

## **\$1.3m boost for mental health services in bushfire-hit communities**

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Mental health services will continue in bushfire-affected communities now that East Gippsland Shire Council has secured \$1.335 million in funding under a Resilience and Recovery Program 2022 grant.

Council has entered into an agreement with Gippsland Primary Health Network (Gippsland PHN) to provide an extension of funding until 30 June 2024. This will enable trauma counselling to be provided by Relationships Australia Victoria and the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS), and for a social-outreach program to be delivered by the RFDS for bushfire-affected communities.

The program is jointly funded by the Victorian and Australian governments under the Commonwealth-State Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements. It aims to strengthen mental health and resilience and rebuild and better protect communities affected by the devastating 2019-20 Victorian bushfires.

Data obtained from social recovery providers and Community Recovery Committees shows the continuing need for mental health support. Services had been under threat as funded providers neared the end of their funding agreements, so the new agreement is vital to ensuring bushfire-affected communities have continued access to emotional wellbeing and mental health services.

Mayor Cr Mark Reeves highlighted the work that Gippsland PHN has done so far and thanked the network for its efforts.

“Gippsland PHN has delivered a comprehensive bushfire-recovery response and has been providing critical mental health services,” Cr Reeves said.

“Without ongoing funding, the services would have finished on 31 December last year, so we’re pleased to see that funding has been extended for these services. It’s a significant outcome for the community and demand for service has not decreased.

“Council continues to advocate for ongoing funding. Being able to extend these services is a significant outcome for the community and will provide an important continuity of care.”

Gippsland PHN Acting Chief Executive Officer, Angela Jacob, said that these important services continued to meet a need in bushfire affected areas, as evidenced by the number of people who had reached out for support since services started.

“These services were initially set up to support those impacted by the devastating summer bushfires,” Mrs Jacob said. “Members of those communities continue to reach out for support and there may be others whose mental health may be triggered by ongoing natural events.

“We are grateful to East Gippsland Shire Council for securing this grant and partnering with Gippsland PHN to ensure the needs of its communities are addressed.”

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