

Executive Summary

Lessons in Resilience Final Report

March 2026

Jesuit Social Services' Centre for Just Places



Jesuit
Social Services
Building a Just Society



Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the unceded lands on which this project took place.

We pay our respects to their Elders past and present, and extend this acknowledgement to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who continue to care for Country, community, and culture.

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Executive summary

Lessons in Resilience examines how community service and health organisations (CSHOs) in Melbourne’s west adapted to climate-related shocks and the COVID-19 pandemic between 2019 and 2025. The report consolidates lessons from a period marked by extreme weather events, flooding, heatwaves, and prolonged health emergencies. Drawing on six in-depth case studies, it identifies what enabled effective action, what constrained responses, and what is needed to strengthen community and organisational resilience as climate risks intensify.

Why this report matters

CSHOs played a pivotal role during recent crises, often acting as first responders for communities experiencing structural and systemic disadvantage. Yet much of the learning from these responses has not been systematically captured. As climate change accelerates, failing to embed these local lessons risks continued reactive, short-term approaches that leave structurally disadvantaged communities at heightened risk. This report addresses that gap by documenting what worked, why it worked, and how climate resilience efforts can be strengthened and supported across the region.

How the research was conducted

The project used a qualitative, case-study methodology involving interviews with leaders, operational teams, and frontline workers from six CSHOs. Organisational documents and contextual evidence were reviewed to deepen insights. Analysis was guided by the Community Capitals Framework, examining how human, social, cultural, financial, political, built, and natural capitals shaped organisational responses and adaptive capacity.

What the research found

Five cross-cutting themes emerged through this research:

1. Community-led, place-based approaches

Grounding responses in local knowledge and lived experience enabled culturally relevant, trusted and flexible action. Bicultural workers, local leaders and grassroots networks strengthened engagement, reduced access barriers, and ensured responses were meaningful to diverse communities.

2. Justice, equity and inclusion

Organisations that applied intersectional, justice-centred approaches were better able to reach those disproportionately impacted by climate and health crises. Embedding lived experience and cultural safety was essential to designing equitable and accessible programs.

3. Trusted relationships and cross-sector partnerships

Strong social capital, including trusted relationships with communities, local government, health services, and partner organisations, was one of the most important enablers of effective responses.

Collaboration supported rapid mobilisation, shared learning, and sustained impact. Consistent with the existing literature and findings of the evidence review, this theme reinforces the central role of social capital in enabling effective responses and building resilience.

4. Organisational learning and adaptability

Structured reflection, documentation of lessons, and leadership support for adaptation enabled organisations to move from reactive crisis responses to forward-looking preparedness. Flexible funding and internal processes strengthened resilience and improved continuity through change.

5. Innovation and solutions-focused practice

Organisations developed new approaches, reframed engagement, and adapted existing frameworks to address emerging challenges. Evidence-informed advocacy and community-led innovation helped influence systems, improve service design, and respond to complex risks.



What enables resilience

The insights from key themes not only highlight what effective practice looks like, but also point to the conditions that underpin climate resilience in Melbourne's west. Across the case studies, six conditions emerged as foundational to enabling effective climate and community resilience:

- Community-led, place-based approaches
- Justice-centred community engagement that addresses structural inequity
- Investment in social capital and cross-sectoral collaboration
- Embedding learning into everyday practice
- Systems that enable adaptive practice
- Evidence-informed action and advocacy

Recommendations: What needs to happen next

Strengthening resilience in Melbourne's west requires coordinated regional action, structural reform, and long-term investment.

For resilience practitioners in community service and health organisations

- Embed organisational learning in structures and culture.
- Use place-based evidence and lived experience to guide action.
- Integrate social determinants and climate justice into resilience planning.

For organisational leaders and decision-makers in community service and health organisations

- Make resilience a core strategic commitment.
- Foster an adaptive, learning-oriented culture.
- Advocate for enabling policy, funding, and governance settings.
- Invest in workforce capability, wellbeing, and lived-experience expertise.

For government

- Enable locally adaptable funding and program models.
- Align emergency management, public health, and climate adaptation systems.
- Shift accountability toward long-term, community-defined outcomes.

For funders

- Provide flexible, multi-year funding for preparedness and resilience - not only crises.
- Resource collaboration and relationship-building as core infrastructure.
- Invest in culturally safe practice and lived-experience leadership.

Conclusion

Resilience in Melbourne's west depends on the interplay of people, systems, place, and power. Effective climate resilience is community-led, justice and equity-centred, relationship-based, and supported by organisations that learn and adapt. To meet escalating climate risks, governments, funders, organisations, and communities must work collectively to address structural inequities, embed learning, and build the enabling conditions for long-term resilience. Acting on these findings will support Melbourne's west, not only to withstand future shocks, but to foster wellbeing, inclusion, and climate justice for generations to come.



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