



EDITORIAL FEATURE

Delivering hope

Meals on Wheels services across the nation stepped up to the plate during bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic

MARGARET opens her door and peeks beyond its wooden edge. A woman in a high-vis vest stands on the opposite side. “Meals on Wheels,” she calls out in a singsong voice. A smile widens on Margaret’s face as she recognises the familiar voice. “Oh, hello,” she exclaims, overjoyed. Julie is the first person Margaret has seen all day. She lifts the lock on the screen door and allows Julie to step inside, her stomach rumbling at the sight of the basket stacked with meals in individual serves. “How have you been darlin’?” Julie asks as she sets her basket down on the round dining room table.

The last 12 months has been one of the most turbulent and challenging on record. Faced with devastating bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian community has swiftly learnt that in the face of adversity, the most important thing is to look out for one another.

Over the last year, Meals on Wheels services across the country, particularly in Tasmania and New South Wales rose to the occasion to continue delivering nutritious meals, human connection and a sense of hope to vulnerable members of the community, when it was needed most. The iconic organisation ensured no one in these affected communities went hungry, from valued clients experiencing social isolation, to exhausted firefighters and families who fled their homes to evacuation centres.

Despite the devastating impact on livelihoods and the challenging road to recovery ahead, we recognised an unwavering feeling of community, comradeship, resilience and an essential service, fuelled by true Australian spirit.

FEEDING THE NSW COMMUNITY

As smoke billowed across New South Wales in November, we watched as communities on the south coast were engulfed by a raging inferno. These bushfires soon became the most devastating in the state’s history, fraught with images none of us will soon forget; injured and deceased native wildlife, properties destroyed, firefighters battling against towering firewalls, families fleeing by boat due to road closures in and out of towns and vibrant vegetation turned charred and lifeless.

With power outages, downed phone lines and both the Kings and Northern Highways blocked for six weeks, Eurobodalla Meals on Wheels Eurobodalla stepped up to the plate to ensure its 180 vulnerable customers clients who receive delivered meals and social support were kept well-nourished and safe.

Constant power outages which impacted business right through to Australia Day, meant the service extended its food service provision to the evacuation centre at Hanging Rock, the hospital and the rural fire service, while committed and resilient volunteers continued to deliver meals to ~~customers~~ ~~clients~~. ~~Placing Into a freezer placed~~ outside the local Harvey Norman centre, Eurobodalla Meals on Wheels Eurobodalla placed meals stocked it full before retail staff assisted in handing out nutritious meals to the community. The distribution of meals to keep the locals nourished at a time of immediate crisis was truly a community effort.

Manager of Eurobodalla Meals on Wheels Eurobodalla, Alan Russell says the fires took a major toll on the community and caused great concern for its vulnerable members.

"After visiting customers [following a meal delivery], we a pair of volunteers got in the car and saw flames jumping through the trees... there were some very harrowing scenes."

He explains the incredible selflessness of the volunteers, who did whatever they could to continue supporting those in their community, with many volunteering for the rural fire service as well.

"There were a couple of our volunteers who lost their homes while fighting bushfires, so we tried to keep in touch with them and if they needed anything we were able to supply it."

"Incredibly, they were more concerned about our ~~customers~~ ~~clients~~ and how they could help them."

With the situation changing each day, Eurobodalla Meals on Wheels Eurobodalla's office even housed staff members whose homes were under threat, for a period of time.

One of those staff members was Client Services Officer, Bethany McLean who stayed at the office with her children for 15 nights in January. She says the facilities and teams who received the donated meals were grateful but understandably overwhelmed.

"It was a really fine balance between trying to get the meals to people but not overwhelming the services with the volume of food we had."

"While we had enough meals and the capacity to support our ~~customers~~ ~~clients~~ we donated about \$8,000 worth of stock to support those in evacuation centres and in hospitals, as well as our exhausted firefighters on the frontline...donating our meals was a no-brainer."

Mrs McLean says at such an incredibly stressful time, the Eurobodalla volunteers also expressed concern for their much-loved ~~customers~~ ~~clients~~.

"I found the ~~customers~~ ~~clients~~ to be very resilient and understanding of the situation. They had lots of family and neighbours supporting them which was amazing."

"However, it was difficult calling the volunteers as they were going through a lot of it themselves and were also worried about the ~~customers~~ ~~clients~~. Within every conversation we had, our volunteers had a story to tell."

Mrs McLean says the bushfires have taught volunteers to support one another in times of crisis.

"The community definitely rallied around its older people during the bushfires. It was really nice being able to call the volunteers clients and knowing that if they don't have family and that hearing their neighbours have kept were keeping their eyes out for them."

STEPPING UP TO THE PLATE IN TASMANIA

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit earlier this year, Australians were faced with an unprecedented situation; empty supermarket shelves, an immediate shift in working arrangements, social distancing recommendations and an overwhelming feeling of uncertainty.

While many lost their jobs or were faced with reduced incomes, Meals on Wheels services across the country reported a significant increase in demand for meals, as more Australians experienced food insecurity than ever before. This was also met with a reduced volunteer workforce, as an overwhelming majority of their volunteers fell into the vulnerable age category and were recommended to self-isolate.

In Tasmania, a COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent lockdown of the North West Regional and North West Private Hospitals meant Meals on Wheels (trading under the Australian Red Cross) servicing the Burnie and Somerset region lost their fresh meal supplier with 24 hours notice. But with some quick-thinking staff and volunteers, as well as the support of local Councils and businesses, the show went on!

Having rapidly switched to stockpiled frozen meals, Regional Manager, Barb Hill says the Launceston City, Northern Midlands and Burnie City Councils, as well as the Royal Automotive Club of Tasmania stepped forward at a crucial time, ensuring there were enough hands on-board to continue delivering these meals to vulnerable Tasmanians five days a week.

Mrs Hill says the COVID-19 pandemic and Meals on Wheels' subsequent response highlighted the incredible strength of the Tasmanian community.

"It demonstrated the true colours of our community and how everyone pulls together to make it happen."

"The volunteers are always happy to jump in and help whenever and it highlighted that local councils and businesses are here to help when needed. The fact that we didn't approach them and instead they came forward asking what they can do to help ... we are very thankful for that."

"Without their support, the service would have scaled back considerably, denying those most vulnerable the essential connection that Meals on Wheels provides."

Rebecca Free, Chief Executive Officer of Meals on Wheels Tasmania says the biggest issue was the impact on multiple branches in the North-West Coast region and the large proportion of volunteers in the vulnerable age category.

“Our main concern was the loss of volunteers and also the increased needs of our clients. Once access to food became difficult, especially with communities in lockdown, numbers of new clients increased and numbers of days existing clients were receiving meals also increased.”

Ms Free is incredibly grateful for the existing volunteers who went above and beyond to ensure the continual delivery of meals while protecting the health and safety of older volunteers.

“We could not be more thankful and we are very grateful that we were able to continue to do what we did. Without those volunteers, we wouldn’t have been able to continue serving those regions without any changes to service delivery.”

“We’ve faced a lot of challenges over our time and I think, given the team we have on the ground that all pull through at such a critical time, I feel we are prepared if anything like this was to happen again,” she explains.

“Our biggest concern over that period was making sure our clients, volunteers and staff were okay. I think the fact they did such an amazing job on the North Coast is a full testament of how strong an organisation we are.”

Ms Free says the pandemic demonstrated the true support backing the iconic organisation and ensured both the capacity and confidence to continue to deliver.

“[It really highlighted] the fact that we do have people who are willing to assist in a really difficult time, that we have close connections within the community, such as Volunteering Tasmania.”

“Our suppliers really stepped up to the mark and we know we can rely on them in the future.”

Ms Free also describes the support from corporate organisations as ‘wonderful’, having received a donation of antibacterial products from Reckitt Benckiser and toilet paper from Woolworths.

“Even something as simple as toilet rolls, we would get handwritten letters from our customers saying it actually means the world that others are thinking of us.”

“They’re filled with gratitude when they receive something as simple as a can of Glen 20.”

As well as the delivered meals and generous donations from corporate supporters, wellbeing checks undertaken via telephone ensured a connection to the community was maintained.

“It became more than Meals on Wheels, it was more about their connection to the outside world and knowing someone cared enough to give them a call to see how they were travelling was so important to them,” Ms Free explains.

Volunteer, Jacky Segger was providing social connection to a number of older Tasmanians living in supported accommodation or residential care, when COVID-19 impacted her usual volunteering duties. Eager to continue supporting her community, Jacky approached the Red Cross to ask if there were other ways she could help, when she was directed to delivering meals.

“The people you see are absolutely beautiful. A lot of them are just so glad to see people. If I had time I’d sit down all day and have a cuppa with them.”

“A lot who have meals delivered are by themselves and might not see people so seeing the smiles on their faces is just lovely.”

“Every single person you go and visit is grateful that you’ve gone there.”

Jacky has found the experience so rewarding, she has decided to continue delivering meals within her community.

Meals on Wheels services represent a significant and essential piece of social infrastructure, providing front-line, early intervention and prevention in the home, reducing the malnutrition risk faced by 1.2 million older Australians and social isolation risk to one in four who live alone.

When older people were at their most vulnerable, Meals on Wheels mattered more than ever.

Over the last year, at these times of such uncertainty, the importance of community becomes undeniably apparent.

The heartwarming stories of goodwill and comradeship that continue to come out of local services are a testament to Meals on Wheels and its committed volunteer workforce, who go above and beyond, every day. Their dedication ensures the continual delivery of well-nourished and connected communities and supports an iconic organisation built strongly on the foundations of true, Australian values.