

Heads Up For Fire (and other emergencies) HUFF Project. 2020-21 Community Survey Write-Up

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Executive Summary

Towards the end of 2020 and beginning of 2021, BANC organised a research activity to gather information about the Heads Up For Fire (HUFF) program. The research found that the program was overwhelmingly regarded as successful by both Facilitator's and Community Participants and that people were invested in the project. BANC wishes to thank all the participants for their feedback.

Introduction

The Blue Mountains is one of the most bushfire prone places on earth, and the ongoing alteration and warming of our weather patterns due to climate change has increased the urgency with which communities need to plan, prepare and connect in such emergencies.

As a community, looking out for one another, and developing and maintaining ties with our neighbours, 'supports the fundamental principle that a connected community is resilient in the face of adversity' (BANC, 2015). Assisting people to become confident in their ability to cope in extreme situations – to know what to do and where to seek help and advice - is one of the keys of building a resilient community, particularly one that prone to extreme weather and natural disasters.

At present, a number of local organisations, in conjunction with the local Rural Fire Service (RFS) are looking at rolling out the Heads Up For Fire (HUFF) project across the Blue Mountains Local Government Area (LGA). This paper serves as a report to describe the HUFF program's origins, how it has been rolled out thus far and how the community (HUFF Facilitators and Program Participants) view it, after the unprecedented bushfires in the Spring and Summer of 2019-2020. The paper aims to compliment the report written by Dr Sarah Redshaw on behalf of BANC, in 2015.

HUFF history

The concept for the Heads Up for Fire (HUFF) Project was initially developed by Blackheath Area Neighbourhood Centre (BANC) and the Blackheath/ Mt Victoria Rural Fire Brigade (RFS) in response to the fires in the Australian state of Victoria in 2009. The project initially began with members of the local RFS brigades and interested community members forming a Blackheath Bush Fire Watch Group. Street meetings were held in the most bushfire prone areas of Blackheath, facilitated by community volunteers who were recruited to seek out and connect with their most at-risk and vulnerable neighbours – those who were not adequately prepared for bushfires, people who were vulnerable due to age, ability or other reasons, or those who lacked access to faster information sources such as the internet or social media. The idea was to encourage these people to: plan and prepare in times of stability, keep them informed in the event of a fire approaching, and be able to support them to act on their plan in times of fire emergencies. This program evolved into the one we know as HUFF during this time (HUFF Report, 2015).

After other serious events including a severe and damaging windstorm, two snow storms and finally a destructive bushfire in 2013, it became evident that it would be beneficial to extend the concept of HUFF to cover the wider community, as well as extend HUFF to cover all emergency situations. This

was difficult to implement due to the reliance of voluntary workers to operate the project, but a grant from the Community Resilience Innovative Program (CRIP) in 2014 soon revitalised the idea. This enabled the extension of the project, with the aim of reaching all residents of Blackheath and Mt Victoria, starting the program in Medlow Bath. This project now has a paid part-time facilitator to support both the project and the volunteer HUFF Facilitators, with the intention of keeping residents informed of any developing disaster situations. HUFF Facilitators are allocated one street to work with, which is generally the one that they already live in.

HUFF volunteers are asked to help support people in their neighbourhood who may be considered to be more vulnerable. Some examples of vulnerable people *may* include the following:

- People who have recently moved to the area and who are unfamiliar with bushfires and what can be done to prepare and respond to such events
- People who are differently abled, aged, in poor health or living with mental health conditions
- People with mobility restrictions such as those living with a disability or those who have no access to cars or other forms of transport
- People with limited access to communication devices
- People caring for young children or high-need dependents.

The HUFF facilitator's core responsibilities include:

- Connecting with and getting to know your neighbours
- Determining who may require assistance with developing an emergency plan
- Being attentive to details such as: newcomers to the street, those who do not have access to the internet or a smartphone, how interested people prefer to be contacted, and which people are eligible for services such as AIDER (to assist with property preparation such as cutting down potentially dangerous trees etc.).

More information about general tasks, communication, connection and advice about assisting neighbours to prepare for emergencies can be found in the HUFF Facilitator Manual (2021). This, and more information about HUFF can be found at <http://huff.org.au/>

HUFF Research Project

In 2019/2020, the Blue Mountains, and much of the eastern coast of New South Wales were simultaneously impacted by the worst bushfires in living memory. In the Blue Mountains, Blackheath and The Mounts areas were particularly badly hit, with bushfires encroaching on inhabited areas for weeks, until heavy rains came and put the fires out approximately 12 weeks after they had started.

As a consequence of these fires, we, at BANC, were keen to see how HUFF was utilised during these fires; what worked well, what did not work so well, and what can be done to improve the program. We sent out two qualitative surveys to our community towards the end of 2020, several months after the fires, one to our Facilitators and one to the Community Participants. The research was granted ethics approval through the Nepean Blue Mountains Local Health District (ethics approval number 2020/ETH01358). Participants were provided with an information sheet and the return of a survey was considered informed consent. All questions were optional and data were immediately de-identified. The sample included 26 responses from facilitators and 28 responses from CPs, which was sufficient considering the small sample population.

All of the responses were given consideration, with suggestions of possible future directions of the HUFF program being outlined at the end of this paper.

Research findings

Facilitators:

HUFF facilitators were asked the following questions:

- How well do you think the HUFF program is working?
- What parts of the HUFF program work well?
- Is there anything you would like to see done differently?
- Do you think the HUFF program helps people in your street to prepare? Please give examples.
- Do you think the HUFF program helps people in your street to connect? Please give examples.
- How have people in your street responded to the HUFF program?
- What were the most useful ways to connect people as a HUFF facilitator?
- Did you find your facilitator role was different for the 2019-2020 bushfires and responding to Covid-19? If so, how?
- What is your favourite part of volunteering as a HUFF facilitator? What is the most difficult part?
- Is there anything you would like to add?

All Facilitators responded that, in their opinion, HUFF was working moderately to extremely well, with facilitators enjoying the increased sense of connection and caring for people in their own street/section of the community, as well as being able to offer practical information about bushfire preparation and emergencies.

Aspects of HUFF that some of the facilitators would like addressed include: how and what material is disseminated, how Facilitators and Community Participants (CP) perceive the role of the Facilitator, and a clearer definition of the Facilitator role. It was evident from the comments supplied that the lack of clarity about the perceived role of a HUFF Facilitator was causing some friction for both them and the CP's. There was also some discrepancy about the type and quantities of information that is shared by the Facilitators. This is consistent with the amount of time facilitators spend volunteering on the project – with some people spending a lot of time disseminating information and others less so – again, which in the context of the program, has to be seen to be fine.

How helpful the HUFF program was in encouraging neighbours to prepare for fires had very diverse responses, with some facilitators feeling very positive about their levels of preparation – feeling satisfaction about being able to 'pass on regular information from reliable sources and ensure vulnerable people got the support they needed and others feeling that 'most neighbours are not interested in any preparations until they see smoke'. It also sounded as if some community members felt more certain about their capacity to stay and be able to respond effectively to some bushfire-related events, and those that realised that they were better off relocating to a safer place elsewhere earlier if there were warnings of dangerous fire events.

HUFF's capacity to facilitate neighbourhood connections between Facilitators and their community in general also had diverse responses, with some Facilitators viewing the opportunity to connect with others due to their HUFF role had been a highly positive experience, with many more connections made than they had previously experienced. Some Facilitators noted that their neighbourhood was fairly well connected regardless, with others not seeing any noticeable difference. Facilitator's that held regular morning teas or a larger event like a Christmas party were among those who noted increased connectivity.

Community feelings towards the HUFF program were also reported as being highly diverse, with some Facilitators noting that there was a general ambivalence or 'polite interest if not enthusiasm.' Others reported mixed reactions, with some Facilitator's feeling that their neighbours are 'too busy to think about it' (bushfire preparation) and others who do not wish to give their email addresses, making it more difficult to share information. It was generally agreed that once a fire had occurred, there was more interest as there appeared to be a much greater understanding of the need and motivation to be prepared.

The most useful ways of connecting as a HUFF Facilitator varied between volunteers, depending on their style of connection – whether it be a 'hands off' or a more 'hands on' type of engagement. People have tried the following: letterbox drops with introductory emails, getting to know neighbours by door-knocking, passing on the latest HUFF newsletter (either via email or a paper copy in the letterbox), by having regular get-togethers, by calling in on new neighbours when they move into the street and introducing themselves, sharing information and apps such as Fires Near Me.

HUFF is for general emergencies as well as bushfires. As mentioned earlier in this paper, Blackheath and its surrounding villages have been impacted by wind storms and heavy snow falls, with all the accompanying issues that these bring: lack of power, phone lines damaged, streets blocked etc. The arrival of Covid-19 has been an entirely new and unfamiliar experience. Most facilitators had little to say about their engagement of their community during the pandemic - the need to socially distance being key, but also the frequently changing/ updating of information that was disseminated by government officials was generally deemed as being more appropriate and accurate than information that could be shared by local groups and agencies.

Overall, the favourite part of being a HUFF facilitator was identified as getting to know neighbours better and forming deeper connections in the street where people live. One Facilitator said that 'HUFF has helped me feel part of the small neighbourhood I moved into a few years ago. I have met other facilitators which has been nice. I can say hi to my neighbours by name when I see them. My neighbours know they can come to me when they need help, for example, one very quiet neighbour knocked on my door and asked for help when she locked herself out of her house. It was good to know she felt she could approach me. I think she approached me because of my HUFF connection.'

What Facilitators identified as being the most challenging of the program overall was doing the initial door knocking at homes to people that they had not yet met. Perceived apathy from some neighbours was also found to be a challenge. There were concerns about trying to connect with vulnerable people who are not interested in engaging, or when the role as facilitator is misunderstood. Empty houses and holiday lets were also viewed with a degree of frustration, as people were not there to connect with, and unprepared properties leave other parts of the street more vulnerable.

Community Participants:

Community Participants were asked the following questions:

- How did you find out about the HUFF program?
- What parts, if any, of the HUFF program do you find helpful?
- What HUFF communication methods do you find the most effective?
- Does the HUFF program affect how connected you feel to people in your street?
- Is there anything about the HUFF program you would like to change?
- Is there anything about the HUFF program that you found confusing?
- Is there anything you would like to add?

There were a variety of ways that CP found out about the HUFF program. This included directly from their local Facilitator, from the RFS (sometimes during 'Get Ready' events), from BANC, as well as from their neighbours. Some people became aware of the program from a local Facilitator holding an afternoon tea!

Most Recipients regarded the HUFF program as being incredibly useful thus far, with a couple of exceptions who did not find it useful at all.

People who were having their first experience of bushfires found that their HUFF Facilitator was a good source of knowledge. One Recipient responded that their Facilitator was 'excellent in disseminating information to us...' and 'would update us regularly if there was any change in circumstances. This provided a rational and well informed environment allowing me to make decisions that were appropriate to me.' Another CP when asked which part of HUFF they found useful responded with: 'Everything! I had moved from an area that was not affected by bushfires, consequently I really had no knowledge of what to do, what to be aware of or where to go in the event of a bushfire. I found the information given to me by my facilitator very informative & precise. This information helped me to decide when to evacuate & when to return.' Other CP's found that during the 2019/2020 fires, their co-ordinator was able to update them regularly and reliable with accurate information. Others found that the information they were provided with gave them confidence about making decisions about when to stay or leave their homes.

When asked to identify which method of communication CP's preferred, most identified emails and/or newsletters, with some preferring texts. Emails could be an issue if the electricity service has cut out. Some CP's identified that face-to-face communication at times was the most pragmatic.

There were a wide range of responses when asked if the HUFF program affects how connected CP's feel to other people in their street. Responses were mostly positive, with some suggesting that HUFF was the main reason that many of the neighbours had connected in the first instance, with others finding the HUFF program made little or no difference to the levels of connection – usually because they were already as well-connected, or as well-connected as they wanted to be.

There was plenty of useful and varied feedback about potential changes that could be used to enhance the HUFF program. Suggestions included finding ways of getting people more prepared for fires, some training to help people keep calm during fire emergencies and having greater clarity over the HUFF facilitator role to the wider community.

When asked if there is anything that people found confusing about the HUFF program, most people answered 'no' but there did appear to be a lack of clarity about certain things, which are: the existence of the safer place (at the moment, in Blackheath, this is the Oval which is fine as a place of absolute last resort, but is an open space which is constantly smoky when fires are ongoing), what

kind of information can residents expect during fire events, which messages should be followed in emergencies (concerns over mixed and unclear messaging from social media sites, HUFF and fire authorities came up a few times in the research).

Final comments offered as feedback include that: 'it makes people feel more secure,' that 'it is a wonderful service,' 'needs a planning revamp,' there needs to be more clarity of the program for the community is needed so that they understand that HUFF facilitators are not necessarily going to stay until the last minute, and that the program is only as good as the Facilitator's in the street.

Areas for improvement:

It is important to be clear that the Facilitators are not there as quasi-Police, to report on neighbours if they are 'doing the wrong thing' (having open fires in the garden in winter, for example), and that if the facilitators' preferred choice during bushfires is to leave the area, then that is entirely their prerogative. It is also important for Facilitator's to know that if their neighbours do not wish to engage with the HUFF program, that it is the latter's choice and that this does not mean that the Facilitator has failed in any way. Essentially, there is not really a right or wrong way to be a Facilitator, and we are very grateful for the contribution that each of them makes.

With the information above in mind, and after 10 years of community practice and wisdom provided by our community, here are some of the suggestions as to how to develop the HUFF concept further.

- Clear messaging in general for the HUFF program. What HUFF is and what it is not.
- A need to have clearer guidelines for the Facilitator role for the community/Recipients – What HUFF facilitators are able/ not able to do. For example, emphasising that Facilitators are not required to remain during bushfires if they do not wish to do so. The challenge here for the HUFF co-ordinator to be aware of is how to give Facilitator's general parameters of the program, and enough freedom to do the role in a way that suits them. It could be that Facilitator's need to be very explicit about what they are and are not able to do in the initial contact/ letterbox drop, rather than enquiring as to what the Community Participant might be interested in.
- Focusing attention on preparation before bushfires, rather than focusing on when the fires arrive.
- Training in mental health for Facilitator's
- Creating letterbox info with a selection of tick boxes asking what it is that people would like.
- More regular facilitator meetings and discussions and tool kits for houses in an area with targeted info.
- Thinking through a solution to working with rental properties, especially holiday lets.
- BANC to support streets to hold gatherings. This could be a really helpful for BANC to co-facilitate community connection and information about the HUFF program.
- HUFF promotion in the community. Needs food, bands and flyers. Get Ready Event and Rhodo stalls.
- Incentives to run events/ volunteer as Facilitators
- Newsletter for specific events/ times of the year

References:

HUFF Facilitator's Manual (2021). Blackheath Area Neighbourhood Centre.

Heads Up For Fire Report (2015). Blackheath Area Neighbourhood Centre, prepared by Dr Sarah Redshaw.