

FROM VULNERABILITY TO STRENGTH: EMERGENCY PLANNING WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES USING PERSON-CENTRED APPROACHES

In 2023/24 the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and Australian Red Cross co-piloted a household fire and emergency planning service called **EPAS - Emergency Planning Advice Service**, targeted to people at higher risk, including people who need extra support because of a disability and/or being older. This was delivered in partnership with 9 Local Government Areas in Victoria.



FRIENDS AND SMOKE ALARMS

Bernard is a widowed, elderly man who lives on his own in South Western Victoria. He has reasonable mobility but needs a walker and uses a lift to move up and down in his double-storey home. His property is on the edge of the Otway's forest in a high-risk fire danger area.



He was unsure of his trigger to leave or where he would go on a high risk bushfire day. A person-centred discussion, helped Bernard decide to go to his friend's house in Geelong. He will leave on days of Catastrophic or Extreme fire danger and on any sign of fire in the area.

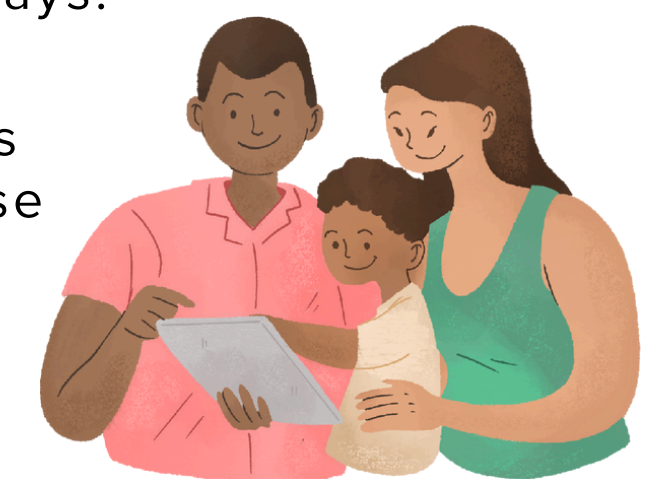
He had two smoke alarms inside – one not working and the other was very old. Bernard has a large room with an elaborate train set. There is a lot of electrical equipment in this room but no smoke alarm. As part of the household service CFA installed new smoke alarms, including in the train room. Bernard also developed a home fire escape plan.

GOING ON AN EXCURSION

Chris and Jessica live in a high bushfire risk area in the Yarra Ranges with their young family. Concerned about bushfire safety for their family, given one of their children has a disability, they asked to participate.

Their child with a disability finds changes to routine extremely difficult to cope with. A brainstorming emergency preparedness conversation led to the idea of "going on an excursion". They will now use this concept with their son if the family needs to leave early. This will shift what might have been highly disruptive to become something that is manageable. The family now have a written plan for Extreme and Catastrophic days.

The family also installed extra smoke alarms in their home to speed up detection of house fires. They have rehearsed their home fire escape plan to make it more familiar and less daunting for their children.



SHARING RESPONSIBILITY

Michael and Peter live in Central Victoria in an area with a significant bushfire history and profile. They both have an intellectual disability and live in an independent living home with round-the-clock in-home support and care.

During the home visits the bushfire risks in the local area were discussed. Plans were agreed for each type of Fire Danger Rated day. These plans will now be formalised and reflected in processes and training for the service provider and their staff. CFA also provided free bushfire training to the service provider.

Home fire safety was also a concern, so the existing home fire plans were reviewed and enhanced. This included CFA installing additional smoke alarms home and prompting more realistic home fire escape practices.

Importantly, the service provider has adopted these approaches at other homes they manage locally.



PLANNED RELIANCE ON OTHERS

While her house is being completed, Shona lives in a caravan at her sister's property. There is bushland to the north of the property near Bendigo, and risk of bushfire and embers. Shona's disability means she does not drive. She has a part-time carer and her sister works full-time away from the property. In an emergency, Shona would be dependent on others.

During a single home visit Shona understood the bushfire risks and her reliance on others to leave early or evacuate. Shona and her sister discussed the situation with two of their neighbours. The neighbours agreed to help Shona.

Shona and her sister now feel confident that between them, her carer and their neighbours, they have a plan for Shona to get to a safer place on high-risk days.



Watch stories of how EPAS improved emergency preparedness here:



To learn more or get a copy of the EPAS Evaluation contact Angela Cook at CFA Community Engagement angela.cook@cfa.vic.gov.au

