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Work in progress - Evaluation and program planning and implementation collaboration

H Goodman¹, J Gawen²

¹RMIT, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, ²Country Fire Service, Adelaide, South Australia, Afghanistan

In recent years there has been an increase in emphasis on the role of community education programs in community safety approaches to bushfire. The Country Fire Service (CFS) in South Australia is exploring some community development approaches which encompass finding partnerships in the community through which such approaches can be developed. This is both challenging for those delivering the programs and for the conceptual requirements for how these developments can be thought about in terms of evaluation. Helen will present some findings from research funded by the Bushfire Collaborative Research Centre (CRC) which she and her colleagues undertook in South Australia in 2005, following a fire event in a rural area in which there had not been a strong community education presence. Results showed active informal community warning behaviour and also vulnerability for women and children. John will present some material outlining the more recent approaches taken by the CFS in terms of community education, and Helen and John will together discuss the challenges they are finding in developing evaluation approaches to newly emerging programs.

Helen and John will engage the participants by shaping the discussion around actual program content and how and in what ways evaluation theory and practice was able to assist the program development and where the evaluation approaches explored may have been found wanting. Can an early engagement with evaluative thinking strengthen programs, or might this engagement be unable to contain the multiple and at times conflicting demands on fire services such that the evaluation presence inadvertently plays a role in weakening the community fabric all parties set out to strengthen?

We will seek to involve a moderator who can assist in a lively discussion which brings out the reality of organizational and community pressures in the contested social space which goes to make up the domain of 'community safety'.