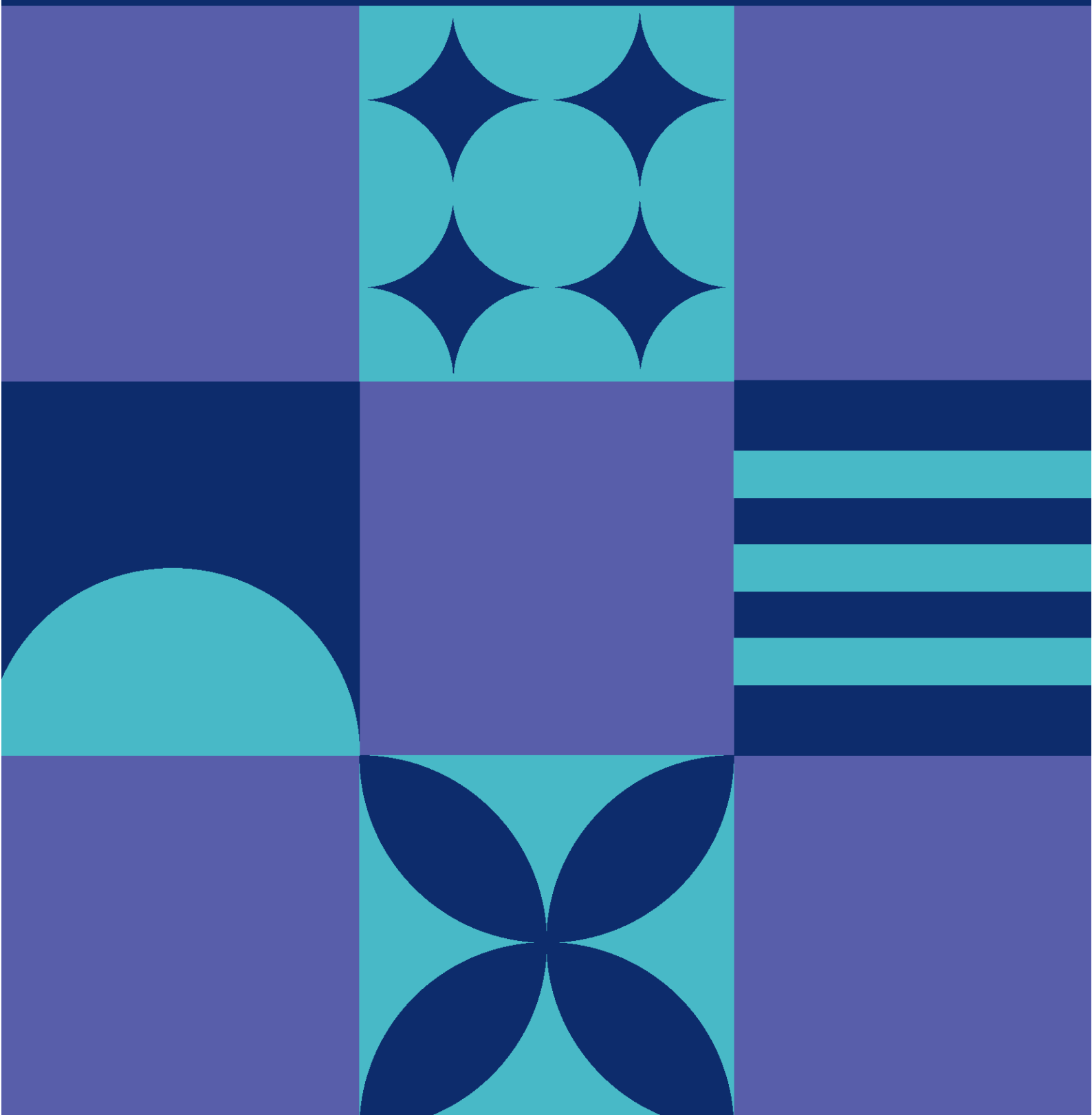
FECCA

Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia

Inquiry into Australia's national civil preparedness and resilience

Submission to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Defence



Who we are

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

For nearly 50 years, FECCA has worked with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, the broader Australian society, and governments to build a successful, productive, and inclusive multicultural nation. Drawing on lived experience, deep community connections, and the expertise of our members, FECCA develops and promotes inclusive, innovative and responsible public policy that reflects the needs and perspectives of multicultural Australia.

The FECCA network is our greatest strength. Through our network we can enhance the capacity of governments to strengthen public policy to meet the needs of the diverse Australian population. FECCA is a proven trusted partner to both CALD communities and government, operating as a sophisticated conduit by mobilising communities to work with government to develop and enrich public policy through community-led expertise and action.

FECCA's Position

FECCA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Submission to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Defence's (the Committee) Inquiry into national civil preparedness and resilience.

Australia's capacity to withstand a national crisis, whether conflict, pandemic, natural hazard or a large-scale disruption to supply chains, depends on more than infrastructure and stockpiles. Trust within and between communities, and between communities and institutions, is an essential foundation for civil preparedness and resilience.

Our submission maker four central arguments:

1. **Migrants are essential to national continuity.** Migrant workers sustain the health, logistics, manufacturing, transport and primary industries that a whole-of-nation defence response depends on. Safeguarding their security safeguards the continuity of essential services and supply chains.
2. **Preparedness and resilience must be community-led.** The COVID-19 pandemic showed that trusted community organisations play a vital role in reaching multicultural communities in times of crisis. Sustained partnership with, and investment in, these organisations before a crisis occurs will provide needed civil preparedness infrastructure.
3. **Social cohesion is a national security asset.** Multicultural communities are disproportionately targeted by disinformation, which erodes trust and deepens division during crises. Community-led media literacy and counter-disinformation measures are core national preparedness investments.
4. **Temporary visa holders should not be excluded from safety nets during national crises.** Many temporary visa holders, international students, older migrants and people with disability are excluded from core Commonwealth support. Extending crisis safety nets, where appropriate, to all residents protects public health, social stability and workforce continuity.

Responses to the Terms of Reference

1. **Whole-of nation support to National Defence for continuity of government and the accessibility of essential goods and services including fuel in crisis or conflict**

Whole-of-nation support to National Defence involves the integration of Defence with all levels of government, industry and civil society. Migrants make up a significant and vital share of Australia's workforce, helping to sustain essential services in times of crisis. In Australia, migrants account for 40.2% of all health care workers[1], while industries including manufacturing, logistics, engineering and transport are highly dependent on migrant labour. Each of these sectors is core to Australia's whole of society defence response, and to maintaining the supply of essential goods and services,

[1] Islam, M.I., Kim, Y. & Martiniuk, A. (2026). The health of Australian migrants working in health sectors: findings from the 2021 Australian Census. https://nslhd.libguides.com/blogs/staffwellbeing/12326/the-health-of-australian-migrants-working-in-health-sectors-findings-from-the-2

including food and fuel, under pressure.[2] Migration has played a critical role in Australia's response to past national challenges. Following the Second World War, large-scale migration supplied the labour and skills needed for post-war reconstruction and underpinned decades of prosperity and security.[3] This contribution cannot be taken for granted in a future crisis. Temporary visa holders may face loss of income, uncertainty about their visa conditions, and exclusion from support. Civil preparedness frameworks should therefore explicitly safeguard the visa, economic and workplace rights of migrant workers that are critical to prevent critical supply chain failures during national contingencies.

Civil preparedness also depends on social cohesion and civil mobilisation, neither of which can be delivered by government alone. Research across major catastrophes shows demonstrates that a community's social networks are crucial in determining how well it recovers.[4] FECCA cautions against relying on a purely top-down, government-centred approach to whole-of-nation civil defence. Community-led models build public confidence in emergency communications, support fairer distribution of resources and strengthen long-term adaptability.

For multicultural communities, top-down approaches may be especially ineffective due to language and cultural barriers and limited exposure to mainstream public engagement channels during crises. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this top-down approach failed multicultural communities due to an overreliance on translating mainstream messages rather than engaging communities in culturally tailored ways. Consequently, overseas-born Australians died at nearly three times the rate of Australian-born residents during the pandemic. FECCA and grassroots multicultural organisations stepped into this gap, adapting public health and safety information to be culturally responsive and distributing it through trusted channels, including community leaders, faith networks and ethnic media. These lessons must be built into national preparedness now, to ensure Australia is ready for the next crisis.

2. Working with state, territory and local governments to coordinate and optimise responses to contingencies

Multicultural community organisations play a central role in in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from national crises. As trusted organisations within their communities, they act as an indispensable conduit between emergency services, defence and other authorities, and multicultural communities They help people with limited English proficiency, low digital literacy or unfamiliarity with Australian systems to navigate complex relief processes and access support. However, their capacity to do this work is constrained by structural underfunding, which primarily comes through short-term grants for general community development or for recovery after a disaster has occurred. Organisations are then expected to mobilise during a crisis without the staff and systems that only sustained investment can build. Strategic, ongoing funding is needed to build their operational capacity before a national contingency occurs.

FECCA strongly encourages Commonwealth, State, Territory, and Local governments to co-design civil preparedness programs and projects in direct partnership with multicultural communities. A proven national benchmark is the Multicultural Emergency Management Partnership (MEMP) model developed by the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) with the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS). MEMP created structured, funded regional working groups that brought together multicultural community leaders, peak bodies, and emergency service agencies to co-design local contingency plans, build organisational cultural safety, and establish multi-channel, two-way emergency communication frameworks. Replicating and resourcing this model on a national scale would pave way for community leaders and emergency service representatives across the country to come together to develop targeted approaches for civil preparedness.

Working in partnership with multicultural community organisations can also help to address specific barriers for some communities. For example, "fear of uniforms" has been documented among former refugees and migrants from conflict zones. In regional Victoria, the Northeast Multicultural Association (NEMA) has shown that proactive, informal engagement between multicultural communities and uniformed personnel, including police, fire services, State Emergency Service (SES), and ambulance services, breaks down institutional distrust prior to crises.

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[2] Mackey, W., Coates, B. & Sherrell, H. (2022). Migrants in the Australian workforce: A guidebook for policy makers. https://grattan.edu.au/report/migrants-in-the-australian-workforce/

[3] Australian Government. (2023). Migration Strategy. https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/programs-subsite/migration-strategy/Documents/migration-strategy.pdf

[4] Aldrich, D.P. (2024). New tactics for a new era: how emergency management needs to change. *Australian Journal of Emergency Management.* https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/ajem-october-2024-new-tactics-for-a-new-era-how-emergency-management-needs-to-change/

The risks of relying solely on top-down approaches are heightened in times of national crisis. Emergency powers and extraordinary measures adopted during conflict, natural hazards or pandemics can disrupt normal democratic processes. Where communities are not engaged, these measures can erode institutional trust, and the burden of that erosion often falls disproportionately on communities that already feel marginalised or overlooked. Community partnership is the best safeguard against this outcome.

3. Collaboration with the private sector including key national logistics and infrastructure operators, as well as manufacturing, resources and primary industries

Logistics, primary industries and critical infrastructure operators depend on a stable workforce and on the local communities their workers live in. Migrants make up a vital share of that workforce, particularly in regional food production, processing, warehousing, freight and care. In a national defence contingency or regional conflict, business continuity is threatened not only by physical damage to assets, but by disruption to the social infrastructure that keeps workers housed, informed, healthy and able to get to work.

The Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding (Colvin Review) warned that without immediate, evidence-based investment in risk reduction, Australia faces an unsustainable rise in disaster costs. It found that 92 per cent of Commonwealth disaster funding between 2018-19 and 2022-23 was spent on response and recovery, compared with 8 per cent on risk reduction and resilience.[5] Investing before a crisis reduces physical damage and helps preserve local jobs and businesses.

For the private sector, resilience means protecting the human and social infrastructure that keeps essential workforces operating during national shocks. FECCA recommends that industry contingency planning recognise the workforce dependence of essential industries on migrant and temporary visa workers, and plan for their welfare and retention during a crisis.

4. Activating and preparing the wider Australian community for contingencies

Sustained national resilience requires a shift toward community-led models which recognise civil society as an important partner in response to national contingencies. Recent experience shows the value of this approach. Following the Bondi Beach attack, the WA Primary Health Alliance has funded culturally safe, trauma-informed mental health and wellbeing support for affected individuals and communities, including through multicultural organisations such as the Ethnic Communities' Council of Western Australia (ECCWA). Organisations like ECCWA provide culturally safe crisis support and work to strengthen social cohesion in times of heightened division.

Media literacy and counter-disinformation as preparedness infrastructure

Geopolitical tensions, regional conflict and other national crises also significantly increase the risk of disinformation threats. Misinformation and disinformation are a growing problem in Australia and globally, making it harder for people to take part in public life, and eroding trust in institutions and in each other. Research, including the Australian Government's Multicultural Framework Review, has found that many multicultural communities trust mainstream Australian media less than the general population.[6] Part of the reason is that they don't see themselves reflected in the news, so many rely more on media from overseas or diaspora media and on closed messaging platforms. This means multicultural communities are of heightened risk of being the target of disinformation campaigns. It also means that national messaging delivered only through mainstream channels will not reach these members of our community. Multicultural peak and community organisations are well-placed to co-design culturally responsive counter-disinformation strategies, media literacy initiatives, and anti-racism safeguards, all of which strengthen social cohesion and should be treated as core national security infrastructure.

FECCA's Media Literacy Program, funded by the Australian Government Department of Infrastructure Transport, Regional Development, Communications, Sport and the Arts from July 2024 to June 2026, was a national initiative to

[5] Colvin, A. (2024). Independent Review of Commonwealth Disaster Funding. https://www.nema.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-10/Independent%20Review%20of%20Commonwealth%20Disaster%20Funding%20-%20Final%20report%20-%20Medium%20Res.PDF

[6] Department of Home Affairs. (2024). Multicultural Framework Review. https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/multicultural-framework-review/multicultural-framework-review

strengthen media literacy and build resilience to misinformation and disinformation among multicultural communities. Instead of running one public education campaign, FECCA built the program around community organisations and leaders that communities already trust. These are the people best placed to strengthen media literacy from within their own communities. Across three phases, the program worked in partnership with 22 partner organisations who undertook 2,828 community consultation engagements to identify media literacy needs, and trained 142 community leaders who delivered 156 media literacy sessions to 2,771 people in their own communities across the country. The program found a substantial increase in confidence and early behaviour change among community participants, with 89% of partner organisations describing learning extending beyond individual participants. This model is a cost-effective, scalable and established model which can be sustained and expanded as part of national preparedness.

Addressing safety net gaps

Multicultural Australia is not homogenous, and preparedness planning must avoid one-size-fits-all assumptions. Communities are shaped by compounding, intersecting factors, including age, gender, disability, regional location, and visa status. During national emergencies, cohorts such as temporary visa holders, international students, older migrants, and multicultural people with disabilities face heightened vulnerabilities because they are excluded from standard Commonwealth safety nets, including Medicare, Centrelink, Disability Support Pensions, and NDIS support. The COVID-19 pandemic made this visible, with many temporary visa holders left without income support and reliant on community organisations and charities for food and housing support.

Leaving these populations without basic economic, health, and housing support during contingencies undermines public health, social stability and the continuity of the essential workforce described above. People who cannot afford to isolate, see a doctor or stay housed cannot follow public health directions or keep working safely. Civil preparedness planning must ensure that emergency relief, health care and basic income support are available to all residents during a declared national crisis, regardless of visa status.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1 – Safeguard Australia's essential migrant workforce: Protect the visa, health, workplace rights and emergency safety nets of migrant and temporary visa workers across essential industries including healthcare, logistics, manufacturing, and primary industries to guarantee operational continuity during crises.

Recommendation 2 – Invest in multicultural community organisations for civil preparedness and resilience: Provide ongoing, multi-year funding to multicultural peak and community organisations to run projects and programs which build civil preparedness, rather than relying on short-term grants of post-disaster recovery funding.

Recommendation 3 – Treat media literacy and counter-disinformation as national preparedness infrastructure: Sustain and expand community-led media literacy programs such as FECCA's Media Literacy Program, partnering with multicultural community organisations in responding to disinformation which weakens social cohesion.

Recommendation 4 – Guarantee safety nets for temporary migrants: Ensure that emergency relief, health care and basic income and housing support are available to all residents during a declared national crisis, regardless of visa status.

Conclusion

Australia's resilience in the face of conflict or national crisis will be tested not only by the strength of its defences and infrastructure, but by the strength of its social fabric. Multicultural Australia is a source of that strength. Migrant workers keep essential services running, and multicultural community organisations reach people that government cannot reach on its own.

A whole-of-nation approach to civil preparedness must build on the lessons of COVID-19 now, before the next crisis, by investing in community-led partnerships, safeguarding our essential migrant workforce, defending against disinformation and ensuring no one is left outside the safety net.

FECCA and its member network stand ready to work with the Committee, the Department of Defence and governments at all levels to build a civil preparedness framework that works for all Australians. We would welcome the opportunity to appear before the Committee to discuss this submission.

FECCA

Office Address

Unit 1, Level 6, 54 Marcus Clarke Street
Canberra ACT 2601

Postal Address

GPO Box 2180
Canberra ACT 2601

t 02 6282 5755
e admin@fecca.org.au
s @ifecca

fecca.org.au