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).

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.

Facilitating Sustained Community Readiness: Community Perspective, Collaboration and Engagement

People’s preparedness decisions are influence 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.

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.

Conclusions

a) 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
b) 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
c) encouraging and facilitating discussion of pertinent issues amongst community members, and
d) assisting & encouraging people to interpret readiness information relative to its implications for themselves, their family, and for activities they consider to be important

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