

11 June 2020

Committee Secretary
Department of the Senate
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FECCA submission regarding COVID-19

The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) is the national peak body representing Australia's culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities and their organisations.

FECCA provides advocacy, develops policy and promotes issues on behalf of its constituency and members to Government and the broader community and would like to thank our members for their input into the COVID-19 response and to this submission. FECCA strives to ensure that the needs and aspirations of Australians from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds are given proper recognition in public policy.

The COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented in cause and consequences but for the CALD community in Australia issues like delayed information provision, immigration delays, difficulty accessing to health care, equity in aged care, experiences of racism, lack of appropriate support in domestic and family violence situations, social isolation, poor mental health outcomes, issues of employment and a gap in accessibility of technological infrastructure are not new experiences. The urgent and critical situations experienced by many people from CALD backgrounds during this crisis are intensified symptoms of a system that is not fit for purpose for Australian society. FECCA appreciates this opportunity to participate in the recovery from COVID-19 and will extend this support into the future with the hope of building a better Australia for all.

FECCA would welcome the opportunity to expand on this submission as required. FECCA acknowledges the Government's efforts in dealing with these complex issues and offers its support in its efforts to respond to this pandemic. For enquiries please contact FECCA CEO Mohammad Al-Khafaji at mohammad@fecca.org.au or on (02) 6282 5755.

Recommendations

Racism

- Establish an ongoing proactive national anti-racism strategy and campaign

Communication

- Strengthen two-way communication mechanisms between CALD communities and Government
- Embed a feedback mechanism for all future Government correspondence to ensure information is being received and understood as intended
- Conduct a nationwide analysis of who was unable to access Government information during this emergency
- Value and invest in multicultural organisations and CALD communities as the solution to ensuring equity in communication

Technological Connectivity Gaps

- Identify and rectify gaps in connectivity with a focus on rural and regional locations

Isolation and Mental Health

- A framework for mental health in multicultural Australia must become mandatory for all service providers¹

Older People and Isolation

- Assist older people, their families, and aged care? providers in assessing and balancing risk between contracting COVID-19 and health impacts of isolation

Aged care

- Include all members of the Aged Care Diversity Sub-group in the formulation of new codes, policies, and procedures
- Support post COVID-19 recovery for multiservice organisations who did not qualify for JobKeeper

Medical Care

- Ensure equal access to medical care for all regardless of visa
- Ensure health actors collect data on ethnicity for targeted information and subsequent research

Destitution of Temporary Visa Holders

- Ensure accurate numbers and details are used to describe the people contained in the broad category of temporary visa holders
- Ensure transparency and efficient processing of applications for those on temporary visas applying to become permanent residents
- Provide a safety net for refugees and people seeking asylum on bridging visas who do not have access to SRSS

¹ <https://embracementalhealth.org.au/service-providers/framework-landing>

- Plan for the wellbeing of those left behind during COVID-19 to ensure Australia recovers with a whole of society approach.

Domestic and family violence

- Invest in CALD specialist domestic and family violence services, including crisis and emergency accommodation services, to respond to increased need as restrictions ease

To ensure people from CALD backgrounds are considered throughout the recovery and into the future FECCA would welcome the opportunity:

- to support the COVID-19 Commission
- to contribute our expertise as well as the perspectives of our members from across Australia as a part of the upcoming JobMaker working groups.

Discussion

Racism

- *Recommendation: Establish an ongoing proactive national anti-racism strategy and campaign*

COVID-19 has seen a spike in both subtle and overt racial discrimination towards Asian Australians. FECCA members and constituents have reported racism as a key issue during the COVID-19 outbreak. FECCA has long been calling for a national anti-racism strategy and campaign because, unlike COVID-19, racism is not new to people from CALD backgrounds in Australia. Now FECCA members and communities are looking for leadership and action in this space. Without urgent action there will be a rise in these incidents and normalisation of such behaviour.

Introducing an anti-racism strategy will also be essential in assisting Australia's social and economic recovery from COVID-19. Addressing and reducing both racial abuse and systematic racism, will help to make sure that CALD Australians do not bear the brunt of community frustrations during the recovery period; and provide the economic benefits of increased social cohesion.

Communication

Recommendations:

- *Strengthen communications mechanisms for and from CALD communities whilst ensuring consistency*
- *Embed a feedback mechanism for all future Government correspondence to ensure information is being received and understood as intended*
- *Conduct a nationwide analysis of who was left behind during this emergency*
- *Multicultural organisations and CALD communities must be valued and invested in as the solution to ensuring equity in communication*

During a health crisis it is essential that health information and information about changes in rules, laws and policy are communicated effectively and understood by all people in Australia. Throughout this crisis, information provision has been recognised as inconsistent and confusing by many communities across Australia. FECCA received reports on the lack of clear, concise, and timely information provided in-language, in simple English and delivered verbally to those who need it. FECCA heard that *'messages and information is still quite confusing'*, *'there should be more and faster translation of health and governance information in languages'* and *'simplify language and issue clearer and more concise directives.'* A significant concern reported to FECCA is uncertainty about what happens if a person does test positive to COVID-19. This lack of information can allow fear to build and spread and reduce the willingness of CALD Australians to get tested.

FECCA continues to hear that individuals and communities have been saturated by information without clarity on which source is the correct source of truth with inconsistencies between States and Territories has been a source of confusion and uncertainty during an already uncertain time. FECCA members are concerned by preliminary evidence that there is a low uptake of COVID-19 testing amongst CALD communities showing that messaging on testing is not getting through.

Australian Governments must work together and consider the people they are intending to reach and whether they have received and understand this information. A feedback mechanism for all future Government correspondence must be embedded to ensure information is being received and understood as intended. FECCA urges the Government to consider that information provision is key to access and equity and those who did/have not received appropriate information in their language written or verbal as required have been denied this Government obligation (as outlined in The Australian Government's Multicultural Access and Equity Policy).

During this crisis, FECCA members across Australia have played an integral role of information provision to the CALD communities in their regions. FECCA members know their community, their needs and how to reach them. These trusted relationships have been built over decades allowing FECCA members to support their communities during such crises. A major challenge for many FECCA members now is managing community expectations about the return to pre-COVID life. People are having difficulty reconciling the health risks with seemingly mixed messages of go back to school, have small gatherings and some community activities restarting. Accessible communication is a key pillar to access and equity and must be maintained throughout and beyond the COVID-19 recovery. These communities and connections must be valued and invested in as the solution to ensuring equity in communication.

Technological Connectivity Gaps

- *Recommendation: Identify and rectify gaps in connectivity with a focus on rural and regional locations*

The restrictions put in place to slow the spread of COVID-19 and the push for socialising, service delivery, work and school to be delivered online has magnified the digital divide that exists throughout Australia. Many people have faced barriers in participating in society during this period such as digital literacy levels, availability of technology, access to regular and reliable internet and the cost associated with digital connectivity.

Communication from the Government has relied heavily on online methods and assumed that all people have regular and reliable access to the internet. However, FECCA has heard from our members across Australia that this is not the case. An initial audit conducted by Wimmera Development Association and Ballarat Regional Multicultural Council has revealed that many families did not have the computers necessary to continue to participate in their regular activities including education. The audit also revealed that due to lack of home internet connectivity in the region many people were forced to use their mobile internet during COVID-19 with both home and mobile internet speeds well below the national average. This gap in accessibility is not limited to Wimmera and must be addressed.

Issues of connectivity have affected:

- older people who are not digital literate and have been increasingly isolated during this period
- young people who cannot participate in their regular gatherings once online due to data cost
- children who have not been able to have equitable access to lessons without the required technology or internet connectivity in regional areas.

This gap has jeopardised online engagement and impacted access to critical health information, loneliness, mental health and educational outcomes.

Isolation and Mental Health

- *Recommendation: A framework for mental health in multicultural Australia must become mandatory for all service providers²*

In 2020 many communities across Australia experienced the bushfire crisis followed by COVID-19 both compounding other issues impacting the mental health and wellbeing of people from CALD backgrounds. FECCA has heard that for people from CALD backgrounds, just like the rest of Australia, concern for and distance from family is having a huge impact. FECCA heard, *'I miss seeing my mother. Breaks my heart'* and *'family overseas is a constant concern.'* For those with family living overseas, this concern and distance will be extended until COVID-19 is controlled globally.

FECCA members have highlighted mental health amongst CALD communities as a concern during the COVID-19 recovery period emphasising the need for access and equity for all people in Australia in receiving support for mental health. Before COVID-19 arrived, many people were already pushed to their limit with a lack of appropriate mental health services for people from CALD backgrounds—especially those from non-English speaking backgrounds. A framework for mental health in multicultural Australia must become mandatory for all service providers.

Older People and Isolation

- *Recommendation: Assist older people, their families and aged care providers in assessing and balancing risk between contracting COVID-19 and health impacts of isolation*

Social isolation of the elderly will continue to be an issue as regular support groups and activities are not running. AIHW records as many as 19% of older Australians are socially isolated³. These people, particularly those from CALD communities, need continuing support throughout and beyond COVID-19 to ensure their physical and mental health is protected from the impacts of social isolation. FECCA members have noted that human contact over the phone has had a huge impact on their regular clients and hope to have the resources to extend their services in the future.

Going forward, FECCA members and other organisations who provide these services must consider how they ensure older people return to activities whilst considering the balance of risks for this cohort. All health information regards older people as high risk for contracting COVID-19 however the balance between this risk and long-term impacts for older people spending increased time at home have not yet been clearly communicated.

Aged care

Recommendations:

- *Include all members of the Aged Care Diversity Sub-group in the formulation of new codes, policies, and procedures*

² <https://embracemantalhealth.org.au/service-providers/framework-landing>

³ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/d18a1d2b-692c-42bf-81e2-47cd54c51e8d/aihw-australias-welfare-2017-chapter5-1.pdf.aspx>

- *Support post COVID-19 recovery for multiservice organisations who did not qualify for JobKeeper*

The recent COVID-19 Residential Care Visitor Access Code and the Free COVID-19 Support Line for Senior Australians did not reflect the needs of diverse Australians. Representation from the members of the Aged Care Diversity Sub-group at the inception would have addressed this challenge. The Aged Care Diversity Framework and Action Plans began to make diversity part of 'business as usual' in aged care policy and practice, not to facilitate special considerations for people from diverse backgrounds. Multiservice organisations have experienced financial deficits and interruptions to some parts of their service while at the same time, other parts are locked into funded programs. As they have not met the required drop in revenue, they are ineligible for JobKeeper to support their staff. This drop in revenue without a drop in demand from clients will have long lasting detrimental impacts on such organisations which must be resolved.

Medical Care

Recommendations:

- *Ensure equal access to medical care for all regardless of visa*
- *Collect data on ethnicity for targeted information and subsequent research*

When COVID-19 reached Australia's shores and began to spread, FECCA heard that individuals and their representatives, were concerned that many people in the community did not have access to medical care. During a global pandemic, cost should not impede any person from accessing medical care. This is both a matter of human rights and of public health. The Government should ensure universal access to testing and treatment during epidemics and pandemics for any person in Australia during such crisis.

There is increasing evidence from the US and the UK that a disproportionate number of people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are contracting and dying from COVID19. As Australian data appears to only report on age and sex, we encourage the government to also collect data on ethnicity which could be useful for targeted information and subsequent research.

Destitution for Temporary Visa Holders

Recommendations:

- *Ensure accurate numbers and details are used to describe the people contained in the broad category of temporary visa holders*
- *Ensure transparency and efficient processing of applications for those on temporary visas applying to become permanent residents*
- *Provide a safety net for refugees and people seeking asylum on bridging visas who do not have access to SRSS*
- *Plan for the wellbeing of those left behind during COVID-19 to ensure Australia recovers with a whole of society approach*

'All temporary visa workers have dreams to become Australian citizen, we have invested money, effort and time to obtain our visas and we are ready to contribute in the Australian community.'

'Our tax will help COVID-19 people. But if we lose our jobs.. we won't get any help?'

The broad category of temporary visa holders includes temporary skilled visa holders, international students, people on bridging visas, New Zealand citizens on special visa category 444 and people currently holding temporary protection visas.

Jobseeker was not extended to cover these people and JobKeeper was extended just to New Zealand citizens on Special Visa Category 444. This decision to 'draw the line somewhere' has resulted in people who have been working and paying tax in Australia for many years left without access to support during this global pandemic. This decision has also arbitrarily discriminated against businesses in Australia who employ people on temporary visas who have therefore been ineligible for government support. FECCA heard:

'I've been stood down from my permanent part-time contract at work and my company is eligible for JobKeeper but I'm not because I'm a temporary resident.'

'My wife and I were both laid off from our jobs. Since our visa is temporary, we haven't received any help from the government or the companies we worked for despite we've been working for almost 4 years in the case of my wife and over 1 in mine.'

'Two day before I lost my full-time job. A main reason for losing the job could be they can't hold us as they might not get JobKeeper payment as we are not Australian citizen or permanent resident. What else can we do in this situation apart from encouraging us to find new job and getting more tensed about how to deal with financial situation.'

The Government decisions around eligibility for JobKeeper have resulted in destitution for many. Charities have been overwhelmed by a huge amount of people who hold temporary visas seeking help for basics such as food and shelter. For those now facing destitution, this health crisis will be even more difficult to bounce back from. Many people have reached out to FECCA expressing that they are *'feeling so rejected and lost my hope'*.

In lieu of support, the Prime Minister advised temporary visa holders 'As much as it's lovely to have visitors to Australia in good times, at times like this, if you are a visitor in this country, it is time ... to make your way home'. FECCA would like to take this opportunity to encourage further discussion about temporary visa holders to acknowledge their contribution and hopes for their lives in Australia. To discuss this vast and broad category of visa holders as visitors is misleading and encourages a false public perception. Their dedication to becoming Australians is not temporary, their actions towards permanency in Australia are not temporary, and their fiscal, cultural and social contributions are certainly permanent.

For many, the temporary nature of their visa is a consequence of the complicated and ever-changing pathway to permanency that those wanting to call Australia home must navigate. The amount of people waiting for their application for permanent residency (PR) has not been published by the Department of Home Affairs however FECCA has been contacted by a large number of people in this situation where, during a 3 year period, the wait time has increased from 3 months to now 29 months from the time of application. To apply for PR these people have already fulfilled all requirements during their 2 or 3 year temporary visa. FECCA heard:

'I had lost the job and no welfare are given to us being a visa holder whereas we had applied for permanent residency 887 Visa since July 2018 and still waiting due to government increasing the processing time.' (applied for PR 21 months ago)

'Yes the processing time for our permanent residency -887 visa is increased to 26 to 29 months by DOHA earlier when I applied last year it was waiting period of 9 to 10 months.'(applied for PR 14 months ago)

'Either they can give me PR or give JobKeeper payment so that I can survive here' (applied for PR 10 months ago)

'Extremely long processing time (26-29 months) for 887 visa after fulfilling requirements for 4 years on a 489 visa. People like us are stuck in a limbo, deprioritised and unable to move forward with our lives. The virus has put us in a difficult position and we feel unwanted.' (applied for PR 12 months ago)

'Been waiting for permanent residency under subclass 887 near about two years only contacted once by home affair and been asked about my newborn's medical which we have done in 5 days, now it's been 6 months and we haven't heard back. The whole family is struggling because of this never ending processing in this crisis.' (applied for PR 23 months ago)

During the shutdown period many FECCA members have reported communities assisting each other with food to ensure that nobody goes hungry. For those communities with many people stood down or terminated on temporary visas this support can only reach so far. During COVID-19 recovery, until these people have their PR applications processed, they will not be able to bounce back and will need ongoing support. A plan must be put in place for the wellbeing of those left behind during COVID-19 to ensure Australia recovers with a whole of society approach. This must include the future of migration, the role of temporary migration and a review of the consistent increase in PR application wait times.

Domestic and Family Violence

- *Recommendation: Invest in CALD specialist domestic and family violence services, including crisis and emergency accommodation services, to respond to increased need as restrictions ease*

As soon as COVID-19 restrictions began FECCA heard of a rise in domestic and family violence (DFV) and a fall in the reporting of these crimes. The restrictions, whilst necessary to contain the spread, kept many women and children in their homes with perpetrators of violence with no access to a safe haven of work or school. FECCA and FECCA members are anticipating an increase in reporting of DFV as COVID restrictions ease and know there will be issues around supporting women and their families. Women have not been able to access services over phone and online during the lockdown period. There is community concern that money provided by the Federal Government has been allocated to mainstream domestic and family violence services without consideration for the appropriateness of these services for many people from CALD backgrounds. FECCA urges the Government to invest in CALD specific domestic and family violence services and ensure all services are appropriate for people from CALD backgrounds.

Related Matters

COVID-19 has revealed many issues of access and equity for people from CALD backgrounds. It has also revealed the adaptability and willingness of multicultural organisations in responding to such a crisis. FECCA and its members are ready to assist in the COVID-19 recovery and recommend that governments work to analyse gaps in the

response as well as strengths in existing organisations and networks. To ensure people from CALD backgrounds are considered throughout the recovery and into the future FECCA would welcome the opportunity to:

- support the COVID-19 Commission
- contribute expertise as well as the perspectives of our members from across Australia as a part of the upcoming JobMaker working groups