

## Submission to the Royal Commission on National Natural Disaster Arrangements

28 April 2020.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit our concerns and recommendations on this topic.

The Australian Breastfeeding Association (ABA) is Australia's leading breastfeeding organisation which provides information and support to mothers and their families, as they require, to enable them to reach their breastfeeding goals.

Natural disasters/emergencies are a frequent occurrence in Australia never more than right now. With the recent long summer of bushfires covering large areas of our country we heard from, and saw on the news, many situation of families being caught out/isolated in environments that were not conducive to the appropriate care of infants and young children.

Babies and young children are a vulnerable population particularly in an emergency. Babies have very specific feeding requirements with regard to the food they require and its timing. They do not have the ability to rely on water like adults. If they are breastfeeding, they need to be with their mother and she will need support and nutrition herself. If they are formula-feeding their parents/carer will need access to clean water, a form of heat/electricity and facilities for preparation and cleaning of bottles and teats or enough for supply of bottles and teats to use a new one for every feed. Australian communities who are preparing to evacuate need timely information of how to prepare for evacuating with a baby or young child.

Breastfeeding women may need skilled support as emergency conditions may affect the behaviour of her baby, leading her or others to think that her breastmilk is inadequate. This is not a good time to be weaning from the breast and commence formula-feeding when access to clean water, electricity and cleaning facilities is at risk.

Given that, in the Australian National Breastfeeding Strategy (2019)<sup>i</sup>, the Australian Government itself states that 'there is currently no standard practice in emergency management planning for the unique needs of children in Australia', we urge this Royal Commission to take heed of the Operational Guidance on Infant and Young Child Feeding in Emergencies (IYCF-E) as Australia is obligated to as a member of the World Health Assembly.<sup>ii</sup>

A recent report by the World Breastfeeding Trends Initiative — Australia (2018)<sup>iii</sup> documented the following gaps in the review of Australia's policies, programming and planning documents:

1. The Australian government has not taken up a leadership role in IYCF-E and no Federal Government agency has taken responsibility for supporting IYCF-E.
2. There is no national emergency management policy on IYCF-E and no national guidance on IYCF-E.
3. In the absence of federal leadership, no agency has a designated responsibility for IYCF-E and IYCF-E emergency planning is absent at state/territory and local government level.
4. Training on IYCF-E exists, but is not readily available to emergency workers or managers.

And the following recommendations which we fully endorse:

1. Federal Department of Health to be designated in the COMDISPLAN as the resource agency providing advice and expertise on IYCF-E.
2. Federal Department of Health to convene and appropriately fund a national advisory committee on IYCF-E with the purpose of incorporating the needs of mothers, infants and young children into emergency management planning at all levels of government, and to ensure that appropriate agencies take responsibility for IYCF-E. This committee must include a broad range of stakeholders from all levels of government, health organisations and emergency management organisations.
3. Indicators related to IYCF-E to be included in the National Breastfeeding Strategy. (Please note the National Breastfeeding Strategy has since been released and a commitment to IYCF-E was included).
4. Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience to produce a Disaster Resilience Handbook on IYCF-E and integrate cross-cutting IYCF-E issues into other Handbooks (eg Disaster Health, Planning for Spontaneous Volunteers, Evacuation Planning).
5. Orientation and training on IYCF-E to be required for Defence personnel involved in emergency management and response.
6. Existing Australian education and training on IYCF-E (eg ABA and National Critical Care and Trauma Centre, Darwin) to be made available to all relevant health and emergency workers.

ABA is a Registered Training Organisation. To address identified deficiencies in previous disaster responses, ABA developed a short course in IYCF-E which is one unit contained in a diploma level course. This course has been validated by industry experts and provides a comprehensive training package for any stakeholders at all levels of service provision.

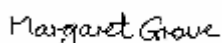
In addition, ABA provides a freely available introductory e-learning module for health professionals on IYCF-E. There is a need to further develop training packages for emergency responders to build on this community initiative.

For further supporting evidence we recommend [Emergency preparedness for infant and young child feeding in emergencies \(IYCF-E\): an Australian audit of emergency plans and guidance](#) by Dr Karleen Gribble et al.

Australian Breastfeeding Association webpage: [Infant feeding in Emergencies](#)

The Australian Breastfeeding Association would be happy to provide further information if needed either verbally or in writing.

Yours sincerely



Margaret Grove  
President  
Australian Breastfeeding Association

---

<sup>i</sup> COAG Health Council Australia. Australian National Breastfeeding Strategy 2019 and beyond. <http://www.coaghealthcouncil.gov.au/Portals/0/Australian%20National%20Breastfeeding%20Strategy%20-%20Final.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> Sixty-Third World Health Assembly. Infant and Young Child Nutrition. *WHA 63.23*. 2010

<sup>iii</sup> World Breastfeeding Trends Initiative. WBTI Australia Report 2018. <https://www.worldbreastfeedingtrends.org/wbti-country-report.php>