Preparing your community for disasters & emergencies

handbook

Original Project Edition

www.communitydisasterprep.com.au

Introduction

Communities that are prepared for disaster are generally better equipped to cope and rebound. In the past, events such as drought and bushfire were considered a normal part of rural life. However the increasing severity and complexity of events – combined with more fragmented societies, volatile climate, an increased focus on wellbeing, fewer people volunteering, and information overload – mean that councils and their communities need a simple way to plan and respond to disasters.

This handbook explains the planning, preparation, response and recovery process; who is involved; and how to build community resilience.

For more information, including

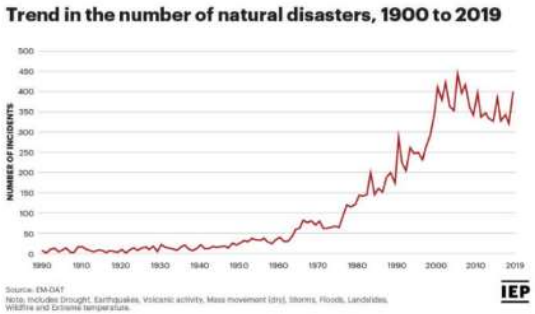
- Community disaster planning tools requested by communities across the Northern and Yorke region of SA
- Links to information, examples and planning tools from a range of sources
- Resources for grants to support community planning and preparation

Have a look at
www.communitydisasterprep.com.au

Sources referenced in this handbook are listed at the end of the document.

Increasing frequency of disasters

We only need to watch the news – or social media – to think that natural disasters seem to be increasing in frequency, and we'd be right. The Institute for Economics and Peace estimates the number of natural disasters has increased ten-fold since 1960, and that was before the disastrous 2019/20 Australian bushfires and 2022 floods, and COVID-19.



Australian communities face increasing losses and disruption from natural hazards. Deloitte Access Economics estimates the average economic cost will rise from $18.2B per year between 2006 and 2016 to $33B per year by 2050 (Australian Disaster Resilience Index).

This Handbook is approved by the Northern & Yorke Local Government Association

NYLGA
NORTHERN & YORKE
LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION

Is this only for major events?

'Disaster' is a term we all understand, and generally refers to an accident or event that causes great damage and loss of life. We're using it in a broader context than that, because an event in a small town will have a much bigger impact on that community than the same event in a city. For our purposes, 'disaster' can include natural hazards such as drought and extreme weather, man-made hazards, in fact any event that requires an emergency response.

Funding acknowledgement

This project was funded under the Disaster Risk Reduction Grants Program funded by the Australian Government and the South Australian Government, and delivered by the Northern & Yorke LGA, to address a gap in collaborative disaster management planning by Councils and their communities.

Authored by Dr Kristine Peters of KPPM Strategy.

Views and findings associated with this project are expressed independently and do not necessarily represent the views of State and Commonwealth funding bodies.

Plan, Prep, Respond, Recover

The ability of communities to bounce back after a disaster is significantly increased by being aware of threats, active planning and preparation, and being involved in local networks and community disaster or emergency management arrangements – including as volunteers (National Strategy for Disaster Resilience).

It helps if we understand the different stages of disaster planning and response. The model used in the detailed Zone Emergency Plans shows four sometimes overlapping stages after the disaster incident – and it's useful to keep those in mind, but for community planning purposes, we've simplified it to four stages:

Planning: knowing what you have to do
Preparation: getting ready
Response: saving lives and property during an event
Recovery: getting back to normal

See Page 10 for more information

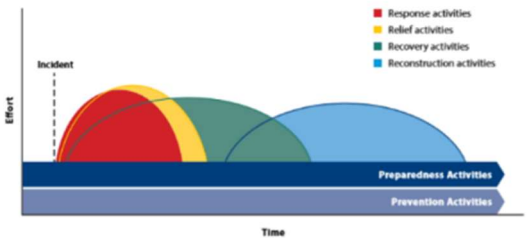


Figure 5 - Emergency Operations Model

Who's responsible for what?

Some of the disasters Australia faced in recent years led to wide-ranging government reviews, including Royal Commissions into bushfires and natural disasters. These reviews resulted in more clearly-defined responsibilities, as set out in the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience, which are summarised here:

Government

- ensuring effective, well-coordinated responses from emergency services and volunteers when disaster hits
- supporting individuals and communities to prepare for extreme events
- helping communities recover from devastation, including partnering with aid and recovery organisations to strengthen disaster resilience
- land management and planning
- information about assessing risks and reducing exposure and vulnerability
- education systems that describe options and the best responses to a hazard

Individuals

- taking their share of responsibility for preventing, preparing for, responding to and recovering from disasters
- knowing about and being involved as volunteers in local community disaster or emergency management arrangements

Businesses have an important role

Businesses and organisations provide supplies, services and equipment during a disaster as well as employment and a sense of continuity during the recovery phase:

- business continuity planning needs to understand potential risks and prepare for disasters and disruptions
- make arrangements for children at work during catastrophic fire danger days when parents want their families close by
- ensure flexible employment practices support staff during the recovery phase
- play an active role in the immediate response to disasters by providing information, refuge space, food, pet boarding and places to charge phones and other devices
- quickly adapting to provide new products and services that are needed during the recovery phase

Government roles

Unless we're facing a major emergency that covers a large part of the state or country, it's likely that the most visible disaster assistance will come from State and Local Government. We'd expect to see State Government funded services like Police, Fire, Ambulance and the State Emergency Service respond to a disaster event, acknowledging of course that the SES, SA Ambulance and Country Fire Service (CFS) are largely staffed by volunteers, often from affected communities. Large-scale disasters (e.g. for the River Murray floods and COVID) are coordinated by Recovery.sa.gov.au which provides updates, information and resources.

People are sometimes surprised that Local Government isn't a 'first responder' for individuals in distress. That's not their role. Councils focus on helping communities to prepare; managing their own infrastructure before, during and after an event; and – with communities, other levels of government and support agencies – assist with recovery.

Table 1: Control Agencies for different emergencies in South Australia

Emergency	Control Agency
Animal, plant and marine disease	PIRSA
Earthquake; road/transport accident	SA Police (SAPOL)
Extreme heat/storm; flood	State Emergency Service (SES)
Fuel, gas and electricity shortages	Department of State Development (DSD)
Hazardous materials emergencies	Country Fire Service (CFS) or Metropolitan Fire Service (MFS)
Marine pollution (coastal)	Department of Planning, Transport and Infrastructure (DPTI)
Rural fire	Country Fire Service (CFS)
Urban fire	Metropolitan Fire Service (MFS)

Local Government

Councils do a number of activities that prevent or minimise the impact of an emergency: land use planning, stormwater management, flood mitigation works, land management, fire prevention, building safety, road and traffic management, waste management, events and public health programs.

The leadership provided by Elected Members is especially important in planning for and managing emergencies. Their role is to:

- Ensure Council administration is enabled and resourced to prevent, prepare for, respond to and recover
- Think strategically
- Communicate with the community.

Messaging during a disaster

Operational messaging – instructions and information that direct the work of first responders and help people to respond quickly and appropriately – are provided by the incident control agency or emergency services, not Councils.

Community is essential

When a disaster hits, the first help often comes from neighbours and the local community. Government and government services can't be there as quickly or provide immediate support. Communities have a number of essential roles:

- Forward planning and preparation to make sure everyone knows what to do and has the right training
- Encouraging people to look out for each other, including knowing your neighbours and having good local networks
- Joining SES, CFS, SA Ambulance and Service groups so that there are enough volunteers to respond to incidents
- Working with government to prepare community meeting places and refuges ahead of time
- Looking out for each other when it all starts to happen

Tyler & Sadiq (2018) found that individuals are significantly more likely to rely on friends and family than government. This reliance varies across demographic groups, with women and minority groups as well as individuals who are older and less educated more likely to rely on organisations to help prepare for natural disasters. **When preparing for disasters, we need to recognise that one size does not fit all.**

Case Study: Mallala

In 2015 a bushfire that started at Pinery in South Australia's mid north burned 86,000 hectares of scrub and farmland, caused two fatalities and 90 hospitalisations, destroyed 97 homes and 546 sheds and out-buildings, 54,000 poultry and 18,500 head of livestock perished, and $30M worth of crops were lost. The fire threatened 20 communities and people were evacuated and displaced across a wide region. There was a huge emergency services response, with over 1,000 CFS volunteers and staff and 200 MFS firefighters.

In the aftermath, the Mallala and District Lions Club realised that a strategic approach to community infrastructure would better support future disaster responses.

The Lions Club's disaster preparation planning had five components:

- An airconditioned shed with large fridges where first responders can eat and rest.
- An upgraded ablution block for showering and washing clothes.
- A large-capacity septic system that can operate without power for three days.
- Management of the Mallala campground with the intention that, in an emergency, the Lions Club can put out a call for spare caravans to house people who have lost homes in the disaster – and in doing so, retain local support networks, schooling and business spending.
- The development of a new Emergency Relief and Command Centre with a large commercial kitchen, multiple TV screens, communications room, wifi, and function space – all of which can be powered by an 8KVA generator at the flick of a switch.

We're OK, we've done this before …

What worked in the past might not be as successful in future. People living in rural areas are used to looking out for their own. CFS, SES, CWA, Progress Associations and Service Clubs were the backbone of many communities. While they're still important, many towns are finding it difficult to attract volunteers and it's not unusual for services to be called in from other areas, which causes delays and additional damage and distress.

"I moved here during COVID and have made a few friends, but in an emergency? I'd have no idea, ring 000 I guess and hope for the best."

One of the aims of this toolkit is to help communities take a fresh look at their residents, resources and how the emergency response system works so that they're not relying on ways that no longer work.

"Resilience is not just about 'bouncing back from adversity' but is more broadly concerned with adaptive capacity and how we understand and address uncertainty in our internal and external environments. Resilience doesn't come about by accident, it's about sound assessment, treatment, monitoring of, and communication about risk." (Gibson & Tarrant)

Disaster resilient communities

The National Strategy for Disaster Resilience describes the characteristics of disaster resilient communities, individuals and organisations as those that:

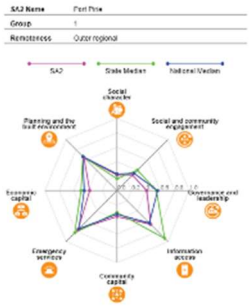
- Function well under stress
- Can adapt quickly and successfully
- Are self-reliant
- Have strong social bonds and can work together to self-organise (social capacity)

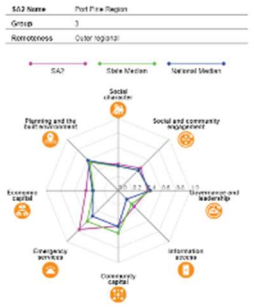
Australian Disaster Resilience Index

The Australian Disaster Resilience Index (ADRI) is a very useful tool to understand the current level of community resilience, and therefore where further work is needed. It assesses communities on 8 resilience factors:

- Social character (who's in the community)
- Economic capital (business adaptation)
- Emergency services
- Planning and the built environment
- Community capital (cohesion)
- Information access (internet, training)
- Governance and leadership
- Community engagement (adaptation)

ADRI generates reports down to SA2 level, with the following example for Port Pirie city and Port Pirie region areas which shows the difference in disaster planning for a rural city (e.g. developing community leadership) and a rural area (e.g. developing community capital).





Planning for vulnerable people

While ADRI is useful at a high level, disaster planning should consider vulnerable people such those who are isolated or from different cultures who may be out of the mainstream 'information loop', and people with disabilities who need direct support in an emergency.

Checking the latest Census data will help you to understand community diversity. A quick search for "community profile" for your Council area will lead downloadable tables with more than 60 categories ranging from Indigenous Status to Need for Assistance and Language Used at Home. Then you'll know how many people in each category in your area so you can factor their needs into your planning.

Home, neighbours, community

Know your neighbours, it's more than just helping in an emergency – people with strong social connections cope better with disasters.

Planning and prep starts at home

There's no shortage of tools and guides to help you prepare your home and family for emergencies. They generally cover:

- Do an emergency plan
- Have an evacuation kit
- Clear vegetation around the house
- Keep your vehicle ready
- Prepare emergency water and food
- Get a battery-powered radio

If you're not sure, start with the Red Cross: https://www.redcross.org.au/prepare/

There are bushfire planning tools for every family and community at www.cfs.sa.gov.au

Bottom line is that you need to do it!

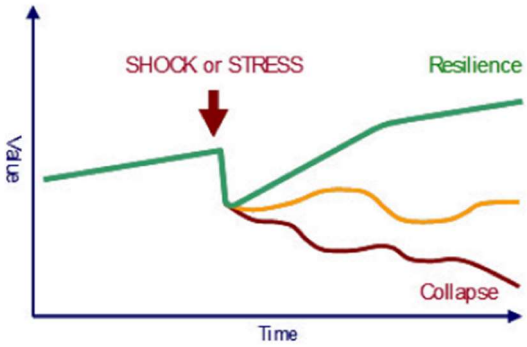
Bushfire Safer Place
Bushfire Last Refuge Resort
Know the difference

A community plan

When disaster hits, it's too late to start worrying about who's doing what. We'll do better if our community operates like a well-oiled machine. That doesn't happen by accident, and as we've mentioned before, the way we did things in the past may not work today.

Community Disaster Preparation project includes community workshops that develop action plans for communities to become 'well-oiled machines'. A guide to planning and running this workshop is included in the Toolkit resources, but the important points are:

- Do your homework first (get the data)
- You can't do everything, understand where community fits in the big picture – your Council can help with this
- Use a facilitator to keep it on track
- Consider all stages (preparation, response, recovery)
- Think about vulnerable people and visitors
- Reference past examples and experiences: what can we learn from things that went well, and things that went badly?
- Focus on processes, not people
- Do an action plan and make sure someone is in charge of making sure it happens



Don't forget to look after yourself

We're finally recognising the importance of looking after our mental health, which includes talking about it. Even thinking about disasters can trigger anxiety, especially if people have experienced trauma in the past.

Be aware of your own and each other's mental health, know where to get help, and consider training – either individually or as a group – to build resilience.

Have a look at the mental health resources at www.communitydisasterprep.com.au

Council *with* community

Councils, especially those in rural communities with small populations and large geographies, may feel overwhelmed by the amount of work they have to accomplish with limited resources – and this often translates into an attitude of 'just get it done' rather than the more time-consuming process of working with communities to do it together.

This page suggests ways that communities can support Councils to make emergency planning and response more efficient – and reduce 'them and us' tension.

Council roles generally fall into three categories:

Deliver (e.g. local roads, libraries, waste)

Facilitate (e.g. leasing community buildings to progress associations, advocating for local services)

Inform (e.g. website with information about resources, clear and consistent messaging)

Delivering together

Disaster planning should consider the way the community interfaces with Council's delivery role, for example: regular waste collection service will be disrupted during an emergency and there is likely to be a sudden demand for removal of hard rubbish. Normal messaging such as 'bin collection on Wednesday' has to be quickly changed to help people in the immediate aftermath of a disaster.

Council's emergency planning should include discussions with communities about service disruption and adjustment. Think about:

- Road access (to homes and businesses)
- Storm water management (people get really upset when their house is flooded as a result of blocked culverts)
- Waste collection
- Whether community halls are equipped to provide shelter and refuge
- Animal management and temporary refuges/shelters
- Redeploying community transport services
- Libraries and Visitor Information Centres as information hubs and safe places
- Council staff and Elected Members who live in the community, their 'official' and 'community' responsibilities in an emergency

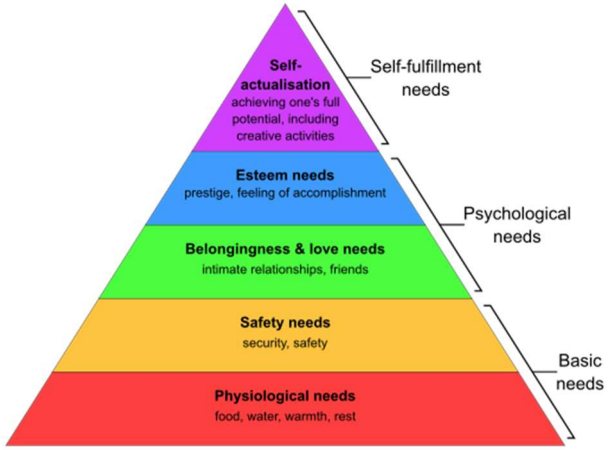
Making the most of Council grants

Council community grants are an under-utilised resource. In many Councils the purpose of these grants is poorly defined apart from a general requirement that they 'benefit the community'. This is a lost opportunity to influence community priorities and actions.

Local government should consider securing or promoting external grants as well as quarantining some of their community grant funding to cover:

- Costs (including facilitation) of community information sessions and developing community-based emergency management plans
- Upgrades to halls and other community buildings to make sure they can operate as local shelters and refuges (e.g. potable water, cooking and storage facilities)
- Business continuity planning, especially for businesses that will be essential in an emergency
- Safety risks that might contribute to an emergency or reduce community effectiveness in an emergency
- Community centre governance training
- Costs associated with a cross-council emergency preparedness group

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



Maslow's hierarchy of needs reminds us that everyone's motivation is different, and our ability to cope with 'higher level ideas' depends on our basic needs being met: in an emergency, you're not concerned with self-actualisation, you're going to be focused on survival and safety.

This is where preparation and planning come in – make sure your plans include contingencies in case your 'go to' people and leaders are busy staying safe.

Be kind to yourself and others and focus on what's important at the moment.

The Pareto Principle

(The 80/20 rule)

One of the challenges in an emergency, or even when you're at the planning stage, is to know where to focus your attention and priorities.

Here's where Pareto (or the 80/20 rule) can assist: 80% of the results come from 20% of the effort. So where do you put your efforts to greatest effect?

The other side of Pareto is that 80% of the problems come from 20% of the people – it's good to remember that in an emergency, the squeaky wheels may not reflect the concerns of the majority, and you need ways of keeping track of what's really happening and deflecting the 'time wasters' so that you can focus on the things that matter.

What happens when you put Maslow and Pareto together?

Southern Yorke Peninsula suffered devastating fires in 2019, and as expected, the community rallied to support their local firefighters. Donations of help, food and supplies flooded in, but the collection point was a long way from where the volunteers needed support.

The community got together to find a solution and came up with the idea of an incident response trailer – the Yorke Boot.

Using funding from FRRR and donations from local businesses and organisations, the Boot is equipped with fridges, facilities for making hot drinks, first aid and safety equipment, even an awning and seating to give firefighters a break.

The Boot can be deployed at short notice, well before CFS' contracted caterers can be on site, and is available for community hire when not needed for emergency operations.

Volunteers are trained to set up the trailer and distribute food, drinks and basic first aid.

Your community action plan

'Top of mind' is all very well, but we'll miss important things. Here are some tips for making your community disaster preparation action plan as effective as possible:

Keep it simple

You can't do everything, establish priorities and 'plan to plan'.

Be real

Talk about your experiences of an emergency or disaster: what worked, what didn't, what were you surprised about, what has changed since then?

Get expert input

What don't we know about how agencies operate in an emergency? Involve council, SES, CFS, SAPOL, SA Ambulance and recovery organisations - ask them how it works, what they learned from previous emergencies, and what the community can do to make it easier next time.

Who are your 'go to' people?

Every community has a number of silent (or possibly not so silent) achievers who have their finger on the pulse and act quickly and responsibly when needed. Do you know who they are? Make sure your plans include them – because that's where people will go for information and direction.

Who has authority to make decisions?

In an emergency, you can't afford to wait for a committee decision – who's making the call and how do you make sure your community knows this?

Use a flow chart to identify gaps

Flow charting is a useful tool to really dig into the sequence of events. Keep asking "how do you get from this point to the next?", you'll be surprised at how many steps or processes are just assumed – these are the times things will go wrong and you haven't prepared. Focus on addressing the gaps.

Communication is key

We can't assume our mobile phones will work – where do people congregate? Are the businesses and organisations at these locations well informed? How do we get info to them, how do we help them stay up to date, how do we make sure they're giving out the right information?

In the absence of good information (and sometimes where there is good information), people start rumours – how do we manage misinformation?

Use scenarios

When we focus on things we know, we're likely to miss important details. Use scenarios to help people imagine different events and responses.

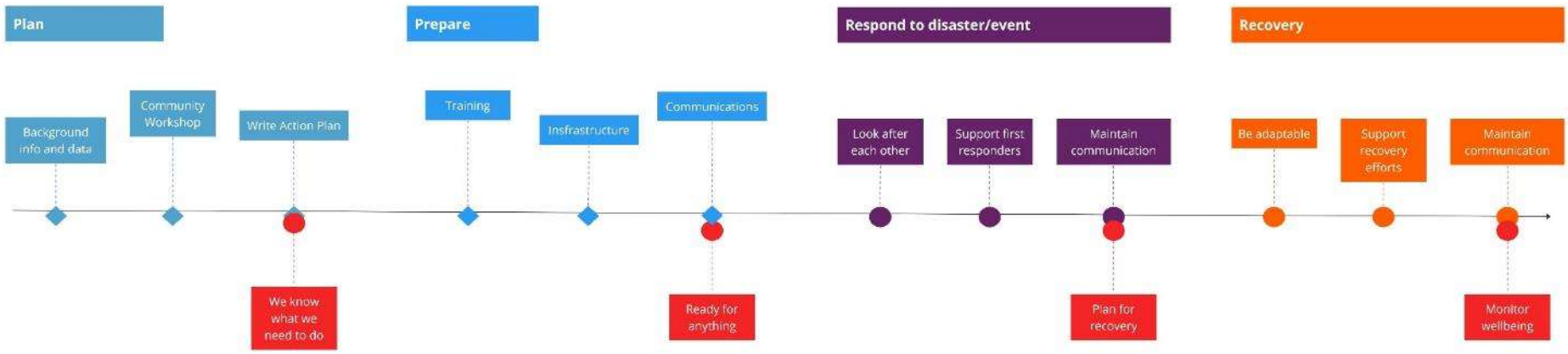
Don't forget visitors and vulnerable individuals and groups – who's thinking about them?

It all starts well in advance

If you have your systems and processes in place in advance, there will be less confusion, conflict and distress when disaster strikes.

From start to finish

The whole process from start (planning) through preparation, response and recovery. The communitydisasterprep.com.au website has lots of information – here's an overview:



Planning

- If it's your first disaster plan, focus on a small number of achievable goals.
- Make sure you include people from across your community, including those who normally don't get involved.
- Councils and community groups should plan together.
- Communicate the risks, how you're addressing them in your plan, and where you need volunteers to help.

Preparing

- Encourage individuals and households to take responsibility for their own preparation: better prepared at home, more likely to be in a good position to support the community.
- Keep reminding people about preparation tasks: the CFS' *26 Weeks to Prepare* is an excellent example.
- Think about mental health preparation and training.

Responding

- If you have organised a leader, know how you're going to get and share information, and who's doing what – you'll be in a good position to cope with the event.
- Emergency services have the experience and oversight, follow their instructions.
- Know where council, other levels of government and response agencies fit.

Recovering

- Support each other and recovery agencies during these disruptive times.
- Keep communications open so you know what the community needs – and have a unified voice with government and recovery agencies.
- Remember that people who have moved away also need support.

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P5 Gibson, C.A. & Tarrant, M. (2010) *A 'conceptual models' approach to organisational resilience*: Gibson and Tarrant discuss the range of inter-dependant factors needed to manage organisational resilience, Vol 25, Australian Journal of Emergency Management

P5 The Australian Disaster Resilience Index
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P5 SA2: Australian Bureau of Statistics' Statistical Area Level 2 population grouping: Generally have a population between 3,000 and 25,000. Their purpose is to represent a community that interacts together socially and economically. SA2s represent suburbs within cities and catchments of rural areas.

P5 Link to Census data https://abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/search-by-area. Click on "General Community Profile" to get the list of 60+ population tables.

P6 Red Cross *Preparing For Emergencies* website https://www.redcross.org.au/prepare/

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