

Background

There are people in the Victorian community who require 24-hour care to survive and manage a physical illness or a condition. Toni is one of those people and she would say she is “broken”. In fact, she has Multiple Sclerosis or MS as it is commonly referred to, which is a condition of the central nervous system. It interferes with nerve impulses within the brain, spinal cord and optic nerves. MS is different for each person with the condition and for many it can be managed with medication and lifestyle leading to an almost normal life expectancy. For other people, it can become debilitating leaving them unable to manage without 24-hour care. This is the situation that Toni has found herself in, even though her mind and cognitive function is fine, her body is not, and it is challenging in many ways, including planning for bushfire.

The bushfire risk

Toni lives by herself in regional Victoria on the outskirts of a small country town an hour and a half north of Melbourne. She lives on a 10-acre property where there is a risk of grassfire and bushfire. And like many people who live in Victoria, Toni is concerned about the bushfire risk. But what does it mean for someone in Toni’s situation to plan to leave early, or to try and leave when there is a bushfire close by.

The situation for Toni

Toni has complete control over her NDIS (National Disability Insurance Scheme) package and in determining who cares for her. At the moment Toni has 24-hour care with two people each shift. This is because it takes two people to lift and manoeuvre her as required. The carers and other support staff working for Toni are not necessarily agency based, some are self-employed and do not work for a particular organisation. Toni does not have her own car that can transport her in her current state; modified cars that can transport her are very expensive and can be difficult to find. Special transportation, such as an ambulance or a specially equipped van with a hoist needs to be organised if she is to be relocated.

For Toni to evacuate, it is not an easy process. It certainly requires a far deeper level of planning to ensure she stays safe and her carers stay safe.

It is a frightening situation to be in, to be completely aware of your surroundings, aware of your risk, but unable to physically do anything about it.

“I am frightened as I know that in the event of impending or emergency fire, the fire brigade cannot be expected to help me to a safe location. Nor can my support workers. Thus, I am left in a perilous situation.”

The carers live locally, and therefore have their own properties and families to prepare and may not be available to assist Toni in the event of a fire.

Fire Prevention and Preparedness

Attempt One - Bushfire Planning

In 2018 Toni had considered the complexity of her situation as had one of her carers, and following CFA's advice they began to look locally for places Toni could go on an Extreme or Code Red day. They wanted to be able to find a place to relocate if there was a fire. They contacted the local shopping centre but unfortunately, they said they did not want to be responsible for Toni's hoist and other equipment.

Toni has also been unable to secure suitable transport. Toni requires an accessible vehicle, and these can be expensive and difficult to source. Cars are an everyday living expense and therefore are not funded specifically with NDIS funding. Without a car, the chance of organising suitable transport for Toni at short notice is slim. The local council only have one accessible vehicle and there are no accessible taxi's in her area. Although a community run transport group is looking into it, finding suitable transport for Toni is a serious barrier to her relocating on a high-risk day. So, Toni came up with alternative plans:

- Stay in the pantry, and hope for the best
- Contact a friend up the road who has a horse float who could transport her, with wheelchair and hoist, to another location

Toni realised the limitations of these plans and contacted CFA in September 2018 to see what help was available to better prepare for the upcoming fire season.

Attempt Two – Bushfire Planning with CFA

CFA's Community Engagement team contacted Toni after her initial letter to CFA to try and determine how best we could help her prepare for bushfire. One solution was to provide CFA's Property Advice Visit Service (PAVS) using a local, experienced staff member on a day when Toni's carer responsible for property maintenance would be on site to discuss the recommendations. On the 11th of November 2018 the property visit went ahead. Several recommendations to improve bushfire preparedness were provided and the main topics discussed were:

- Vegetation Management
- Access and Egress
- Water Supply
- Warnings and Advice

After the PAVs visit several preparedness measures were put into place, such as relocating some hay bales and removing and reducing other flammable materials from around the house.

The result was that Toni's property can be managed in a way to greatly reduce the risk of grassfire or bushfire impacting her and the carers on site.

Fire Prevention and Preparedness

But what about relocating Toni?

CFA's advice for all Victorians living in high risk bushfire areas on Code Red and Extreme rated days is to leave early before a fire starts and relocate to a safer area. It is based on the premise of relocation which carries with it the assumption that individual residents have the means to relocate and the transport to do so.

In discussions with Toni and her carers it is now understood that moving her on a high-risk bushfire day actually carries a fair amount of risk for Toni's health. There is a need to determine whether the risk to someone's health outweighs the risk a bushfire poses. Considering moving someone with significant care infrastructure and personnel attached can be far riskier. Without a specialised vehicle it is certainly very difficult. Therefore, without a viable relocation option, the best option for Toni is to create the most prepared and bushfire ready property possible.

Some people may suggest that Toni should move and live somewhere else that has little or no risk of bushfire however; Toni's home has been modified at considerable expense to allow her to stay in it and she does not want to move.

"This is my home, this is where all my memories are, and those memories are precious"

Moving may be an option for some people but is by no means the answer for everyone who has a debilitating condition like MS.

Bushfire Safety for Carers

CFA does have a Bushfire Safety for Workers online module and face-to-face session that are designed to provide life-saving advice for people working in high risk bushfire areas. It is recommended that each of the carers working for Toni complete the module as part of their employment contract with her. In this situation it is important to consider the bushfire safety of the carers at the property and how they can remain safe on site and on the road over summer. And although CFA recommends that no-one be on the road driving to, and staying in high risk locations on Code Red Days, the reality for Toni and many others across Victoria is they will have carers doing just that.

Unless there is a safe place to relocate Toni to and a safe way to transport her, she will need to remain at her property over summer. And as a result, will have carers onsite to help her 24 hours a day. Toni's situation is not unique, and to assume that all people can be moved or relocated on high risk days has proven in this case, very challenging. CFA can however, play an active role providing fire safety advice to ensure people have very well-prepared properties. In addition, CFA can advocate for better options for transport and relocation centres during emergencies for people with certain medical conditions and both physical and cognitive limitations. As Toni points out not all Relief Centres opened during a fire are accessible for people in wheelchairs or have accessible bathrooms.

Fire Prevention and Preparedness

The Vulnerable Persons Register

The State of Victoria has a Vulnerable Persons Register (VPR), included as part of the Vulnerable Person's in Emergencies Policy (2018) which was a response to a recommendation in the Bushfires Royal Commission in 2009. The VPR has very strict inclusion criteria, but once listed the person's details can be accessed by Victoria Police to potentially aid in evacuation. In Toni's case this would not be possible without the right vehicle and equipment to move her. However, being placed on the register does give another avenue for people like Toni to highlight their dependencies on others and their need for help in an emergency. Placing Toni on the VPR is indeed recommended but by no means provides a solution to her situation over summer.

In Summary

People unable to respond in an emergency will be living in areas prone to disaster. They will be in their own home, utilising in-home care, and we need to understand that this will be a growing issue across the State. And although carers and individuals are doing their best to relocate people on high risk days, it is likely this will not be possible in all situations as highlighted by this case study.

CFA can help provide fire safety advice to improve property preparedness for bushfire for people who may be unable to leave their homes due to physical or cognitive limitations and conditions. However, it is still up to the property owner and manager to put these measures in place and keep them in place. In Toni's case she has implemented the recommendations of CFA which in turn alleviated some of the fear Toni felt over summer.

CFA also has a specially designed program aimed at educating carers about bushfire safety, although this is up to individuals and care agencies to adopt, and is not compulsory training for NDIS agencies. Advocating for greater uptake of this program and a greater focus on emergency planning is something CFA should strongly support.

Overall, it is important to share stories, like Toni's to ensure we, the emergency services are not making assumptions about people's capacity and that we are aware of the circumstances of some people when developing fire safety programs and policies for all Victorians.