



Guaranteeing Medicare – Response to 2022 East Coast Floods

The Australian Government will invest more than \$35.9 million to support Australians impacted by the recent flood emergency in New South Wales and Queensland, with critical mental health and primary care services.

This emergency investment supports the Government’s approximately \$1 billion flood response, which has been led by the Australian Government National Recovery and Resilience Agency. It will ensure immediate and longer-term services are available for individuals, families, and communities impacted by the disaster and to support communities as they recover and build resilience for the future.

Residents in disaster hit areas, such as the NSW and Queensland coastal regions experiencing flooding in March 2022, will have unrestricted access to GP telehealth to minimise the disruption to their essential care.

This has been put in place through changes to Medical Benefits Schedule (MBS) telehealth arrangements, enabling any GP or Other Medical Practitioner (OMPs) to provide healthcare to patients affected by natural disasters.

More than \$4.7 million over two years will ensure continuity of primary health care services for flood-affected Australians. This will guarantee the delivery of primary care services on the ground immediately in disaster affected areas and are engaged in locally-focused emergency preparedness, response and coordination.

The Australian Government’s primary health care investment also includes:

- \$2.4 million over two years for primary health care emergency response teams in 8 Primary Health Networks (PHNs) in the flood-impacted regions to ensure urgent access to health services
- \$730,000 over six months to employ locums in the Lismore region to provide relief for local GPs and ensure ongoing access to primary health care, creating a temporary surge workforce to meet the current emergency need, and a longer term capacity if local practices remain closed for an extended period
- \$1.5 million to immediately establish shared temporary business premises in or near Lismore for displaced local primary health care providers, including

general practitioners, pharmacists, allied health providers, mental health service providers and dentists, for timely emergency medical assistance, and

The Australian Government's is also providing \$31.2 million towards mental health services and support in flood impacted areas including:

- \$16.6 million to support local mental health services to ensure immediate psychological needs of communities can be met, including:
 - \$13.5 million to fund psychological therapies delivered by local service providers to meet current demand
 - \$2.4 million for local Aboriginal community controlled health organisations to deliver culturally appropriate, locally-designed mental health services in impacted communities
 - \$200,000 to support the Queensland Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma (QPASTT) to boost psychological support for current clients impacted by the floods, and
 - \$500,000 to ensure the Australian Psychological Society can continue to deploy its Disaster Response Network of over 500 trauma-trained psychologists.
- \$9 million to support the mental health of children and young people, including:
 - \$4.5 million to fund headspace services currently impacted by the floods, including funding to rebuild or relocate headspace Lismore and provide outreach services to Ballina and surrounding regions, and
 - \$4.5 million to provide dedicated services to impacted children and young people, with a focus on working through school communities, provided by Royal Far West.
- \$1.2 million to accelerate the establishment of a Head to Health centre in Lismore, with a particular focus on trauma recovery and PTSD treatment
- \$3 million towards Wellbeing and Resilience Grants that allow communities the opportunity to design their own response to address the losses, anxiety and distress they have experienced, and actively participate in their recovery.

Where appropriate, services will be commissioned through local PHNs to ensure services meet local needs.

This investment will maximise recovery and resilience through community-led activities, identify those whose mental health is a risk and encourage them to seek help when they need it. They will be connected with the full range of mental health support available through targeted communications and local supports.

Why is this important?

It is critical that we deliver a coordinated primary health care response to national emergencies, to reduce pressure on the acute sector and ensure an organised and effective response.

Amendments to MBS telehealth items for disaster affected regions will ensure that essential care can continue even in the event of a natural disaster, such as the east coast floods of March 2022. This will mean any GP or OMP can provide healthcare to patients affected by natural disasters, when their regular clinician may be unavailable because of the disaster.

The Government's plan for dedicated localised emergency preparedness teams and other disaster support will safeguard communities impacted by disasters, with a strong on-the-ground presence, a principle of data-driven local-led recovery and delivering initiatives to lessen the flow-on impacts of future emergencies. This will better integrate the primary care into national emergencies, and strengthen the resilience of communities during and post a public health emergency.

We know that the mental health effects of natural disasters can present themselves over a long period of time, and the people impacted by these floods in NSW and QLD have a long road to recovery ahead.

The Government is ensuring that individuals, families and communities directly impacted by the floods will be able to access immediate and ongoing support to reduce the distress and trauma experienced in the face of these floods.

This commitment aligns with recommendations from the *Royal Commission into National Natural Disasters* to boost mental health supports during and after a disaster, and with the draft *National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework*, to guide how all governments can support people's mental health before, during and after natural disasters.

Who will benefit?

The Government's investment in mental health support will benefit individuals, families and communities in NSW and QLD directly affected by the flood disaster of 2022.

Improving how Australia's permanent telehealth system works for patients living in a disaster zone will ensure the continuity of their care when disaster strikes. Knowing that they can access telehealth with a GP or OMP, when their regular clinician may be unavailable is a tangible benefit and also provides peace-of-mind for people needing ongoing care.

Emergency primary health care funding for flood impacted regions will support all Australians living at risk of being impacted by a disaster or emergency event, flood impacted Primary Health Networks, and all levels of government (Commonwealth, state and territory, local).

How much will this cost?

The Australian Government is investing \$35.9 million over two years, 2021–22 and 2022–23.