

# Homeless and looking for help: Why people with disability and their caregivers fare worse after floods

March 15 2022, by Jodie Bailie, Jo Longman, Michelle Villeneuve & Ross Bailie

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Credit: Cliff Booth from Pexels

Thousands of people have been displaced from the floods in New South

Wales and Queensland. Across the Northern Rivers, the floods have [damaged at least 5,500 homes](#), with at least half of these expected to be uninhabitable.

Floods expose social inequities and exacerbate the [housing crisis](#) for people with disability and caregivers in the region.

In 2020, the [disability royal commission](#) raised concern that people with disability were more at risk of homelessness during emergencies.

This followed [our research](#) after the 2017 Northern Rivers floods, which showed people with disability and caregivers were more likely than others to have their homes flooded, to be evacuated and still displaced from their homes six months after the [flood](#).

Pleas for NSW flood survivors with disability to be prioritized for urgent housing and care <https://t.co/IhQMfmayXc>

— ABC News (@abcnews) [March 10, 2022](#)

We found people with disability and caregivers were at greater risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

## Why the greater impact?

People with disability are disproportionately impacted by flooding because of [socioeconomic disparities](#).

Floods intersect with social, cultural and [economic factors](#) to shape people's exposure to risk and their ability to prepare for, respond to, and recover from flooding events.

In Lismore, for example, [82% of people living in the 2017 flooded area](#)

were in the lowest socioeconomic group.

Housing in flood-prone areas is generally cheaper to buy and to rent, which means people with the least resources—including those with disability and caregivers—are more likely to be living in areas prone to flooding.

As one person with disability told us: "Some of my friends lived in places in the center of Lismore CBD that perhaps should never have been rented due to the vulnerability of their buildings in floods. These types of rooms/places were really vulnerable in the flood, it would have been impossible to get possessions to safety quickly enough. And people who rent these types of places have the least resources (mental, emotional, physical—cars etc—financial) to cope with this type of event quickly. "

## **Stories from the ground**

Due to socioeconomic disparities, people with a disability or caregivers affected by flooding have greater need for emergency housing in the short term and more secure housing in the long term.

In many cases, people affected by this flooding event will have [experienced other climate-related traumas](#). It was only five years ago the Northern Rivers experienced its last major flood event and just over two years since bushfires devastated the region.

Following a disaster, people with disability must navigate two complex and often inaccessible bureaucracies: the [emergency response](#) and recovery arrangements, and disability services, which which are likely to be compromised by the same disaster.

In the 2017 flood, people felt left behind. As one person with disability

explained to us: "The disgusting way people were left to fend for themselves and then the lack of proper response from our [federal government](#) [...] The lack of help for the homeless and vulnerable. The anxiety and stress that occurred and the amount of people left homeless and still trying to find a home five months later. Services that were desperately needed were very hard to find."

The lack of affordable and accessible accommodation resulted in people with disability and caregivers returning to, or moving into, unsafe accommodation. Floods can affect the integrity of buildings: they are more likely to leak, develop mold, and suffer from draughts.

Our research highlighted the lack of affordable accommodation for displaced people with disability, a situation exacerbated by many temporary accommodation and homeless services being flooded. "One person with disability said: Where the flood did affect me was the housing crisis borne of a shortage of rental properties. I was given notice to move from my rental property just before the flood. It was extremely tough to find anything affordable on the pension [...] in the months after. I am currently in temporary accommodation till March, then who knows?"

Some become homeless. A caregiver told us: "I am currently homeless with three children, looking for help from [community organizations](#) and there are big waiting lists."

Climate change means there will be [more frequent and severe disasters](#). The Northern Rivers will flood again.

The right to safety and well-being in emergencies is now built into [Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–31](#). It includes, for the first time, targeted action on disability inclusive emergency planning. This must include safe and accessible housing.

Improving housing outcomes for people with disability affected by flooding requires the removal of pre-existing barriers that increase inequitable access to safe living situations. This should happen during pre-planning, and we have direction with the new disability strategy.

## **Six steps to minimize the housing crisis when disasters strike**

But we're in the middle of an unfolding flood disaster now. So here are six steps governments could take now to minimize the [housing crisis](#) for people with disability and caregivers:

1. provide accessible short-term emergency housing and support access to secure, safe and accessible long-term housing options
2. relocate displaced people with their family, caregivers and support networks to ensure continuity of support from the people they rely on for personal, practical, and emotional support
3. [partner with people, their representative, and advocacy organizations](#) to identify, understand, and respond effectively to disaster-related housing vulnerabilities
4. include local housing and homelessness services in human and [social recovery planning](#) now and for long-term recovery
5. resource disabled people's organizations to enable [person-centered emergency preparedness \(P-CEP\)](#) tailored to people's local flood risk, living situation, and other support needs to increase choice and control during recovery
6. support social [housing](#) and homelessness services to develop effective emergency plans for how they will [sustain services and continuity of supports](#) during and after disasters.

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