

Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia

Submission – Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience

Who we are

The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) is the national peak body representing people from multicultural communities and their organisations across Australia. Through the membership of state, territory, and regional councils, we represent over 1,500 community organisations and their members.

What we do

For over 40 years, FECCA has proudly worked alongside culturally and linguistically diverse communities, the broader Australian society and the Commonwealth Government to build a successful, productive and inclusive multicultural Australia where everyone, no matter their background or how long they have lived in this country, can belong equally and reach their full potential.

FECCA draws on the lived experiences of the people and their descendants that have migrated to Australia and the expertise of its extensive and diverse network to develop and promote inclusive, innovative and responsible public policy that reflects the needs and perspectives of multicultural Australia to build a strong, innovative and inclusive nation that harnesses its greatest strength, the diversity of its people.

This submission

This submission focuses on highlighting the gaps in existing emergency management services, the current role played by multicultural community organisations and volunteer groups during and after natural disasters, and the importance of engaging with such organisations and groups in a strategic manner to enhance the preparedness and resilience of multicultural communities.

FECCA thanks the Committee for the opportunity to share the knowledge, experiences and expertise of members to improve services and outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse communities. FECCA wishes to thank its members for their contribution towards this submission and their ongoing work with culturally and linguistically diverse people in Australia.

We welcome the opportunity to expand on this submission as required. For enquiries, please contact FECCA CEO Mohammad Al-Khafaji at ceo@fecca.org.au or on (02) 6282 5755.



In development of this submission, we pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past and present and recognise that the land we live and work upon was never ceded. FECCA proudly supports the Uluru Statement from the Heart and its call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice protected by the Constitution.

FECCA acknowledges that our work on behalf of multicultural Australia has learnt from and been enriched by First Nations peoples and organisations. We are committed to continuing to listen, learn and support First Nations peoples in the journey to a more inclusive society.

Background on multicultural communities and disasters

Australia's diversity is growing. Australia has never been more culturally and linguistically diverse. The most recent Census showed that almost half of Australians have at least one parent born overseas (48.2 per cent) and the population continues to be drawn from around the world, with 27.6 per cent reporting a birthplace overseas.¹

Multicultural communities are not homogenous. Multicultural communities are incredibly diverse, yet, are often grouped together as “culturally and linguistically diverse” and treated as homogenous in government policies and services. This overlooks the myriad of differences between communities, such as culture and language, and results in services and messages that do not connect with the intended audience as they are not nuanced to specific cultural differences. This is further compounded when in-language information is often limited to machine translated materials which are regarded as ineffective by community organisations and leaders.

Communities' understanding of emergencies and disasters differ². Experiences, perceptions, and knowledge about emergencies are different from one community to another. The nature of emergencies in different countries, and each nation's approach to emergency management is unique. As a result, some individuals may not be aware of natural disasters such as bushfires as they may not be common in their countries of birth and therefore, they would not be familiar with the processes to follow. An individual's preparedness and resilience also depend on factors such as length of stay in Australia, proficiency in English and previous traumatic experiences, and these differences in experiences, perceptions and awareness should be taken into account in emergency management.

Multicultural communities are not engaged proactively in government decision making and are often an afterthought, which results in negative outcomes particularly during emergencies. COVID-19 demonstrated how multicultural communities are largely absent from the overall emergency response approach which resulted in disproportionately negative outcomes for communities. Individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds were more susceptible to contracting COVID-19 due to reasons such as higher representation in insecure forms of work and residing in densely populated locations. There were almost three times as many COVID-19 related deaths among people who were born overseas, as compared to those born in Australia. This clearly reflects how multicultural communities' experiences and unique circumstances were not considered in discussions and decisions made around pandemic response.

Engagement through mainstream media and official government channels are not effective mechanisms of reaching communities. During COVID-19, the government learnt how community organisations and leaders play a crucial role in passing on information to communities in a trusted and an effective manner, and passing information from communities back to government. Communities rely on a diverse range of sources to receive information, and messaging should be tailored for individual communities. Community organisations, volunteer groups and leaders with their deep and intricate understanding of their communities are best positioned to advise governments about the most effective means of engagement with different communities. The role played by multicultural community organisations and volunteer groups in supporting migrant and refugee communities overcome the challenges faced during COVID-19 and recent extreme weather events, demonstrates the need to strategically engage with such groups in disaster response and recovery.

¹ [2021 Census: Nearly half of Australians have a parent born overseas, ABS](#)

² [Emergency Resilience in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities - Challenges and Opportunities, Australian Red Cross](#)

a.iv) The role of Australian multicultural civil and volunteer groups, and not-for-profit organisations in preparing for, responding to and recovering from natural disasters, and the impact of more frequent and more intense natural disasters on their ongoing capacity and capability

Multicultural community organisations and community groups play a central role in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from emergencies and natural disasters but are currently not adequately resourced to do so as effectively as they could. These roles include but are not limited to acting as a conduit between emergency management services and multicultural communities to pass on information around disaster management to communities, assisting emergency response services to approach communities during disasters, and assisting individuals with limited English proficiencies and other accessibility concerns to navigate through disaster recovery processes such as to access hardship support payments.

Multicultural community organisations' capacity to engage as effectively as they could is affected by resource constraints and funding targeted to broader community development. These organisations work on a wide array of issues within their limited resources and cannot focus too much on a single issue such as disaster preparedness and response without targeted funding. As natural disasters become more frequent and intense, community organisations and groups will experience challenges playing the current crucial role they play during and after natural disasters, repeatedly and at a much larger scale. To ensure that these organisations and groups have the capacities and capabilities to serve multicultural communities during intense and more frequent natural disasters, adequate measures should be taken by governments and emergency management services to strategically engage with and invest in these organisations and groups.

Emergency response services engage with multicultural community organisations and volunteer groups in a rather ad-hoc manner, often without a long-term strategic focus. Much of the current engagement is around disaster response and recovery, rather than on disaster preparedness. Furthermore, the efforts made by emergency management services to engage with multicultural community organisations and volunteer groups are fragmented and are not centrally coordinated, resulting in efforts usually being limited to certain locations and regions.

(b.i.) Consideration of alternative models, including repurposing or adapting existing Australian multicultural civil and volunteer groups, not-for-profit organisations and state-based services

Targeted approaches deliver the strongest results. Due to the diversity among multicultural communities, targeted approaches, such as communication through trusted channels, have proven to be highly effective during emergencies. During COVID-19, targeted communication strategies developed and delivered by grassroots community organisations were highly effective, in comparison to official national communication channels.

Multicultural community organisations and volunteer groups should play a key role in developing and delivering targeted approaches. Multicultural community organisations and volunteer groups understand the nuances in their communities, and more importantly, are trusted by communities. The organisations and groups have strong relationships with their communities, often engaging continuously on them on a wide range of issues. These strong relationships, the intricate understanding of communities and the mutual trust were invaluable assets during COVID-19, to develop and implement highly effective targeted communication strategies.

Case Study: Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland partnership with Brisbane North PHN on a COVID-19 vaccination campaign for culturally and linguistically diverse communities

The Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland (ECCQ) was engaged by Brisbane North PHN to develop and implement community awareness and education campaigns adapted to the needs of specific communities. The purpose of the campaigns was to increase vaccination rates, including boosters, among identified culturally and linguistically diverse populations in the Brisbane North PHN (BNPHN) region. Key community members and stakeholders were consulted to ensure that the target groups had equity of access to the campaigns and that they were effective. Consultations revealed that video campaigns would be the most effective among Afghan and African language groups, while social media tiles would be appropriate for Mandarin-speakers. The campaigns were designed in consultation with members from the respective communities, and feedback on content and the approaches were obtained at every step by community members and other stakeholders. The Mandarin social media tile was placed in Queensland Asian Business Weekly, Queensland Chinese Times, and Asian Community News Weekly electronic and hard-copy newspapers, as well as Facebook and WeChat platforms. The Dari, Hazaragi, Somali, Swahili, Tigrinya and English language videos were accessible via internet on YouTube and through the ECCQ Facebook page, through boosted posts. Furthermore, downloadable files were provided to stakeholders and community members, to provide the opportunity to share the videos through additional platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram.

Case Study: Breaking down the fear of uniforms in North Eastern Victoria³

In 2019, the North East Multicultural Association (NEMA) identified that local multicultural communities were fearful of engaging with a range of 'services in uniform'. To build trust and create spaces for interactions amongst communities and the emergency management sector, NEMA partnered with State Emergency Service (SES), Country Fire Authority (CFA), Ambulance Victoria, Victoria Police, and a number of other stakeholders, to organise an expo to allow multicultural communities to learn more about and interact with the various agencies in an informal setting. Some of the activities at the expo included allowing families to sound sirens, play with water hoses, and wear SES and CFA hats. The initiatives at the expo contributed to two-way communication and better engagement and understanding by communities and agencies, as well as a higher sense of community belonging.

Emergency management services and organisations should engage with multicultural community organisations and volunteer groups in a strategic manner. The case studies above emphasise community organisations' understanding around the unique challenges experienced by their communities, and possible avenues of overcoming such challenges. Emergency management services should build strong partnerships with multicultural community organisations and volunteer groups to allow all stakeholders to come together to co-develop and co-design tailored approaches to enhance the disaster preparedness and resilience of multicultural communities.

³ [North East Multicultural Association Case Study](#)

Case Study: Multicultural Regional Emergency Preparedness & Response Program

The Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria (ECCV), FECCA's state member for Victoria, is working with Victoria's regional ethnic councils and peak bodies to support communities in regions affected by the October 2022 floods to ensure that multicultural communities are integrated into local emergency management responses for future emergencies. The Multicultural Regional Emergency Preparedness & Response Program aims to embed engagement of multicultural communities within the regional local emergency management response and strengthen and support the vital work of local community leaders to help deliver better outcomes during any emergency management response, such as floods, bushfires and other natural disasters. ECCV is coordinating the development of regional working groups and supporting regional partners to have a seat at the table in local emergency response to help respond to the needs of local communities in future emergencies. The program will also help provide education and build awareness regarding emergency management preparedness and response among regional multicultural communities.

Funding recommendations

The Commonwealth and state and territory governments fund genuine collaboration between multicultural community organisations and volunteer groups, and emergency management services. In order to co-develop and co-design approaches tailored for multicultural communities, FECCA proposes to implement the Multicultural Emergency Management Partnership (MEMP) model developed by ECCV together with the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS), across all States and Territories. Currently, the Partnership brings together multicultural community leaders and representatives from emergency service organisations in Victoria, and replicating the model nation-wide would pave way for community leaders and emergency service representatives across the country to come together to develop targeted approaches for disaster preparedness and response. The partnership model ultimately aims to improve community engagement and cultural responsiveness in emergencies, and in Victoria, had fostered a genuine dialogue between multicultural community leaders and emergency management agencies for the first time.

Fund a small grants program to empower grassroots community organisations to support the Multicultural Emergency Management Partnerships across the nation with the engagement of communities to fill identified gaps in improving preparedness and resilience in their communities.

Proof of Concept: Victorian Multicultural Emergency Management Partnership (MEMP)

ECCV collaborated with VCOSS on the 'Emergency Preparedness and Resilience for Multicultural Communities' project, to work with community leaders across Victoria to respond to the immediate COVID-19 related needs and to build preparedness for future emergencies. ECCV and VCOSS worked with key multicultural community leaders and influencers to co-develop and co-design a leadership program, which resulted in the development of the MEMP, bringing together community leaders and representatives from the emergency management sector to work towards embedding a long-term inclusive approach to emergency management.

Objectives of the Multicultural Emergency Management Partnership

- To provide greater cultural safety and cultural responsiveness for all who participate in and with emergency management organisations.

- To increase mutual understanding and trust between multicultural communities and emergency management organisations.
- To strengthen community resilience by enabling communities to prepare for, cope with and recover from the impacts of emergencies.

Outcomes of the Multicultural Emergency Management Partnership

Collaboration between emergency management organisations and communities would result in:

- Building stronger relationships and multiple channels of communication.
- Strengthening and equipping community leaders with knowledge about local emergency management processes and tools, exploring together to allow for different approaches.
- Engaging community leaders in emergency management planning at the community level for relevant and tailored local approaches to emergencies.
- Developing simple, accurate and relevant information to disseminate in culturally safe and community-specific ways.
- Seeking opportunities and developing strategic alliances that build cultural safety and inclusion in emergency management organisations.
- Supporting the adaptation of recruitment and induction processes that increase workforce diversity in the regions and at the grassroots levels.