



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND COMMUNITY WELLBEING
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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into West Belconnen
supercell thunderstorm

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From: [REDACTED]
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Dear Madam or Sir:

Below, please find my submission to this inquiry:

Name: Brett Baker

Phone number: [REDACTED]

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Regarding communications:

Like many Belconnen households, we lost power during the storm on Monday, 3 January. When we went to bed that night, power was still off, but we had high hopes, based on past outages, that power would be restored sometime during the night. In the meantime, we had been very careful not to open the refrigerator or freezer to try to preserve food.

We were surprised the next morning to still be without power and determined to try to find ice to help us not lose hundreds of dollars' worth of food. (More on that below.) Upon returning, we began the tedious exercise of trying to find information on the EvoEnergy website regarding when power might be restored. At that point, we could find nothing useful. Soon thereafter, EvoEnergy began making posts to social media (shared by at least one ACT Government minister) with information regarding when certain suburbs could expect power to be restored. Time and time again, this information proved to be wildly inaccurate.

I understand that residents need to be prepared for emergencies, but it is impossible to implement a correct emergency plan based on false information. We made decisions based on the expectation that our power would be restored as indicated online. If we had known that we would be without power for nearly four days, we would have made very different decisions. Information from EvoEnergy regarding when power would be restored only became accurate towards the end of the week. This was too late, and it meant that what could have been a manageable situation began to border on crisis.

Beyond inaccurate information online from EvoEnergy, communications to affected

households were woefully inadequate. Providing information online may work for households with power. People in my street were, however, without power for nearly four days, and many of them lost electronic access to information. I know at least one family that drained their car battery trying to keep a mobile charged and then weren't able to travel anywhere.

EvoEnergy was able to give the exact number of households without power each day (after the first couple of days?). That means the location of each affected household was known. Nevertheless, targeted communications (such as a letterbox drop, a public presence in affected streets/neighbourhoods, or doorknocking) never occurred.

The ACT Government eventually opened an 'information hub' (after two days), but by that point, many affected people had no way of knowing about this hub. I shared the information with my neighbours, many of whom are older. In every case, they never would have known if I hadn't told them.

When we went to find ice on Tuesday (acting on false information regarding when power would be restored), we discovered that no business in the Belconnen area had any ice left. We eventually found some at a servo in Braddon (though the first servo we visited was sold out as well). When we returned home, our elderly neighbour was at the bus stop. He told us that he was taking the bus into Belconnen hoping to buy ice. We let him know that there was no ice available in Belconnen and offered to help him get some. This is the kind of information that needed to be shared but wasn't. Someone somewhere needed to be thinking: 'What do people need to know? How will we get the message out to everyone?' I saw no evidence that this was happening at any level of government.

Provision of assistance:

Many of my neighbours expressed that they felt completely abandoned and left to their own devices. This worked out OK for some people but not for everyone. When the information hub in Higgins first opened, it had very few services: ice, charging stations, rubbish disposal. The messaging was clear: there is no food here. Eventually, showers and clothes washing facilities were added, though these should have been available from the beginning. I'm guessing, but I think the assumption was that, because roads were cleared of debris the first day, food was not an issue because people could just hop into their cars (or onto a bus) and get takeaway. This wasn't an option for everyone, however. For example, one of my elderly neighbours couldn't get his car out of his garage, even after we had pulled the lever to allow manual opening of the door. In addition, people who had food couldn't always cook it. I personally made two butane camp stoves available to people who needed to cook at home but couldn't because their cooktops are electric.

I understand that food assistance was available somehow, but at this point I still don't know how someone was supposed to access it. I never heard about this until more than a

week after the storm, emphasising again that communications were inadequate. Telling people that no meals were available at the information hub was possible; why was it not possible to then provide information for those who did need meals in the same social media posts, etc.? It feels as if food assistance was deliberately difficult to learn about and/or access.

Missing the vulnerable:

As indicated above, I did all I could to assist my neighbours, many of whom are retired. I likewise checked on other households that I know in the area. My fear through all of this was that those already somewhat socially isolated were going to be missed, and they were. On day three after the storm, one of my mates was approached by an elderly woman whose husband's medical device was about to run out of reserve power. She had no idea how to get assistance. Who knows how many other people had similar experiences?

Just this week, I spoke to an elderly man who lives alone. He had no idea what was happening or what to expect (communications). He went without food once his food spoiled and since he could no longer cook (electric cooking). He survived, but he should have been identified somehow and given the support he needed. He felt completely alone in all of this. I didn't know him before and so couldn't help. Neighbours helping neighbours is great! But we know there are people amongst us who are more vulnerable and/or more socially isolated. They bore the brunt of the inadequate response to this storm, in my opinion.

In summary, I saw very little 'response' to this storm outside of a very slow restoration of power accompanied by misleading messaging from the power utility. One northern summer, I worked in the United States and went through a hurricane (cyclone). The impact was very similar to that of the storm that hit West Belconnen: long power outages, many trees down. By the next day, a van was in our street delivering ice and checking to see if anyone in the street needed more because of vulnerabilities. Absolutely nothing like that happened in Canberra.

Many of my neighbours have shared with me that, should a more serious storm hit, the territory would be overwhelmed, based on what they experienced in January. It has not inspired confidence.

Kind regards,

Brett