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Minister for Ageing

THE HON BILL SHORTEN

Parliamentary Secretary for Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction

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Bushfire and Flood Safety Planning For Aged Care Homes

All Australian nursing homes applying for new Federal Government-funded aged care places will be required to demonstrate that they have taken into consideration natural disaster threats such as bushfires and floods.

The Minister for Ageing, Mrs Justine Elliot and the Parliamentary Secretary for Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction, Mr Bill Shorten today announced the details.

Details will also be discussed at the next meeting of the Ageing Consultative Committee which comprises the aged care sector, unions and various consumer representatives.

Each year, the Australian Government allocates aged care homes across the country with thousands of bed licences through an independent process known as the Aged Care Approval Round (ACAR).

The new requirement would be part of the ACAR application process, would apply to the next round – the 2009-10 ACAR. The 2008-09 application process closed December 19.

The Australian Government decided to take this approach rather than add another layer of red tape and avoiding incurring extra costs for aged care providers.

The new ACAR natural disaster requirements would complement existing State, Territory and local government planning requirements and emergency management plans by requiring an approved provider to stipulate these requirements have been met.

“While there was no loss of life at the aged care homes during the recent bushfires in Victoria or floods in Queensland, a number of facilities had to be evacuated,” Mrs Elliot said.

“Continuing to care for and evacuating older frail people from nursing homes during a time of disaster can be very challenging and - at times – dangerous for them, especially high care residents.

The Australian Government’s certification requirements and accreditation standards administered by the Aged Care Standards and Accreditation Agency require aged care homes to have evacuation plans in place, but there is scope for improvement to take into account emergencies which are widespread and prolonged.

In particular, aged care facilities need to establish and maintain emergency management plans which are linked into the planning of relevant state and local government authorities. They have primary responsibility for the protection of life, property and the environment.

In addition, the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing would work with relevant state and territory agencies on a communication plan – for existing nursing homes and hostels – to reinforce the need for proactive relationships with these authorities.

Mr Shorten said: "Knowing that natural disaster planning has been factored into the building development process could save lives one day."

The existing requirements relevant to bushfires and other natural disaster safety are considered during the Development Application process.

Over the next three years, the Rudd Labor Government is creating more than 37,000 new aged care places for allocation through the ACAR, the Zero Real Interest Loans initiative and related processes. This builds on the 221,144 aged care beds and community care places already operational.

The Victorian bushfires and the northern Queensland floods have highlighted the potential for natural disasters to affect aged care residents.

Currently, there are some 2.8 million Australians – about 13 per cent of the population – aged 65 and over. This number is expected to triple in 40 years.

In addition, over the next four years, funding for aged and community care will reach record levels of more than \$41 billion -- with \$29.4 billion of that on residential aged care alone.

The Australian Government would be providing an average of \$43,000 for every aged care home resident per year. In addition, the average amount a resident contributes is \$20,000 a year. (However, the Federal Government pays for those who are unable to do so).

There are 2,830 nursing homes and hostels in Australia; of which 890 are in NSW; 480 in Queensland and 785 in Victoria.

For more information, contact Mrs Elliot's office on (02) 6277 7280