

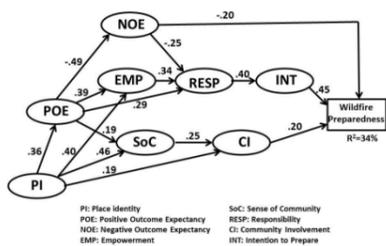
PROMOTING COMMUNITY BUSHFIRE READINESS USING A COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT APPROACH

Douglas Paton¹, Mai Frandsen¹ and Peter Middleton²

¹School of Psychology, University of Tasmania, Launceston, Tasmania ²Tasmania Fire Service, Hobart, Tasmania

Getting People Ready for Bushfire - Simply Providing Information is not enough.

Reports and research on recent bushfire impacts (e.g., McLeod, 2003; COAG; Paton et al., 2008) identified a need for greater bushfire education and preparedness in communities susceptible to bushfires. So far, the primary strategy for conducting education has been providing factual information. However, research has established that simply making information available does not increase the adoption of preparedness measures.



Paton et al. (2008) and Frandsen et al. (2012) demonstrated that certain facets of people's social context could help explain differences in people's bushfire preparedness. In particular, sense of community, levels of active participation in community life, and collective efficacy were implicated as predictors of bushfire preparedness. The personal beliefs that influenced preparedness, such as outcome expectancy, were also influenced by social interaction and discussion in social contexts (Paton et al., 2005).

Facilitating Sustained Community Readiness: Community Perspective, Collaboration and Engagement

People's preparedness decisions are influenced by several psychological and social factors. Social interaction influences people's risk beliefs and the choices they make regarding how to mitigate risk. Consequently, using community engagement strategies to empower people in ways that mobilise the social conditions that increase the likelihood of preparing has an important role to play in facilitating sustained bushfire preparedness.

In 2009, through appointing a Community Development Officer, the Tasmanian Fire Service (TFS) initiated a Community Engagement Program that sought to engage Tasmanian communities to facilitate bushfire preparedness actions. Four communities, (Bagdad, Binalong Bay, Fern Tree, and Snug) were selected



The Community Development Officer constructed community profiles in consultation with the local volunteer bushfire brigades. This enabled her to specifically tailor the program to suit the needs of the community, thus ensuring greater relevance and support for the program. Interactive information sessions ('forums') were used to facilitate bushfire preparedness.



After the forum, participants were invited to contact the Community Development Officer to develop/organise further community engagement activities. Amongst such activities was a focus group, individual property assessments, a women's bushfire workshop, and community property assessments ('field days'). The field days were particularly successful as they allowed a greater number of community residents to benefit from context specific bushfire preparedness information. Participating residents indicated that one of the main benefits of the field days was the opportunity to meet and network with other community members. This highlights the importance of realising that both communities and their residents are unique (e.g., differing levels of bushfire knowledge, motivation, decision making stage) and may be motivated to engage in risk-reduction behaviours by significantly different types and manner of information. Therefore, it is not feasible to develop a 'one size fits all' program of bushfire engagement, but rather, agencies need to tailor such programs, through engagement and consultation at the 'grass roots' of these communities to ensure the efficacy of such initiatives. The TFS Community Engagement Program provides a template for how this can be successfully achieved.

Conclusions

- engaging *local* communities to identify prevailing personal beliefs/attitudes & social norm and conditions that reduce the likelihood of preparing and addressing & facilitating change in community beliefs, processes and actions
- providing people regularly with information tailored to their specific living circumstances and to the specific phases of preparation in a manner they can relate to and understand
- encouraging and facilitating discussion of pertinent issues amongst community members, and
- assisting & encouraging people to interpret readiness information relative to its implications for themselves, their family, and for activities *they* consider to be important

This work was conducted as part of Project C.4 II