

# Listening to the experts: The power of lived experience in leading community initiatives

## A peer-led model for disaster resilience on the Sunshine Coast

### Project Overview

The Peer Leadership to Support Disaster Resilience Project emerged from hearing stories from people experiencing homelessness about their unique challenges during extreme weather events and how these are often overlooked in disaster planning. To address this gap, Caloundra Community Centre initiated a project aimed at understanding the resilience and resourcefulness of people without a home and encouraging more inclusive disaster resilience planning.

The project showcases community-led practice in action and involves people with lived experience of homelessness taking on leadership roles, conducting research and guiding the project, ensuring that those most affected are at the forefront of finding the solutions.

What sets the project apart is its peer-led approach. Peer leaders were local people with lived or living experience of homelessness. They were invited into the peer leader role based on their local knowledge, community connections and longstanding relationships with the Caloundra Community Centre and its staff.

### Key Steps in the Process

1. Building relationships and trust through multiple conversations, including curious questioning, over time
2. Sharing information about the project and its purpose, and then inviting people to participate in an interview
3. Conducting interviews in various accessible locations, often where supports were being

offered such as community meals

4. Sharing of relevant disaster resilience information in conversations
5. Collating and interpreting findings to identify emerging themes and patterns
6. Conducting an analysis to identify some of the main barriers to access and participation
7. Intentionally forming partnerships with other organisations and groups that align with the project
8. Sharing results with local government and other stakeholders.

### Key Outcomes

Outcomes of the project include:

- Increased understanding of the impact of weather-related disaster events on the homeless community
- More inclusive disaster management planning across the Sunshine Coast
- Providing disaster preparedness information and resources to the homeless community through peer leaders
- Project documented in infographic and research report
- Relationship with local government has led to one of the peer leaders becoming involved in several opportunities including Street Up (a collaborative and inclusive initiative foregrounding the voice of people with living/lived experience in responses and solutions to homelessness)

## Community-Led Considerations

The success of the Peer Leadership to Support Disaster Resilience Project is grounded in its community-led approach. Key aspects of this include:

**Encouraging community members to lead the project** rather than workers implementing solutions for them.

**Recognising the importance of building relationships** and valuing your investment of time and resources to do this.

**Positioning those with lived experience of homelessness as leaders and researchers** in the project and valuing their expertise.

Conducting interviews and sharing information in **places where people regularly access and feel comfortable**, such as at community meals.

**Creating opportunities for people with living/lived experience** to mentor and support others in community.

**Encouraging the development of new skills** among people with living/lived experience, such as research and public speaking, enhancing personal confidence and knowledge, and community capacity.

**Adapting the project's approach when needed**, based on community feedback and changing needs.

**Using a strengths-based approach** that focuses on the resilience of people experiencing homelessness, rather than solely on challenges.

Engaging a community-led approach enabled the project to be more responsive to the experiences, challenges and capacities of people without a home during disasters. It also highlighted the importance of meaningfully including people with living/lived experience in generating solutions to issues that affect them. A community-led approach can bring value to a range of collective action projects across a diversity of communities.

## Key Learnings

- The power of meaningfully including people with living/lived experience in leading community initiatives – they are the holders of valuable knowledge, perspectives, connections and skills.
- Very important to value investing in developing relationships with people as it takes time to build trust
- Shared experiences contribute to building bonds – this is an important aspect as it facilitates understanding, empathy and trust (hence, the value of people with living/lived experience guiding and leading interactions)
- It's helpful to be flexible and responsive in terms of your time and your hopes for interactions, to be able to go at the pace of the person and meet them where they are at in their capacity
- The value of collaboration with diverse groups and organisations – this builds resilience and capacity of the project, people and organisations. It can also provide space for new opportunities to emerge

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This case study supports the delivery of the *Queensland Neighbourhood Centres Strategy for Disaster Resilience 2023-2026*. The full strategy is available for download from the NCQ website: [ncq.org.au](http://ncq.org.au)

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Australian Government



Queensland Government



Neighbourhood Centres Queensland acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional custodians of Country; we pay our respects to their Elders, Ancestors, land and seas. Sovereignty has never been ceded. It always was and always will be, Aboriginal land.