

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria

Rochester – Wednesday 23 August 2023

MEMBERS

Sonja Terpstra – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

Ryan Batchelor

Melina Bath

Gaelle Broad

Wendy Lovell

Samantha Ratnam

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Sheena Watt

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

John Berger

Ann-Marie Hermans

Joe McCracken

Evan Mulholland

Rachel Payne

WITNESS

Cameron David Lovering, Salvation Army.

The CHAIR: I declare open the committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria. This public hearing is for the Environment and Planning Committee, a bipartisan committee of the Parliament looking into the October flood event. We will be providing a report to Parliament, which will include recommendations to the government. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee. I welcome any members of the public in the gallery and remind those in the room to be respectful of proceedings and to remain silent at all times.

All evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders, therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

Now I will just take the opportunity to address myself and the rest of the committee. My name is Sonja Terpstra. I am the Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee, and I am also a Member for North-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

John BERGER: My name is John Berger. I am a Member for Southern Metropolitan.

Wendy LOVELL: Wendy Lovell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

Gaelle BROAD: Gaelle Broad, also Member for Northern Victoria Region.

Melina BATH: Melina Bath, Member for Eastern Victoria Region.

Sheena WATT: Sheena Watt from Northern Metropolitan Region.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

Samantha RATNAM: Samantha Ratnam, Member for Northern Metropolitan Region.

The CHAIR: With that, I would like to thank you for joining us and hand over to you. If you could just keep your opening remarks to about 5 to 10 minutes, that means it will give us plenty of opportunity to ask you questions. Before you commence, could I get you to state your name and the organisation you are representing.

Cameron David LOVERING: Yes. Captain Cameron David Lovering, the Salvation Army Rochester and president of Rochester RSL.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Over to you.

Cameron David LOVERING: Dear Legislative Council and planning committee of the Victorian Parliament, the honourable members, I Captain Cameron David Lovering of the Salvation Army, Rochester, president of the Rochester Returned & Services League, wholeheartedly thank you for accepting public submissions into the October 2022 flood event. My submission and personal involvement in this event transcend any one organisation, and my areas of responsibility at times have blurred lines regarding what action or at what time I was representing a particular organisation. Because of this, it is difficult for me to clearly articulate and differentiate what parts of my submission and experience are representative of the Salvation Army Rochester, the Rochester RSL and my personal lived experience as a citizen of Rochester.

Our response to the flood has been dynamic, ranging from mental, emotional, spiritual, financial, physical and material support. Because of this, I feel that I have a reasonably good understanding overall of the situation that impacted our most adversely impacted community members and what they are still experiencing to this day. Despite our own members and volunteers being adversely affected themselves, our services were rendered almost immediately ineffective due to this flood event. Remarkably our volunteers and organisations continued to strive despite this devastating blow.

The Salvation Army has had a substantial presence in the community of Rochester for over 134 years. The Salvation Army shop, church and office were inundated and only a few office spaces remained usable. Almost all of our stock and emergency supplies was completely lost. Regardless, during the flood event we assisted in the vicinity of 1500 locals with material aid, welfare and immediate financial support, ranging from school uniforms, hampers, clothing, toys and all kinds of essential items. Additionally, thousands of our locals have accessed emergency payments provided by the Salvation Army Red Shield Appeal funds – accessible almost immediately after the waters had receded. I think our most memorable and valuable provision offered was the emergency catering over the initial weeks for the emergency services and the community members in the immediate aftermath of the flood event.

Rochester's veteran community has also found a home in our local RSL for over 100 years. This home was inundated, and the contents and structure were adversely affected. Still to this day it remains unrepaired, given insurance delays and the ambiguity of our insurance policy, much like countless homes in our community. Regardless, the RSL Victoria dispatched two social workers immediately to the area, as soon as our roads opened and allowed them access, to make direct contact with our vulnerable veterans and their families. The RSL replaced iPads, phones, computers, groceries, furniture and other essential care items. We also funded emergency accommodation, evacuations and home repairs, covering uninsured expenses and additional flood mitigation works in the thousands. I wholeheartedly confirm that the Salvation Army Rochester and the Rochester RSL have indefatigably strived to see our people recover, keeping in mind that between the two organisations we serve the most at-risk and vulnerable members of society. Both organisations deployed personnel on the ground assisting with sandbagging, lifting of furniture, evacuations, home strip-outs, flood waste removal, garden renovations and immediate physical assistance. Much of this has been carried out with little fanfare or public awareness, given the sensitive nature of our operations and our volunteer base.

Personally, I also volunteer as an operational firefighter. As a result of my military life experiences involving water and for the lack of a better alternative, I was used directly in emergency response by conducting flood rescues. For this reason my submission is largely focused on the emergency response and the lack of a swift water flood rescue capability in the vicinity of Rochester.

Ultimately to the committee I recommend that the honourable members consider sandbagging and mitigation levees in the vicinity of Rochester for the preservation of our critical infrastructure. To mitigate delays in defensive operations I urge that the committee considers purchasing one if not two sandbagging machines to be permanently stationed in Rochester along with the permanent storage of sand and sandbags for immediate use in a comparable flood event. Had Rochester had this, it is arguable that we would have been awarded an additional day of preparation time and would have been given at least some time to save at least one critical asset in our community. Tragically, all critical infrastructure was lost in Rochester. Still to this day most of the infrastructure remains inoperable or is still undergoing significant repairs or restoration works. An Echuca-centric government response saw dirt levees and almost 200,000 sandbags laid in that area compared with a little over 30,000 sandbags laid in Rochester. Because of this they were largely spared a disaster, and I am thankful for that, but on the other hand, we suffered immensely.

Additionally, the emergency resourcing and response – I suggest the committee examines the overall emergency response in Rochester thoroughly and not just the resourcing of the SES but equally of the CFA. Through collective desperation, determination and the realisation that no other emergency services were on duty or coming to the aid of the eastern side, firefighters were forced to affect technical floodwater rescues that arguably should have been conducted by SES, FRV or police helicopter flood rescue technicians. With no ability to evacuate, rescued persons had nowhere to go. One residence became a casualty collection point where evacuees needing monitoring and treatment were placed, and multiple other residences became ad hoc emergency evacuation centres. If it were not for the stoic service of an off-duty, flood-affected ambulance officer, the east side of Rochester would have had no medical support whatsoever. To date there has been no formal AAR for either the CFA or SES locally in Rochester above the individual unit level, nor has there been

a combined AAR for the emergency response provided in Rochester in its entirety. Because of this the actual emergency response is yet to be clearly determined, defined or recorded.

Finally, I ask that you consider the effectiveness of the existing state-based arrangements with emergency catering providers and/or the established charities and churches such as the Salvation Army for the provision of meals and other services in an emergency event. I propose local government should have existing arrangements with such organisations. The lack of any such arrangements in Rochester led to a well-meaning but disorganised community response that organically developed, directly due to no formal government oversight or leadership. This resulted in multiple charities, organisations and community groups duplicating offerings of welfare provisions and ambiguity about who would meet what specific role in the flood response and subsequent recovery. Due to the complex requirements around the sharing of sensitive personal information, both the Salvation Army and the RSL were unable to share our welfare details with other organisations, only the emergency services.

Already we know that this flood has caused untold trauma to the members of our community, with one precious life lost and numerous other lives changed forever. I personally view this inquiry as the only viable expression to date to communicate our experience, in the hope that it aids our community. I thank you for hearing my testimony. May the honourable members in their planning to help the government improve upon its response locally in Rochester succeed. I commit to you the entirety of my 30-page submission and every submission of every community member in Rochester. Thank you for listening.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for those opening remarks, and now we will throw to questions from committee members. Mr Berger?

John BERGER: I do not have a question – more of a comment. I think you have more than adequately in your submission there covered every detail that would serve us as a committee to take into consideration all of the aspects that you have raised. They are very important to us to understand exactly what it is from your position. And I understand from your background, just looking at the CV that we have been provided with, that your experience would be well served to educate us as to what is required. So I thank you for your submission.

Cameron David LOVERING: Thank you, sir.

John BERGER: I do not have a question – more of a comment.

The CHAIR: Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Thank you very much, Cameron. If I may ask, and forgive my ignorance, just share with me ‘AAR’.

Cameron David LOVERING: Sorry, members: after-action report or after-action review.

Melina BATH: Right you are. So you spoke about a lack of an AAR, and you also spoke about the fact that we are your first sounding board in a real sense, we will say, from – we are not government – Parliament. I want you to expand on what you needed with an AAR and any detail that you have had about government agencies, whether it be CFA – and I know we love CFA – and what has been missing.

Cameron David LOVERING: I will confirm that the Honourable Premier Mr Daniel Andrews did visit me personally and individually, I think it was only a day after the waters had receded. There was no fanfare or media, so it was not widely circulated, and he asked me in those comments, ‘Is there anything that you need?’ I just wanted to say that this is that opportunity to express what we need. I know this inquiry was announced early on. Because of that I guess a lot of us that had concerns that we wished to raise –

Melina BATH: Can I just put on point that this is independent of Mr Andrews. We have thought up this ourselves in the upper house.

Wendy LOVELL: This is my motion.

Cameron David LOVERING: Okay. My apologies. I did not realise that. Well, thank you for raising this. This whole time I have thought that was actually part of the expository.

Melina BATH: But I guess I want to understand – you know, you have got 20 recommendations in here, very detailed. Give us the top three. Punch it out.

Cameron David LOVERING: Yes. So ultimately sandbagging – I was previously posted to Forbes/Parkes, central New South Wales, a drought-prolific and flood-prone area of New South Wales. I sat on the local emergency management committee there as a representative of the local Salvation Army so that in the event of a disaster they could get out the playbook and say, ‘This is exactly what we’re going to do.’ We would war game the situations before they would happen, so we were well prepared to roll that out. They own two sandbagging machines. So the local SES had a storage of sandbags. Because sandbags perish – they are a perishable item – they were regularly replaced obviously at a cost but not that much, and sand was also kept there. So for the committee, that is my number one priority that I put to you – permanent storage of sandbags and defensive equipment.

Additionally, the resourcing of the emergency response – in particular I am pleading for a flood rescue entity, be it SES, CFA or other, even police, for a flood rescue capability in the vicinity of Rochester. And I have also put in my submission that I believe we have grounds for the cause to justify a permanent flood rescue entity here, considering we have the Campaspe River and there is an all-abilities Campaspe kayak trail, which the council encourages people of all abilities to use. With the difficulties that I have put in my submission of access and rescue from such an area, we need a technical specialist capability in our area. At the moment it is my understanding that we rely on either police aerial assets to come to our area or the Echuca search and rescue or potentially FRV from further aboard – Fire Rescue Victoria have a swift rescue capability – so there is no local within 20 minutes asset that is in this area.

And then finally, I ask the committee to consider the appropriateness of existing national or state or local government relationships that could be put in such a playbook to say, ‘In this area, if this was to happen, we’ve got these local contacts, and this is their area of expertise or this is their specialty.’ It was seven months before I as a representative of the Salvation Army was contacted by representatives of the local Campaspe shire to be invited to a meeting or a flood recovery meeting as such. I also sort of coordinate and have regular contact with all the other ministers in the town – not in any formal capacity, we all support one another. But I invited those members to that meeting as well. That was seven months.

The CHAIR: Last one.

Melina BATH: Thanks, Chair. And thanks very much, Cameron. We can tell your passion and the extent of your knowledge on this and your thought processes. The other question I have got in relation to establishing a local incident centre is I guess facilitating the correct equipment at that centre. My understanding is that SES from head office somewhere down there gave or provided ‘dinghies’ I will call them, and this area was shallow but fast moving, and they just were not suitable. So people brought in their own virtually hardened equipment.

Cameron David LOVERING: Yes.

Melina BATH: Can you talk to the type of equipment that you might need?

Cameron David LOVERING: Yes, ma’am. Regrettably, in the absence of any permanent equipment or flood rescue capability station here, I can confirm that individual members of the emergency services purchased their own rescue equipment – life jackets, rescue ropes and other necessary equipment that was needed in this flood event – in the anticipation that there may not be anything available for use. So I suggest that most members of Rochester who are willing be trained in land-based swift water rescue at a minimum and that the state government provide the appropriate life jackets, rescue equipment, you know, potentially high-angle working courses using ropes and also boats. I can confirm that the water was definitely deep enough on the eastern side to justify having a boat. Regrettably it was not until we had the community member pass away, it was not until that point, that we received any boat support whatsoever. That consisted of one FRV light duty – it was not a swiftwater boat; it was a light-duty inflatable surf lifesaving-equivalent boat with a very underpowered motor, and they did dispatch an SES barge over the bridge, but that only came once we had the fatality. The waters are definitely deep enough. If we had had a rigid-hulled flat bottom with inflatable skirted rescue boats with a high-output motor for swiftwater rescue capability, I believe we would have well and truly used that rather than unfortunately putting our firefighting appliances at risk, and we did sustain a vehicle

casualty in the attempted rescue of some community members because we had no alternative equipment to do so.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Ratnam.

Samantha RATNAM: Thank you so much for your presentation today and your very, very thorough submission. There is a lot of food for thought that the committee can really deliberate on and use from your submission, so thank you very much for that. Thinking about the disaster preparedness of the systems that are there to prepare and hopefully mitigate, and then the post-event response services, I would like to focus on that part because we have had quite a few recommendations around that which are really helpful.

You talked in your submission about the coordination, so it was essentially, I think you said, an SES-led response theoretically, but essentially the CFA played a really significant role. What is your take on what the ideal system or an improved system could look like, should there be another event like this in future? How should that be coordinated and how should the communication work better?

Cameron David LOVERING: I was not on the western side, so I was not actually aware of what was happening in the ICC, but my understanding was, as I was told, that there were only minimal SES members available in the community, and I also understand that they received no additional outside bolstering or reinforcement, so overwhelmingly, as I understand, it was the CFA members that were on the ground. Then when the rescues started to tally up considerably higher, it is my understanding then that the CFA vehicles commenced deploying into the floodwaters, and I guess that action in itself meant that they started then affecting the primacy of work to ensure primacy of life whilst the SES were maintaining command and control and speaking with the ICC. Does that answer your question?

Samantha RATNAM: Yes, so it sounds like in some ways what happened on the ground was a product of who was resourced and what resources were on the ground. So you have a theoretical model versus the practical one about how much is resourced there, and ideally for the future we want a better match so that the theoretical model is resourced to actually deliver what it is supposed to deliver.

Cameron David LOVERING: Yes. My understanding is – and I am open to being corrected if I am wrong – that the commander levels of CFA, SES and police do a comparable, if not the same, course, so an SES commander can actually be stationed in command of fire appliances in the ICC. So I think the model as it is written, from my limited understanding, is a good model. I just do not know why we did not get the outside support that we hoped we would get.

Samantha RATNAM: Implemented in full? Okay, that is really helpful. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Lovell.

Wendy LOVELL: Mine is a little bit similar to Sam's, but in response to Melina you gave us three specific points that can be better done next time. One was the sandbagging, which is obviously a preparedness thing, and the other two were both to do with response afterwards. What else can be done better for next time in the initial stages, like the warnings and the lead-up to the actual event?

Cameron David LOVERING: Full disclosure: so I would just make the comment that – and this is my personal private citizen comment – it would have been good if defence was requested to assist organising and coordinating, potentially, the sandbagging point. What I personally witnessed was our exhausted SES membership were exhausted by the time the second day had rolled around. They were there sandbagging for unbelievably long hours, but because there was no-one to backfill them they then on the final night rather than sandbag and defend their own homes had to go out and canvass and doorknock the community. So if we had had reinforcements from outside of the community, those members – and an alarmingly high amount of our CFA and SES members lost their own homes, and their homes are to be demolished and they have lost the entirety of their possessions, and some of those members have young children as well. So if we had had reinforcements deployed to the area to help us in the defensive operations of the town, that would have been entirely encouraging and worthwhile.

Wendy LOVELL: What about warning systems?

Cameron David LOVERING: Warning systems – my understanding of the warning systems is I personally felt the warnings were very good. I have only been in Rochester for three years. When I say that they were very good, I was at every single community meeting and I was already in the emergency services, so I could go to people and unpack that information even more. I will say there was the best case scenario – correct me if I am wrong and it is not the right terminology – and then there was the worst case scenario. It was my personal opinion that in the majority the communicated warning was best case scenario, but my defence experience teaches me that you should always prepare for the worst case scenario. I felt that the worst case scenario potentially needed to be communicated more broadly and more widely. I felt that it was on the VicEmergency app and potentially with the text messages. However, you have to be technically skilled – have access to internet, have a smart phone, have access to social media – and I found there was an over-reliance upon the electronic warnings. When we were rescuing and evacuating people – even the people I knew personally from the Salvation Army and the RSL that I wanted to evacuate who I knew had not evacuated – they did not seem to grasp the seriousness of the event. For one reason or another, they missed the doorknock or they just did not have the technology to access. So I put my recommendation in there for the honourable committee to consider an audible sound or alarmed warning system. Our CFA station has an incredibly loud alarm that sounds when we get daytime turnouts, but the system I am talking about is comparable to what we have on defence establishments. It produces an audible warning that is clear and can be heard across the entire community. The tornado states of America have it, and also every defence establishment has such a thing.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I might just ask a question as well here. In terms of what you were saying about the sandbagging and that sort of stuff, how confident are you that that would have had a real impact, given the volume of water that was going to come? What I am sensing is that this was an unprecedented event, so when we talk about playbooks, there is really no playbook that could have addressed this. How confident would you be that those sorts of measures would have actually resulted in real protection of assets? Because that is really what we are talking about here. When I am talking about assets, it could be pharmacies, businesses, hospitals or homes. They are all assets. There was just so much water. This was unprecedented. So how confident would you be that some of these measures would in fact result in a real sort of saving of these assets?

Cameron David LOVERING: I guess my confidence comes from the fact that there were over 200,000 sandbags laid in Echuca, and that is not counting the sand and the dirt that was shipped in by trucks to build these enormous levy walls. We had a very small percentage of people from the Echuca area access assistance from the Salvation Army – a very small percentage – compared to people in Rochester. What we could probably look back at and encourage the community to consider is: Echuca had extensive sandbag walls, levies and fire pumps pumping out water. There are a few considerations. If you build a levy around a building, someone has got to stay potentially in that area and run those pumps. That in itself could be incredibly hazardous. But it worked in Echuca. They did it; it worked. My understanding is they were expecting a one-in-1000-year flood event. They were anticipating a catastrophe. They did not get the catastrophe, arguably because of their extensive defences of the community. Unfortunately, Rochester experienced a catastrophe, arguably because we had, in my personal opinion, no mitigation. There did not –

The CHAIR: So not the same defences available to you, yes.

Cameron David LOVERING: No. But if we had, it is more than likely that we could have saved some of the buildings. I know I had help from the forest firefighters the night before. After all the official sandbagging operations have been completed, the forest firefighters helped me sandbag the Salvation Army, because I left that almost till last. I know that the sandbags that we put there did indeed stop the doors from blowing in, and they potentially stopped an even greater level of devastation. Unfortunately, we did sandbag for a number of vulnerable community members, being elderly RSL veterans, war widows and the like; we sandbagged their houses. We know some of them were a three-or four-sandbag rung height. I like to consider myself and our members as professional sandbaggers given our occupations, but even that was not enough – the water just went straight over the top of the sandbags. Had we not been limited to 25 sandbags per house, one day out – again, that is another point for the committee to consider. It was 25 sandbags per residence in the 2011 flood-impacted area. My understanding is that is only a couple of hundred homes that were able to go and get sandbags two days out. One day out, when they realised the severity would considerably improve, it was 25 sandbags per residence. There have been some comments in the community that it might have been better to not have everyone sandbag their house inadequately; it might have been better to have some places sandbagged adequately. But I would put it to the committee that it is that Sophie's choice. I would put it to the committee: if we had those sandbags, those resources and those machines here, I wholeheartedly believe we would have had

an additional day. And I say that with confidence because my offsider in the RSL self-purchased sand and sandbags so we could sandbag vulnerable members of the community's homes on the day before the announcements were actually made that we were going to flood. So I believe there would have been more time and more warning.

The CHAIR: Sure. Just on the question of plans, I asked another witness this before: when you were going in and helping people, and this might have been the first time they have experienced a natural disaster like this, were people prepared mentally or even with a physical plan to say, 'Look, I've got my emergency evacuation plan; I did it months ago, and I'm going to act on it'? Or was it a mix of people that had it, were kind of mentally prepared and then right down to people just not having any plan at all and waiting for direction? Are you able to tell me a bit about what you experienced in dealing with people?

Cameron David LOVERING: I would probably comment on one person that we visited before the flood was going to hit. I said to my offsider Lieutenant Nisbet, who is here in the crowd today, that I was very concerned that this family was not evacuating. So we went around there, and I think just Chris's encouragement helped them accept that they needed to evacuate. They had no awareness of the devastation that was about to come. Their house was totally adversely impacted. They are elderly, and they are still living in a caravan. I put it to the committee that that individual community member had no understanding whatsoever of what was about to occur. And then I would just make a general comment that the people we were rescuing from the floodwater were extremely distressed. They could not possibly have prepared for the situation and they were exhibiting stress responses, grabbing unnecessary items, trying to pack suitcases and just in states of considerable distress.

The CHAIR: Yes. And that is possibly because they had not experienced this before, so not being in that situation before – 'What do I do?' So it was a complete stress response.

Cameron David LOVERING: Yes, I guess there was a sense that they knew we all lived in a flood area – most people; there were some people that moved to the community not long before and have said that they actually did not realise or know. But the people that we interacted with and that I rescued seemed completely overwhelmed with the enormity of what was before them.

The CHAIR: Yes, okay. Thank you. Ms Broad.

Gaëlle BROAD: Thank you. Thank you very much for your submission and everything you have been doing. It is incredible. Just in your submission you do talk about recovery centres. I guess I heard too it was hard for this community having to go so far from here, which may have delayed the recovery efforts. Bendigo showgrounds got set up as a relief centre and had a lot of support there with ADF personnel and others. What were your thoughts? Could the caravans be set up a bit more? What would help that recovery and speed up the process?

Cameron David LOVERING: There were actually dry areas of the community, so it would have been my hope that the government would have deployed recovery assets to these dry areas of land where they could have been set up and established. In saying that, everyone that we evacuated on the east side had nowhere to go, so homes turned into evacuation centres. We did get some buses through, but the call was made that it was going to be too dangerous to put the evacuees on those buses because those buses went through floodwater to get to out, and they were concerned that the water was rising yet again. So the call was made to keep those evacuees locally. However, after that option had left – not only that, but it was confirmed that there was nowhere for them to go. Apparently Echuca was full, Bendigo was full; there was nowhere for them to actually go or be taken, so they stayed locally. In saying that, there were no recovery assets set up in the actual flood emergency on the eastern side, and if it was not for that ambulance officer that we had off duty, it is arguable that there could have been potentially much more adverse consequences.

Gaëlle BROAD: I guess people have been living in houses impacted by mould and that sort of thing, but right now it is nearly one year after. What is the feeling like now, and what are the needs now?

Cameron David LOVERING: I am dealing with veterans, emergency services, individual community members and at-risk people who are in a state of sustained distress. I really appreciated that the community house had Dr Rob, I think his name was, come out. He gave an incredibly informed delivery, and he said the danger period is the six-to-12-plus-month period, because that is when people are living in a state of sustained

distress. If they do not address that stress, that can then potentially develop into anxiety and depression. I am not a mental health professional, but this is my understanding of what the mental health professionals say. It is my opinion, in the capacities that I represent, that I have seen and been witness to people in sustained states of distress – people who are up to their fifth insurance assessment, who are now threatening legal action. People from our church have gotten insurance assessments back completely missing rooms, and other people – and these are very intelligent and strong community people – might be missing something like a \$17,000 heating or air conditioning unit. These are the sorts of things that they are just not willing to just sign off on their insurance assessments, because they cannot afford that. So you have got people at all levels, in all professions and in all states of health in sustained distress.

The CHAIR: We have got a few more minutes for this session to run, so we might do a second round.

Sheena WATT: I have not had a question.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Nor me.

The CHAIR: Oh, haven't you? Sorry, Sheena; I have got my list all messed up over here. Ms Watt.

Sheena WATT: You go first.

The CHAIR: Mrs Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you very much. You mentioned earlier that a permanent sandbagging machine would be beneficial for the community. Have you got an organisation in mind that would be best to manage a facility like that?

Cameron David LOVERING: Definitely indeed the SES – the State Emergency Service.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Which one, sorry?

Cameron David LOVERING: The State Emergency Service – the SES.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. And during the floods were the SES facilities themselves impacted at all, or are they higher up?

Cameron David LOVERING: Yes, they were flooded. They were adversely impacted. Their sandbagging machines, as I understand, come from out of the area. They are not actually stationed here in Rochester. From my personal experience, I would suggest buying them to the committee. That happened at Forbes; we had them located there permanently. As I understand, they are not actually overly expensive, but they can be the difference between saving some infrastructure and not. Essentially, if we had more manpower, more days and more sandbags – and additionally a comment that I neglected to mention is that we ran out of legitimate sandbags, so they were replaced with stockfeed bags.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: And pillowcases.

Cameron David LOVERING: I like to consider myself a strong man who can carry one or two sandbags quite easily; however, some of these sandbags were being substituted with chickenfeed bags, and it is my opinion that they weighed in excess of 20-odd kilos. I know I and my veterans were extremely fatigued laying those. It was like using house bricks and cinder blocks to build a wall. It just did not work. That is another comment – it was not just the machines or the sand, it was also the legitimate hessian sandbags. Did I answer your question there?

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you. I think you did. You just stated that we do need permanent flood facilities at State Emergency Services in flood-prone areas, and I think that is a really wise thing to look into.

The CHAIR: Ms Watt.

Sheena WATT: Hello. Thank you so very much for being here today and for your testimony but also for your submission, which is very, very substantial. I know that you and your team must have put in an enormous effort to make that, so can I just let you know how very valuable reading that was. I wanted to go to your

opening testimony, where you spoke to the well-meaning but disorganised community response. I know you meant that with the sincerest of intentions. What are some examples of how that could have been a little bit better? I mean, you obviously have the experience that you do. Then further to that is the bit around information sharing. Perhaps let us just feed into the first bit, and then I can follow up perhaps on information sharing and the limitations of the services you could provide in that –

Cameron David LOVERING: Thank you. Early on it was identified that I had access to welfare lists and information on clients that would have been of value to collate. But unfortunately, under both legislations I am prohibited from sharing sensitive welfare clientele data with external organisations. I can share that with the emergency services. I did get consent from the individuals. However, I could not share the bulk RSL welfare list or the bulk Salvation Army welfare list with any other organisation.

Sheena WATT: Sorry, was that an organisational policy or was that a government legislative policy?

Cameron David LOVERING: My understanding is that there are privacy protections and laws around welfare data. Salvation Army has DGR status. We are a registered charity, and we also provide emergency relief and welfare. We have got very strict policies around what we can and cannot share about individual data. So unfortunately it was not as easy as handing over our clientele to a collective database. And then – Dr Rob mentioned it as well – sometimes it is healthy having different organisations, because not everyone is going to be comfortable approaching certain organisations. They may approach the RSL and not the Salvation Army, or they might approach the Salvation Army and not the RSL or a different site. We have seen that and experienced that. That was the difficulty around sharing the data. Did that answer your –

Sheena WATT: Yes. That is actually really helpful. What about the community response and how that came about – by people just being geared by the right things?

Cameron David LOVERING: It was incredibly well meaning, and in the lack of any oversight or command and control, different organisations – multiple organisations in the community and external to the community – tried to meet their need, but there was a considerable duplication of particular items. An example of that is: we were very close to Christmas time, so most organisations did the toy drives and things, which is great; it is fantastic. But what we were finding was we were accessing these families and they were coming to us for assistance that they knew they would get every year, year in year out – the Kmart Wishing Tree appeal. We already had about 15-odd pallets of toys on the way to be delivered for Christmas, because we do that every year – not pallets, large box crates; correction, they are smaller than a pallet. But they had said ‘Oh, we’ve got toys here’, or ‘We’ve got a bike here. We don’t need that. Can you supply this?’ or ‘Can you supply this?’ Because we did not have funds – we did not do a local fundraiser or we did not have access to other things; we only had access to the toys, the hampers and the clothing – we were having community members approach us in need and we could not meet those particular needs, and they have said, ‘Oh, we’ve had about three or four other organisations offer the same thing.’ That is just a comment. It is just an observation. Whereas I have seen in other states, other areas and other disasters that when there is an organised and coordinated response, the different groups work out who is providing what – who is already well established and entrenched, who has got different qualifications et cetera and who can provide what. That is where my comment was on the duplication.

Sheena WATT: Are there any of those that you would point us to as a committee and say, ‘They did that really well. Have a look over there?’

Cameron David LOVERING: Lismore, March 2022. I and my offsider from the Salvation Army Rochester deployed Salvation Army emergency services to Lismore. It was a different government with different departments, but there was a clear local emergency management committee. It is identified. There are representatives of the police and emergency services. They have contacts with these charities and services that provide emergency catering, emergency clothing and emergency equipment. Because everyone gets to sit at a round table they can war game and plan and prepare so when the disaster or the event happens, there is that pre-prepared and pre-discussed and pre-arranged – and also people can identify their weaknesses and their inadequacies. It is an opportunity to say –

Sheena WATT: What, like, as an organisation, you mean?

Cameron David LOVERING: Yes. The organisation might be able to put their hand up and say, ‘I don’t think we’re really good at this, but this organisation might be much better.’ When we have those roundtable

discussions prior to the event, we can then – in my opinion; I have seen it – work more smoothly. But it did take the local council and the Forbes shire – they did chair and lead that LEMC that I was a part of. They let all the organisations develop it, but there was one point of contact who was, on paper, the authority and had the command and control, and the other parties were invited to assist in that particular response.

Sheena WATT: No further questions from me, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for providing the committee with your very detailed evidence today. It is very much appreciated. Of course I know this has been particularly challenging. If you feel the need, please reach out to any mental health supports that you might need. With that, we thank you very much for providing your evidence.

Witness withdrew.