environmental disasters and the role that can be played by primary health practitioners in responding to individual and community impact.
- [Emergency Response Planning Tool \(ERPT\)](#) for General Practice - <https://erpt.racgp.org.au/>
- [Geospatial Gippsland Climate Vulnerability and Risk Map](#)



