Using program theory in evaluating bushfire community safety programs

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Chapter summary

There is an ever-increasing need for evidenced-based practice in all aspects of emergency management, and bushfire community safety programs are no exception. Over the past few years the value of programs that increase awareness and preparedness among communities in high bushfire risk areas has risen dramatically. There is now a wide range of programs run by agencies across Australia and the evidence suggests these are diversifying and occurring in greater numbers each year. To date, information about whether these programs are really working has been largely anecdotal and success has quite often been determined by quantity, i.e. how many community meetings have been run, rather than a deeper understanding of how a program works and whether it is achieving its intended outcomes. The net result can be evaluations that only measure simple outputs rather than exploring more complex outcomes.

This chapter describes the use of a program theory approach to evaluating complex multi-site programs, based around a workshop or interview methodology. The rationale behind the approach, the process of developing a program theory matrix and relevant case studies help to illustrate how it can be extremely worthwhile in determining what programs work, for whom and in what contexts. It provides a deeper understanding of what can be expected from a program, and more reliable information on which to base decisions about how best to allocate community safety resources for bushfire.

Introduction

Programs are interventions intended to bring about change in a social condition or issue. Where there is an unmet need among a group of people, or another social problem that a community wants addressed, organisations often initiate programs that involve activities and the allocation of resources that are intended to address the need or ameliorate the problem.

In developing such programs, the question of whether the program will actually address the need or problem often receives less attention than a range of other personal, organisational and situational factors. There is a diverse range of circumstances that can influence the development of programs. For example, competition among organisations for funding and recognition, the enthusiasm of an individual overriding the planning and development of initiatives, or time and cost pressures. Programs can also become entrenched as 'part of the way we do business' and continue without appropriate review and revision to take account of new or emerging circumstances. The rapidly changing context in which organisations operate can also make it difficult to develop effective programs in response. If these circumstances alone drive program development, there is a risk that programs may be ineffective or unsustainable. However,