

# The role of recreation in disasters

During times of crisis, recreation can play a vital role in helping communities to cope and rebuild. Our facilities become welfare centres, recreation activities are a welcome respite - and our skilled staff bring people together, reinforcing a sense of community.

## Response

The widespread damage to [particular communities](#) caused by unprecedented weather events this summer isolated some and drove many from their homes. Local marae and recreation centres played an important role, as welfare centres: places people could meet and feel safe, where food was prepared and shared, and local information was available.

Communities functioning well recover more quickly after [natural disasters](#), and recreation personnel have a role to play in building that social capital.

Recreation staff already have established roles in connecting communities. After natural disasters [community connection](#) is vital, and [stronger communities](#) recover faster. Recreation personnel offer valuable skills and experience including risk management and emergency operation, first aid and CPR, event and programme management. Staff are often seconded into emergency management roles, and others ran their centres as community bases, such as [Moana-Nui-a-Kiwa Leisure Centre](#) in Māngere which was a one-stop shop for people seeking access to community agencies.



Figure 1 The team at the Māngere Civil Defence Centre at Moana-Nui-a-Kiwa Leisure Centre

## Recovery

Immediate recovery focuses on survival basics – suitable housing, financial security, childcare, clearing up and trying to re-establish some kind of daily routines [including school](#) for children. These priorities are intense and draining, particularly for people who may already be in shock.

Children still need care, and jobs have to be done. Equity is hugely important, as [disasters hit some people harder than others](#).

Cut off from everything, the [Wairoa](#) marae played a vital and holistic role in caring for people that went far beyond the provision of food, and included labour to clean up as well as support. The Community Centre was another stronghold of support (see Case Study).

Stories from the Christchurch earthquakes have a similar theme.

***I genuinely felt like we were rebuilding neighbourhoods...these are the places where people gather and connect as a community and people really missed them after the quakes.*** [Daniel Moses]

***[<https://newsline.ccc.govt.nz/news/story/post-quake-rebuild-puts-christchurch-back-together>]***

If there is a moment of leisure, and [recreation](#) is easy and accessible, it may provide some respite from the stress that people experience – offering restoration, escape, time alone or [with others](#), connection, physical release, or opportunity for reflection. [Social recovery](#) is a key element in the recovery of whole communities.

## Wairoa Community Centre: after Cyclone Gabrielle:

In Wairoa, a small town of around 8,500, the people know far too much about managing after a disaster. Sara Bird, from Sport Hawkes Bay, is manager at the Centre, and generously shared her story.

*The river came up, water had gone right under the facility, there was silt and stuff under the building, power and communications were out. There was nowhere to go, the town was cut off.*

*At the beginning, we spent hours and hours at our own families', friends' and relations' homes digging silt and ripping out the insides of houses. Physically, mentally, and emotionally it was really draining.*

*When we returned to work (2 weeks post the cyclone) we all came together, and one of our worker's brothers cooked yummy kai, and we tidied up the facility, and shared our thoughts and feelings. Normality for people is going to work and people need normality.*

But Sara had checked first. "Are you Ok to come to work?" Because if not, she wasn't going to open the Centre.

***"... [as staff] you need to be 'present' if you are to give something happy. So, the focus was all about 'How do I support my staff?'"***

### **Sara Bird, Centre Manager.**

The Centre soon became a distribution centre for clothing and bedding, with spaces dedicated to different purposes. An ex-staff member distributed donations from Raglan.

The staff put their focus on supporting schools, many displaced and without any equipment.

*'We contacted every school we could, to find out what the needs and wants were. I told the staff "Don't worry about your contract, worry about our teachers and our staff, and support [them] how you can."' We ran a Fun Day alongside Wairoa schools for students and staff. In one school, 70 children were from families displaced by the events. They needed some normality.*

*We welcomed in Nūhaka School [which is 30 km away, and], they have a classroom in the function room.'*

***"trying to cope after a cyclone, is different from anything else"***

Nūhaka School was in their temporary classroom for several months.

Staff applied for funding on behalf of schools through the Sport New Zealand Tū Manawa fund to assist schools with replacement of lost equipment, and to purchase new equipment.

Now, the gymnasium has netball night leagues and pickleball running. Community events for whanau let people see what services might be able to help and creates a safe place for people to chat to others. Sara and her staff are still in recovery mode, and it will be a long road, she said.

The story reminds us how staff roles change in response to people's needs. It highlights the focus on mental wellbeing as a priority for exhausted people; and how valuable practical, hand-on support can be.

Principle	Action
Places - multi-use, equipped for a range of uses, community hub	<p>Design multi-use adaptable facilities with spaces that can be used for a range of purposes.</p> <p>Be equipped to manage and support displaced people and the preparation of food.</p> <p>Create welcoming spaces where people can meet, connect, and reaffirm their sense of community.</p> <p>Have flexible, portable equipment that supports play and informal recreation.</p>
People - mental wellbeing	<p>Make staff and their whanau welfare a higher priority than work.</p> <p>Focus on family, housing safety and wellbeing first. Offer practical support.</p> <p>Train staff in effective active listening skills and approaches.</p>
Communities – focus on those most in need	<p>Place focus in the places most in need of support.</p> <p>Ask 'what's most needed now?'</p>
Communication and Relationships - stakeholders, communities, networks etc	<p>Access existing community networks.</p> <p>Use recreation networks as a foundation for community connections.</p>