



Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia

**Submission to the Alternative Commonwealth
Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper**

20 September 2023



FECCA pays its respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past and present and recognise 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.

Foreword

The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) thanks the Australian Government for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Alternative Commonwealth Capabilities for Crisis Response Discussion Paper.

We thank our members for their contributions towards this submission and for their ongoing work to support culturally and linguistically diverse people in Australia.

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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 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 experience of the people and their descendants who have migrated to Australia and the expertise of its extensive and diverse membership to develop and promote inclusive, innovative and responsible public policy that reflects the needs and perspectives of multicultural Australia. We are committed to building a strong, innovative and inclusive nation that harnesses its greatest strength, the diversity of its people.

The FECCA network is FECCA's 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 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.

Introduction

Australia has never been more multicultural. People from across the world arrive in Australia, bringing with them a rich diversity of backgrounds, life experiences, skills, and strengths. The most recent Census shows that more than half of Australians have a multicultural background with 51.5 per cent having at least one parent born overseas, 29.3 per cent reporting a birthplace overseas, and 22.8 per cent speaking a language other than English at home¹.

Multicultural communities are not homogenous. Multicultural communities are incredibly diverse, however they are often grouped together under the category of 'culturally and linguistically diverse' and treated as a homogenous cohort. 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 difference. The experiences and perspectives of people from multicultural backgrounds are not only affected by their cultural identities, but also by other intersecting social and political identity markers such as age, gender, sexual orientation, impairment, class, religion, and visa status, as well as factors such as the area in which they live. These identities do not exist independently; each informs the

¹ [Census of Population and Housing, ABS 2021](#)

other and can have overlapping and compounding effects on a person's life experiences.

Multicultural communities are not engaged proactively in government decision-making and are often considered as an afterthought which results in negative outcomes, particularly during crises. COVID-19 demonstrated how multicultural communities are largely absent from the overall crisis 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 Australia², reflecting that multicultural communities' experiences and unique circumstances were not considered in decision-making on crisis response to the pandemic.

Opportunity for the Government to better meet the needs of 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 on improving communities' preparedness and resilience to disasters and crises. The Review is an opportunity for the Government to address the shortcomings and barriers in existing crisis preparedness, response and recovery efforts and implement alternative strategies and initiatives that better meet the needs of multicultural communities.

How could the Commonwealth build community resilience and capability so they are better able to respond to and recover from national-level crises?

Recommendation 1: Engage with local community organisations and leaders to develop place-based disaster preparedness, response, and recovery strategies.

Multicultural communities' experiences, perceptions, and knowledge about emergencies and disasters differ from one community to another. The nature of disasters in different countries, and each country's approach to emergency management is unique. Some individuals may not be aware of the concept or reality of natural disasters such as bushfires as they are not common in their country of birth. The likely implication of this is that whole communities are not familiar with the processes to follow in the case of a bushfire, putting them at particular risk. An individual's preparedness and resilience also depend on factors such as existing connections and networks, length of residence, proficiency in English and previous traumatic experiences. At the same time, people from countries that experience frequent natural disasters such as cyclones, floods, earthquakes, tsunamis etc. could have had exposure to sophisticated disaster preparedness and response systems used in their countries of birth. Co-designing and co-developing place-based disaster preparedness, response and recovery strategies with communities will allow the strategies to be tailored to better meet the needs of local multicultural communities, while also providing an opportunity to improve these strategies based on the learnings and experiences of disaster preparedness, response and recovery strategies used overseas.

Multicultural community organisations and leaders have deep understanding of the strengths, needs and challenges in their communities and are trusted by their communities due to long-term, ongoing engagement on a wide range of matters. Community organisations and leaders currently play a crucial role in responding to emergencies and natural disasters, acting as a conduit between emergency services and communities. Multicultural community organisations and leaders have the connections and trust of their communities and can reach even those that for others may be hard to reach. They pass on important information in-language in a culturally appropriate and accessible manner and assist emergency services to

² [Government data reveals being born overseas increases your risk of dying from COVID-19 in Australia, ABC News, February 2022](#)

connect directly with multicultural communities so they can provide the support communities need. As demonstrated in the case studies below, these strong relationships, the intricate understanding of communities and the mutual trust can be invaluable assets in developing and implementing highly effective disaster preparedness, response and recovery strategies.

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 recent disasters 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. The program continues work that began during the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to improved coordination of on-the-ground support for regional migrant communities as ECCV worked with regional ethnic councils and the Victorian Multicultural Commission to establish multicultural working groups, and connect the councils with the local regional incident management teams, improving communication and service delivery to local communities. 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.

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

In 2019, the North East Multicultural Association (NEMA), one of FECCA's regional members in Victoria, 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.

Recommendation 2: Employ targeted strategies to disseminate information on disaster preparedness, response and recovery, in-language through trusted channels.

Targeted approaches such as communication through trusted channels, have proven to be highly effective during disasters and emergencies. During COVID-19, targeted communication strategies developed and delivered by grassroots community organisations were more effective in comparison to official national communication channels, as targeted approaches developed and delivered by community organisations take into account the diversity between multicultural communities and are tailored to meet the specific needs and challenges of individual communities.

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), FECCA's state member for Queensland, 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.

Recommendation 3: Invest in building the capacity and capability of community organisations to improve community preparedness, response and recovery to disasters.

Disaster preparedness, response and recovery strategies should include significant investment in supporting community-led, place-based strategies and initiatives. This must involve adequate funding for local community organisations and emergency management agencies to work collaboratively to develop strategies that work best for communities. Currently, multicultural community organisations' capacity to engage as effectively as they can is affected by resource constraints and funding targeted to broader community development. Community organisations are required to work on a wide array of issues with limited resources, resulting in limited ability to have a strong focus on a single issue such as disaster preparedness, response and recovery without targeted funding. As natural disasters become more frequent and intense, community organisations will experience challenges meeting the current crucial role they play during and after disasters. To ensure these organisations 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 invest in these organisations.

Genuine collaboration with local community organisations has proven to be particularly impactful for multicultural communities. COVID-19 demonstrated how people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are underserved in emergency response approaches. Commonwealth Government efforts to collaborate with local community organisations to successfully increase the uptake of COVID-19 vaccinations during and post-pandemic, demonstrated the benefits of investing in new ways of doing things, particularly those that are community-led and community implemented.

FECCA recommends governments invest in emergency management services across states and territories and local multicultural community organisations and leaders to work collaboratively to ensure all communities across Australia receive the services they need for effective disaster preparedness, response and recovery. The Multicultural Emergency Management Partnership model developed by the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) and the Victorian Council of Social Services (VCOSS), was proven to be a genuinely collaborative model that provided a unique opportunity for communities and emergency management services to prepare for and manage the needs of multicultural communities in emergency situations, through a network of trusted and connected community leaders.

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.