bushfire CRC

A Program Logic Approach to Evaluating the Street FireWise Program in the Blue Mountains, NSW.

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Street FireWise (SFW) is a community education program run by the Blue Mountains Rural Fire Service (RFS) that involves delivering street corner meetings to communities in targeted high bushfire risk areas. Since the program was piloted in 2000 over one hundred meetings have been run. The meetings are essentially scripted presentations to members of the general public with the aim of raising awareness of the bushfire risk in their area and the need to prepare for the eventuality of a fire. They are delivered by volunteer community education facilitators from the local brigades in the Blue Mountains and supported by the Community Education Group at the RFS district office in Katoomba. After several years of running SFW, the Community Education Group were keen to gauge whether the program was making a difference as they began to plan for the future development of community safety in the Blue Mountains. This provided an excellent opportunity for Project C7 to collaborate with the Blue Mountains RFS and undertake an initial application of 'theory-based' evaluation in the community safety field.

The evaluation involved extensive stakeholder consultation with program developers, practitioners, local RFS brigade volunteers and participants involved with SFW. A case study methodology was used that included interviews with members of the Community Education Group and members of the public who had attended SFW meetings. Analysis of documents related to SFW (including meeting scripts, previously collected raw data and yearly reports on the program) added rich layers of detail to the research. The evaluation was also able to draw upon the concept mapping of community safety outcomes as two workshops had been run with groups in the Blue Mountains.

A key component of this was the development of a hierarchy of intended outcomes, a logical order of the program's goals ranging from the initial outcomes through to higher-level outcomes of the program. This was the foundation of developing a program logic matrix that identified the causal factors that contributed to the attainment of each of these outcomes.

Hierarchy of Outcomes for SFW

Ultimate Outcomes	*A reduced impact from bushfires on communities in the Blue Mountains (fewer houses and lives lost).*	L o n g e r T e r m S h o r t e r T e r m
	Formation of neighbourhood networks.	
Intermediate Outcomes	*Residents use awareness and understanding to develop a realistic survival plan, decide whether to stay and actively defend or leave early, and adopt appropriate preparations around their property. i.e. they become more self-reliant.*	
	Residents gain an increased awareness and understanding of bushfire risk and how it applies to their own specific context.	
Initial Outcomes	*SFW meetings are positively received by residents.*	
	Targeted residents hear about meeting, are motivated to attend and do so.	
	Brigades must actively participate in SFW by targeting high-risk communities and running meetings.	

Rather than simply assessing whether the program worked or not, looking at the program in this way helped to recognise the particular aspects of the program that were working, the plausible reasons for this and the necessary circumstances needed for this to be achieved. The approach helped identify the importance of the context that SFW was used in, and the mechanisms that were most likely to lead to the successful attainment of the intended outcomes. It also served to highlight where the context was inappropriate for the success of the treatment and possible mechanisms that could be undermining its success.

Evaluation Findings

Some of the key findings in relation to the development of a program theory for SFW are laid out below.

Contexts identified as being successful for SFW meetings:

• "Middle" Blue Mountains region with small / medium sized settlements;
• Local brigades with active community education personnel or individual;
• Residents in high risk areas with some basic awareness;
• Individuals / communities with some capacity to change;
• Communities with strong local social ties.

Mechanisms identified as leading to intended outcomes:

• Recent experience;
• Peer influence;
• Inspiration of new ides;
• Positive reinforcement.

Contexts where SFW meetings not successful:

• Isolated settlements in "Upper" Blue Mountains;
• Larger suburban towns in "Lower" Blue Mountains;
• Residents with little or no awareness;
• Communities with little social interaction amongst neighbours;
• Local brigades with limited focus on community education;
• Individuals with minimal capacity to change.

Observable outcomes:

In the appropriate contexts (as highlighted above), SFW is having a degree of success in achieving initial and intermediate outcomes. This tends to be more likely where residents have attended two or more SFW meetings, or been exposed to other forms of bushfire community education activity. In contexts in which SFW has not worked it has either led to program abandonment or program adaptation. Some of the adaptations have proved successful but succession and sustainability issues do arise.

Overall, the evaluation of SFW has proved to be a useful example program theory for Project C7 and demonstrated the potential for this approach in the field of emergency management. At the same time, it has provided the Blue Mountains RFS with a clearer understanding of the capacity and limitations of the SFW program. Their Community Education Group have developed a response to the report and are factoring the key recommendations into the future planning and development of the program. The program logic matrix has provided them with a useful tool to consider the implications of aspects of the program logic and the actions they can take to enhance the SFW program.