

Valuable industry messages in ACCAN flood report

ACMA has welcomed the release of a report from the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) on the recent Queensland floods that highlights the emergency communications needs of people with a disability.

The Queensland flood disaster: Access for people with disability to phone services and emergency warnings makes a number of recommendations about the provision of both emergency and non-emergency calls in such incidents.

The severe flooding in January caused the temporary suspension of most services delivered by the government's National Relay Service (NRS), which provides telecommunications services (including an emergency call service) to people who are deaf or have a hearing or speech impairment. The NRS Brisbane call centre was evacuated for 24 hours on 12 January 2011 due to concerns about staff safety and access during the floods.

However, the text-based emergency access via 106 was not interrupted over this period, due to the sustained efforts of the Australian Communication Exchange (ACE), who is the NRS relay provider, and the support of Telstra. The ACMA also kept the NRS community informed of the disruption by producing a number of AUSLAN videos.

'The ACMA has been working with ACE to assess how to better mitigate such disruptions in the future and both parties are committed to ensuring that the integrity of the NRS is maintained,' said ACMA Chairman Chris Chapman.

'More broadly, the ACMA has received regular briefings from the major telecommunications providers during the recent run of natural disasters, outlining their preparatory actions, assistance to emergency services, customer support and infrastructure restoration.

'Given the severity and overlapping demands placed on the telecommunications sector by these recent natural disasters, the ACMA applauds the sector for responding quickly and appropriately. With the combination of power outages, access difficulties and damage to physical infrastructure, the telecommunications providers should be recognised for their dedicated and responsive endeavours.

'In such natural disasters, it is nevertheless important to examine how responses can be further improved. The ACCAN report is an important contribution to that examination by governments, emergency service providers, the telecommunications and broadcasting sectors, and the community.'

The ACMA is also working with the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy on a range of issues from the ACCAN report, such as:

- > how the current NRS—including access to emergency services—could be improved
- > how best to establish mobile text-based access to emergency services for people who are deaf or who have a hearing or speech impairment. 📞

The report is available on the ACCAN website at www.accan.org.au.

