



PRESS RELEASE

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Mallacoota residents 'reclaim the beach' through surf therapy

Waves of Wellness & Movember team up to bring mental health support to Mallacoota following devastating bushfires

Mallacoota - a coastal holiday town of just over 1000 residents in Victoria's East Gippsland region - made headlines earlier this year after shocking vision of the destructive bushfires that took hold of the town on New Year's Eve was beamed around the globe.

The town was described as a "disaster zone", with the sky pitch black from billowing smoke at 9.30am. More than 4,000 people were forced to take shelter at the town's beach, over 120 homes were destroyed in the blaze and while some residents were able to escape by boat, almost 1200 people had to be evacuated by naval ship from the beach.

While the immediate danger has subsided, the focus has turned to rebuilding the town, as well as to concerns that the trauma experienced as result of the bushfires will have a much longer term impact on residents' mental health.

In the wake of the fires, Vanessa Janns, President of Mallacoota Boardriders Club, reached out to the [Waves of Wellness \(WOW\) Foundation](#), in the hope they could create a customised surf therapy program for the Mallacoota community.

"Our little town was all but decimated by the fires. Over 123 houses have been completely razed - which in a town of 1,000 residents is quite significant," she said.

"Many members of the Boardriders Club were present during the horrific days during the fire front and in the immediate aftermath. They spent this time huddled on the beach or in the lake cowering together under wool blankets - children included - fearing for their lives.

"After speaking with the community, it became very apparent that over the coming weeks and months we would have a huge mental health challenge on our hands. Having heard of the amazing work the guys were doing in Sydney, I reached out in the hope that we might be able to work together to bring Waves of Wellness to the people of Mallacoota."

To get the program off the ground, men's health charity [Movember](#) - a long-time supporter of Waves of Wellness - threw their support behind the initiative by funding an intensive five-day program. WOW then immediately set about assembling a team of six qualified mental health professionals (who double as surfing instructors), two clinical experts in trauma and disaster relief, a psychologist and a psychotherapist.

The aim of the trial was to decrease the impact of trauma and PTSD on the town through a learn-to-surf program incorporating surfing with mental health education and connection.

CHANGING THE FACE OF MEN'S HEALTH



Waves of Wellness CEO Joel Pilgrim said: "Isolated communities such as Mallacoota are not just in need of funding to rebuild their homes and lives, they are in need of approachable mental health support. Many, particularly children, had no idea if they were going to survive the night, let alone comprehend the journey of rebuilding their lives.

"The experience of grief, shock, and stress, take an incredibly high emotional toll on families in such times of crisis. For some, simply connecting, sharing stories and uniting during this time can make all the difference. This program supports the Mallacoota community to reclaim their beach, reframing its recent correlation with trauma, to a place of positivity and respite."

Brendan Maher, Movember's global mental health director, said: "In terms of community recovery, it's still early days for towns like Mallacoota, and the heavy lifting really starts now. As individuals, we can all keep an eye out for those who've been impacted, not only in the immediate aftermath, but in the weeks and months following. It can be as simple as lending an ear to people you know may be struggling through a phone call or text to let them know you're thinking of them and you care."

As well as surf therapy sessions, the WOW team – alongside three volunteers from Movember - ran individual counselling, surf therapy programs, beach games, school visits and BBQs at local community groups. With the generous support of Bronte Boardriders Club, WOW also delivered 70 refurbished boards to surfers and children in the town that had lost surfing equipment during the fires.

Ms Janns said: "It's amazing the many ways the program has filtered through the community. Just one example is Zac, a teen who lost his family home. He came down, hung out in the periphery of the WOW sessions and ended up grabbing one of the donated boards. He hadn't surfed in *years*, but has become reconnected with our tight-knit surf community and has been out surfing every time there's waves over the past few weeks."

While in town, the team also worked to train and upskill local WOW champions, as well as providing support to the town's GPs and psychologist (who visits Mallacoota once a fortnight).

Over the past three years, Movember has invested \$5.6 million in the Social Innovators Challenge (SIC), a series of projects aimed to strengthen the social connections of those men at risk of becoming isolated. [Waves of Wellness Sand n' Surf](#) is one of six SIC projects launched in Australia. As well as teaching men to become physically and mentally fit, the six week learn-to-surf wellness program teaches young men the skills they need to cope with everyday challenges.

During their time in Mallacoota, the WOW team and Movember volunteers stayed in local accommodation, supporting the [@emptyesky](#) campaign to help the community's tourism economy get back on track. To support small businesses in Mallacoota (before your next holiday), you can purchase an esky of local products direct from [mymallacootaesky.com](#).

Lifeline has launched a special Bushfire Recovery Crisis Support line, with callers able to dial **13 43 57 (13 HELP)** to access mental health support and information about other services.

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About Movember

Movember is the leading global men's health charity. The charity raises funds to deliver innovative, breakthrough research and support programs that enable men to live happier, healthier and longer lives. Committed to disrupting the status quo, millions have joined the movement, helping fund over 1,250 projects focusing on prostate cancer, testicular cancer and suicide prevention.

In addition to tackling key health issues faced by men, Movember is working to encourage men to stay healthy in all areas of their life, with a focus on men staying socially connected and becoming more open to discussing their health and significant moments in their lives. The charity's vision is to have an everlasting impact on the face of men's health. To donate or learn more, please visit [movember.com](https://www.movember.com).