



Valuing strengths, building resilience

Improving emergency management outcomes for multicultural communities in Victoria

September 2022

About us



Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV)

is a member-based peak body for migrant and refugee communities in Victoria. ECCV has more than 220 organisational members, including ethnic associations, multicultural service providers, and eight regional ethnic communities' councils across the state. Since 1974, ECCV has been advocating for human rights, freedom, respect, equality and dignity for multicultural communities, and for the building of a socially cohesive and inclusive Victorian community.



Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS)

is the peak body for Victoria's social and community sector, and the state's premier social advocacy body. We work towards a Victoria free from poverty and disadvantage, where all people and communities are supported to thrive. We champion wellbeing and inclusive growth. VCOSS supports and advocates on behalf of its members. We respect the unique perspectives of people with experience of poverty or inequality and seek to strengthen and elevate their voices. VCOSS is independent and impartial. We are not affiliated with any political party.

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This report was funded by the Department of Health.



ECCV and VCOSS acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Victoria and their continuing connection to land, water and community. We pay respect to their Elders past and present.

Thank you

We humbly acknowledge this paper relies heavily on the insights, observations and experiences volunteered by multicultural community members and leaders. We thank them for their contribution.

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Acronyms

ABCD Asset based community development	CFA Country Fire Authority	EMV Emergency Management Victoria	SES State Emergency Service
AIDR Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience	ECCV Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria	FRV Fire Rescue Victoria	VCOSS Victorian Council of Social Service
BNHRC Bushfire & Natural Hazards CRC	EM Emergency Management	IGEM Inspector-General for Emergency Management Victoria	

Executive summary

The COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing threats posed by climate change are reshaping the disaster resilience and emergency management policies of our time. Since 2009 and the devastating Black Saturday bushfires, Victoria has embarked on ambitious, whole-of-system reforms of the emergency management sector.

These reforms are premised on the idea of shared responsibility: government, agencies, business, industry and the community working together to improve capacity and resilience, with grassroots participation essential in building a strong emergency sector.¹

However, the promise of these systemic reforms is not equally shared. Migrant and refugee communities in Victoria continue to be disproportionately affected by emergencies and disasters. For instance, data shows that there have been almost three times as many COVID-19 deaths amongst people born overseas as amongst those born in Australia.²

The Emergency Management Diversity and Inclusion Framework, published by Emergency Management Victoria (EMV) in 2016, recognised the need for greater involvement of the multicultural sector in helping diverse communities before, during and after emergencies. The Framework provided a strong rationale and a proposed structure for increasing diversity and inclusion in the emergency management sector. However, the disproportionate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have demonstrated that

multicultural communities are often largely absent from overall emergency responses. More needs to be done to reduce risk and provide equal outcomes for these communities.

Towards this end, the Department of Health approached VCOSS to lead a multicultural resilience project. VCOSS partnered with ECCV to deliver the project, so that VCOSS' emergency management expertise was complemented by ECCV's multicultural expertise in undertaking and delivering the Multicultural Emergency Management Project.

The Project, undertaken in July 2021, aimed to improve community engagement and cultural responsiveness in emergencies, with a particular focus on the COVID-19 pandemic. Working with key multicultural community leaders and influencers to co-develop and co-design a leadership program, the Project ultimately resulted in 92 'graduates'

In addition to the leadership program, the Project included extensive community consultations and interviews. The learnings from these consultations

¹ <https://www.emvvic.gov.au/publications/government-response-to-the-igem-review-of-connecting-and-collaborating-with-the>

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

are incorporated in this paper, along with existing research findings and recommendations about how these insights might be applied going forward.

Multicultural communities have a range of strengths and needs in relation to emergencies and disasters. The strengths of community members and leaders are often born of pre-arrival experiences of war and hardship, and can include a capacity to cope under stress and adapt to change, strong leadership and community networks, the ability to mobilise their communities to take action, strong values around community responsibility, and cross-cultural skills.

By fostering community collaboration and participation, the emergency management sector can harness these strengths in the spirit of shared responsibility; communities can be supported to prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies. However, a model of culturally responsive, context specific, community-led and asset-based support requires effective communication at the right times and in the right mediums.

During consultations, some community members reported that they had minimal knowledge of common emergencies in Australia and how to prepare or respond.

Lack of awareness of local risks and hazards can be compounded by socio-economic disadvantage, language barriers, poor quality housing, pre-arrival experiences and cultural factors. These vulnerabilities are often magnified for people who arrived as refugees, those who are on temporary visas, are undocumented migrants, or who arrived in the last 10 years. During the Project consultations, community members imparted clear learnings on how to overcome these barriers and create effective communication channels, including through:

- In-language video/audio information co-designed by communities

- Using a range of social media platforms, where pages/groups are in-language
- Phone trees
- Face-to-face or online gatherings
- Short plain English information to reach target groups.

Participants reported that complex translated materials are less helpful, as are in-language resources promoted via English-language social media channels and websites.

The overriding message is that communications should always be created or co-designed by communities. The emergency management sector should recognise the role of both formal and informal leaders in multicultural communities, and the need to support and engage them in emergency management protocols.

Culturally responsive engagement is a priority in building resilience in multicultural communities early and ensuring good outcomes in the event of an emergency or disaster.

As a result of the collaboration between VCOSS and ECCV, a cross-sector Multicultural Emergency Management Partnership (MEMP) has been established. The membership of MEMP includes 16 community leaders from a range of multicultural communities, as well as representatives from the peak emergency services organisations in Victoria.

This is an important initiative in engaging multicultural communities in the emergency services sector, and ensuring these communities can effectively prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies and disasters.

Summary of Recommendations

To strengthen connections and engagement with multicultural communities, and to become a diverse and inclusive sector that supports and is supported by all Victorians, it is recommended that the Victorian Emergency Services undertake a number of initiatives:

- Co-design emergency communications with multicultural communities and organisations
- Invest in community engagement
- Engage with key peak bodies and community organisations

- Model and communicate commitment to diversity and inclusion
- Act at the local level
- Invest in community leaders
- Undertake cultural competency training
- Increase workforce diversity

Further research is required to build an evidence base for improving emergency management outcomes for multicultural communities in Victoria.



Introduction



Migrant and refugee communities are often more vulnerable than others to the impacts of emergencies and disasters. This is due to a range of factors including unfamiliarity with Australia's physical and social environment, low English proficiency, poor awareness of local hazards, undeveloped support networks, and the impacts of previous traumatic experience.³

During the pandemic we have seen additional risk factors such as overcrowded housing, casual employment, and low incomes, which have magnified the consequences of emergencies and disasters for multicultural communities.

As we prepare for a future in which climate change demands increasing resilience of our communities and systems, and as Victoria becomes more culturally diverse, it is critical that we ensure multicultural communities are prepared for emergencies and disasters and can respond and recover according to their specific contexts and needs.

In July 2021, VCOSS and ECCV came together to undertake the Multicultural Emergency Management Project, aimed at improving community engagement and cultural responsiveness in emergencies, with a particular focus on the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper is a result of that collaboration and draws on a range of community consultations, interviews and observations.

³ Red Cross Australia. 2011. *Emergency Resilience in CALD Communities*

A system under reform: what it means for multicultural communities



Since the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, Victoria has embarked on ambitious whole-of-system reforms of the emergency management sector. These reforms aim to increase the sector's effectiveness in a changing demographic and environmental context, and to create safer and more resilient communities.

To date, new legislation has been enacted leading to the establishment of Emergency Management Victoria (EMV), and the appointment of an Emergency Management Commissioner (EMC) and Inspector-General for Emergency Management (IGEM). A series of inquiries and reviews have offered evidence on gaps and guidance for next steps.⁴

Within these reforms, and in line with current national and international disaster resilience and recovery principles,⁵ there has been a move towards stronger community involvement, focusing on community-led approaches, collaboration and communication.⁶ There has also been a growing recognition of the need to improve diversity and inclusion within the sector, both in response to changing demographics and in order to

⁴ 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (2010). Final report, Parliament of Victoria; Victorian Government (Department of Premier and Cabinet) (2016) *Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry: Victorian Government Implementation Plan*, Victorian Government; IGEM (2019). *Review of 10 years of reform in Victoria's emergency management sector*, Inspector-General for Emergency Management, Victorian Government; IGEM (2020). *Inquiry into the 2019–20 Victorian Fire Season - Phase 1 report*, Inspector-General for Emergency Management, Victorian Government; IGEM (2021). *Inquiry into the 2019–20 Victorian Fire Season - Phase 2 report*, Inspector-General for Emergency Management, Victorian Government.

⁵ See for example Council of Australian Governments (2018) *National Principles for Disaster Recovery*; International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2018) *The IFRC Framework for Community Resilience*; the Australian New Zealand School of Government (2016) *National Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for Disaster Recovery Programs*.

⁶ Victorian State Emergency Management "Six c's approach": emv.vic.gov.au/about-us/what-we-do/the-six-cs.

capitalise on the improved innovation and productivity that a diverse workforce brings.

The Emergency Management Diversity and Inclusion Framework, published by EMV in 2016, is a significant step towards improving emergency outcomes for diverse communities. The Framework gives a strong rationale and a broad framework for diversity and inclusion. It states that, "Emergency services have

traditionally been dominated by able-bodied, Anglo-Celtic, heterosexual men." And that, "Achieving diversity and inclusion in the emergency management sector requires significant cultural change."⁷ The Framework recommends significant change both within the sector and in the way the sector connects to community. However, it does not provide detailed actions or information on implementation.

Emergency Management Diversity and Inclusion Framework Themes

Becoming a Diverse and Inclusive Sector	Connecting with a Diverse Community
Lead	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actively cultivate a culture of respect and inclusion Call inappropriate behaviour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build on and support community momentum
Listen and learn	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gain detailed understanding Be respectfully open and curious 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand needs, expectations, and capability
Act to create opportunity	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Act on the learning Agility to adopt the new 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage broad participation in planning and service design and delivery
Be accountable	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish measures with clear responsibilities for all Provide regular and transparent reporting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consult community on priorities and actions Seek community feedback on progress

In recent years, the Inspector-General for Emergency Management Victoria has published several inquiries that included findings and recommendations about

the need for better community connection and more targeted work with multicultural communities to improve emergency management outcomes.

⁷ *Emergency Management Diversity and Inclusion Framework*, EMV, 2016

IGEMS's *Review of 10 years of reform in Victoria's emergency management sector* (2020) identified that initiatives incorporating genuine, early community consultation had better outcomes.⁸ The review recommended aligning preparedness strategies with existing community resilience initiatives, and including "clear, consistent and accessible preparedness messages".⁹

Additionally, the review highlighted the impact that changing demographic trends will have on both regional areas and peri-urban areas closer to Melbourne:

“ The peri-urban areas with the highest rates of population growth also have high levels of cultural and linguistic diversity... In the case of an emergency there is greater risk for people who have recently moved to a new area as they may be unfamiliar with local environmental hazards, access and egress routes, community shelter options, and other local procedures for before, during and after emergencies. It may also take time for those people to make the social connections that will strengthen their overall resilience.”¹⁰

Other IGEM inquiries, including into the Hazelwood mine fire¹¹ and the 2019–2020 bushfire season,¹² led to similar findings. The Hazelwood Mine Inquiry found that regular, trusted and culturally relevant communication channels were vital to distribute messages to migrant and refugee communities, both for preparation and warning systems. The Phase 1 report of the IGEM Inquiry into the 2019–2020 Fire Season found that:

“ Where emergency management preparedness and planning are well-supported – and led by community – there is stronger community resilience to bushfires. This community-led approach could be broadened to consider all emergencies.”¹³

Effective diversity and inclusion are imperative for all emergency service agencies to navigate the changing risk landscape facing organisations and communities.¹⁴

While there is increasing recognition of the need for greater diversity and inclusion in the emergency management sector, and of the heightened risks for multicultural communities when they are not consulted or catered for, there is still a lack of consistent, practical information about what this means at both a systemic and local level.¹⁵

⁸ See IGEM (2019), *Finding 8 and observation 3*.

⁹ See IGEM (2019), *Recommendation 3*.

¹⁰ See IGEM (2019), p39

¹¹ Department of Premier and Cabinet, Victorian Government (2016).

¹² IGEM (2020) and IGEM (2021).

¹³ *IGEM 2020, Inquiry into the 2019–20 Victorian Fire Season, Phase 1, Observation 3.4, p 23*

¹⁴ BNHCRC, *Using diversity and inclusion to strengthen capability in emergency management*, 2021

¹⁵ For a positive example of response, see the Victorian Government's [Safer Together approach](#) to risk reduction of bushfire and fuel management, developed with focus on community and local knowledge.

Methodology and data collection

This paper incorporates valuable information from ECCV's consultations with a diverse range of multicultural community sector stakeholders, including:

- Eight community consultations (six in Melbourne, one in Bendigo and one in Shepparton) including participants from the Afghan, Indian, Iraqi, Karen, Syrian, Somali and South Sudanese communities (July 2021)
- Seven one-on-one interviews, including the Victorian Multicultural Commission, multicultural services organisation, and ethno-specific associations (July 2021)
- Consultation with leaders of regional Ethnic Communities' Councils, in Albury-Wodonga, Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong, Gippsland, Mildura, and Shepparton (July 2021)
- Consultation with Emergency Services Victoria (November 2021)
- Consultation with three Strategic Engagement Coordinators (SECs) of two regional areas and one metropolitan area (November 2021)
- Three community consultations (Bendigo and Nhill, Greater Geelong, Gippsland) focused on fire safety, with community leaders from Afghan, Chinese, Dutch, Filipino, Indian, Iraqi, Karen, Maltese, Maori, Nepalese, Russian, Syrian, and South Sudanese communities (February 2022).

Participants were invited to share their experiences and provide suggestions around culturally responsive practices related to the bushfires and other emergencies. Because of when the consultations were conducted, the majority of responses were related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This paper was also informed by:

- VCOSS Emergency Resilience Project program participants
- Insights from Multicultural Emergency Management Partnership (MEMP) Model co-design process
- Project Evaluation Report

VCOSS and ECCV have drawn on what limited research exists in this area. Further research is required to build an evidence base for improving emergency management outcomes for multicultural communities in Victoria. Additional information used to inform this paper includes:

- Findings from the needs analysis
- The establishment of two Advisory Groups
- The design and delivery of a series of masterclasses in leadership, communications, emergency management and psychological first aid
- The establishment of the Multicultural Emergency Management Partnership (MEMP)
- Evaluation report outcomes

Multicultural communities in emergencies and disasters



Shared responsibility

Emergency preparedness starts with the premise of shared responsibility. For this principle to be fully realised, Victorian communities – in all their diversity – need support to prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies. For this support to be effective, it needs to be culturally responsive, context specific, community-led and strengths-based.

There is a need for a new focus on shared responsibility; one where political leaders, governments, business and community leaders, and the not-for-profit sector all contribute to improving emergency management and better integrated disaster resilience. In turn, communities, individuals and households need to take greater responsibility for their own safety and act on information, advice and other cues provided before, during and after a disaster.¹⁶

We can learn a great deal from localised responses that have been co-designed with multicultural communities. There are five case studies in this paper that give practical, hands-on examples of good practice. They demonstrate the importance of adopting locally embedded, culturally responsive actions that nurture trust, and of co-designing resilience and preparedness measures.

¹⁶ National Strategy for Disaster Resilience 2011

During consultations, community members from newly arrived refugee communities reported having minimal knowledge of common emergencies in Australia, and of

how to prepare or respond. As one Hazara community leader in regional Victoria told us:

“ I run an English class for women in my community. Last Saturday I asked them about bushfires, as I knew I was coming to this consultation. No one knew what a bushfire was, not even the word bushfire. There is no easy translation into Hazaragi, we are a country of rocky mountains, we just don’t have this concept, so the women find it difficult to even understand – why am I learning this word? Why is it a danger?”



● Case study

Shepparton Afghan communities' support systems

The Afghan community is Shepparton's largest newly arrived refugee community, with more than 1,000 members as of the 2016 census, estimated to be much larger now. Prior to the pandemic, Afghan community leaders had developed a pastoral care system where each community leader was responsible for around 20 households. When an event was organised or information needed to reach the community, each community leader would be responsible for phoning their assigned households to pass on information. When community members needed support, they would contact their allocated community leader. This structure has been highly effective for reaching community members during the pandemic, particularly for elders and those who don't read in any language.

In August 2021, Shepparton faced its worst outbreak of the pandemic, with a quarter of the population placed under 14-day isolation in less than a week. The high proportion of residents in isolation caused two separate but interconnected problems: a surge in demand for the delivery of food and essential items, and a shortage of workers at the businesses that provide them. The military were called in to support the town. For the Afghan community, food shortages were compounded by the closure of all three Afghan grocers, with halal products and cultural food items not available. The Afghan community's pastoral care and phone tree system was critical in supporting the community to be able to continue to isolate and not go hungry.



Strengths and Needs

Whether we use the term “multicultural” or “culturally and linguistically diverse”, what we’re talking about is a broad cohort of people and communities that incorporates over half the Victorian population.

While it is important to consider and be inclusive of all cultural communities within the emergency management landscape, some multicultural communities are at very high risk during emergencies and others are at lower risk.

Many consultation participants pointed to the incredible resilience of communities, often born of pre-arrival experiences of war and hardship. A Shepparton focus group member said:

“ [Migrant and refugee communities] are actually more resilient often, than the mainstream community, because they go through the hard yards, so many things to get here. Lockdowns and things are not necessarily hard for them, because they’ve been on that journey, what they’ve come from has been very unsafe.

A participant from the South Sudanese community, speaking of the lockdown she was in, commented:

“ Last time my children were in danger I needed to flee from my village, walking for days in the desert. This time I can keep them safe by staying at home.

Many multicultural communities bring a set of valuable assets to emergencies, such as capacity to cope under stress and adapt to change, cross-cultural skills, strong values around communal responsibility, and community mobilisation skills. Research also shows that resilience and leadership skills are often strong in those who have already survived disasters.¹⁷

While previous traumatic experiences can build resilience, they can also contribute to vulnerability. Research shows that prior traumatic experiences can significantly affect responses to natural disasters like bushfire or flood. Newly arrived people may have experienced hardship and trauma, including poverty, civil unrest and war, as well as other natural disasters such as earthquakes and tsunamis. Many have experienced or witnessed violence and lost loved ones.¹⁸

¹⁷ Asquith, N.L., Bartkowiak-Théron, I. & Roberts, K. (2017). *Policing Encounters with Vulnerability*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan; Bartkowiak-Théron, I. & Asquith, N. L. (Eds.). (2012). *Policing Vulnerability*. Annadale: Federation Press; and Lakhina, S. J. & C. Eriksen. (2017). Resilient Together: Engaging the knowledge and capacities of refugees for a disaster-resilient Illawarra. In Guadagno, L., Fuhrer, M. & Twigg, J. (Eds.). *Migrants in Disaster Risk Reduction: Practices for Inclusion* (pp. 32-35). Geneva:

¹⁸ M Baumer, *The impact of disaster on the most vulnerable: People from culturally and linguistically diverse background and the floods in Brisbane 2010–11*, School of Social Science, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, 2014.

Consultation participants told us that communities at higher risk were those where the majority of members have any of the following characteristics:

- Arrived in Australia as refugees
- Arrived in the last 10 years
- On temporary visas or are undocumented migrants
- Low levels of spoken and written English

All consultation participants were aware of 000 as the emergency number; however, most could not distinguish between the different agencies that respond to different emergencies. For regional consultations, around half the participants had heard of CFA, but not about SES. Leaders of multicultural organisations who were interviewed (Chief Executive Officers and Board representatives) cited some good examples of collaboration to increase connection and knowledge, but reported that these initiatives were ad-hoc and generally initiated by an emergency management staff member with a particular interest, rather than as part of a resourced strategy.

The lack of knowledge and preparedness about Australian emergencies and disasters is compounded in some communities by pre-arrival experiences and cultural factors creating specific needs.

During the project, for example, members of the Filipino community reported high levels of vaccine hesitancy based on two factors. Firstly, many in the predominantly Catholic community believed the Catholic Church was against vaccines – including the COVID-19 vaccine, which was believed to have been developed using human embryos (beliefs that were incorrect on both counts, but were commonly held in many communities). Secondly, in 2016–17 the world's first dengue fever vaccine was rolled out to children in the Philippines, then removed from the market as it was believed to be unsafe. There were reports of children dying from the vaccine, causing a significant decrease in public trust of vaccines.

As another example, South Sudanese consultation participants reported that many in their community remove the batteries in home smoke alarms because traditional cooking practices create enough smoke to set off the alarms on a daily basis, and that spiritual practices involving incense burning can also set off the alarms.

● Case study

Breaking down fear of uniforms in North Eastern Victoria¹⁹

In 2019, the North East Multicultural Association (NEMA) identified that local multicultural communities were fearful of engaging with a range of 'services in uniform.' NEMA serves multicultural communities in the Victorian Shires of Indigo, Mansfield, Alpine and the Rural Cities of Wangaratta and Benalla. To build trust and create spaces for interactions amongst the communities and the emergency management sector, NEMA partnered with SES, CFA, Ambulance Victoria, Victoria Police, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) and local government councils. Together they ran an expo to allow multicultural communities to learn more about and interact with the various agencies in an informal setting. One of the highlights of the project occurred during a Children's Week event, when families were able

to sound the sirens, play with the water hose, climb over the trucks, and wear SES and CFA hats. Combined with attendance at multicultural festivals, these initiatives contributed to two-way communication and better engagement and understanding by communities and agencies, as well as a higher sense of community belonging.

Learnings from the project included:

- The need to challenge assumptions and improve communication and translation (e.g. clarity about what an evacuation kit should contain)
- The need to deliver more information about local environment and natural context
- Understanding that many multicultural communities listen to news from their country of origin and do not follow local TV or radio.



Photo: NEMA

¹⁹ Find out more at vcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/NEMA-Case-Study-VCOSS.pdf

Communication

Research shows that members of multicultural communities with limited English proficiency, varying cultural practices, lower literacy levels and poor communication channels are often the first victims in an emergency.²⁰ Particularly when they are recently arrived in Australia, these community members can struggle to understand what is going on in their new cultural and environmental context, and this disconnect can be intensified in times of extreme weather or natural disaster.

During disasters it can be hard to find information, learn how to deal with the situation, and know where to get help.²¹ Government departments and services often assume that people will access the internet or rely on television or radio for emergency alerts, but many people in multicultural communities cannot access or understand these mediums, or are used to relying on other forms of communication.

Research from NSW shows that people from refugee communities do not have ready access to local hazard and risk information. Almost 40 per cent of participants reported being caught unaware by bushfires, flash flooding, hail, heavy rain, lightning and strong winds during their first year of living in NSW. The research also found that people from refugee communities do not receive timely and culturally and linguistically relevant information and training on issues of personal safety and home preparedness.²²

The most cited theme in consultations and interviews was the disconnect between how the emergency management sector presents and disseminates information and how communities obtain information. By the end of 2020, the Victorian Government regularly produced COVID-related written translations in 54 languages; CFA has written translated information on its website in 40 languages. Yet consultation participants and multicultural organisations stated that written translations are not generally used by communities. None of the consultation participants had read or downloaded Victorian Government COVID-19 translations.

There are several reasons for this:

- Refugee communities often have minimal access to formal education prior to arrival, meaning levels of literacy in first language are low. Communities with high levels of literacy in their first language often

²⁰ R Hurworth, *CALD Communities and Emergency Management: A Literature Synthesis*, Centre for Program Evaluation, University of Melbourne, 2011.

²¹ M Baumer, *The impact of disaster on the most vulnerable: People from culturally and linguistically diverse background and the floods in Brisbane 2010–11*, School of Social Science, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, 2014.

²² People from refugee backgrounds contribute to a disaster-resilient Illawarra, *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, April 2019

also read English, either because it was part of their schooling in their country of origin or because it was easier to learn post-arrival.

- Key emergency concepts can be hard to understand if they haven't been encountered in someone's country of origin. Often there is no direct translation for the words conveying these concepts. This is the case for terms including smoke alarm, bushfire, mental health, volunteer and household. Documents can easily become nonsensical to their readers; for instance, a Syrian participant commented that "mental health" translates into Arabic as "brain damage."
- Newly arrived community members often face information and paper overload and have a plethora of competing settlement demands. Written information is often accepted politely but not read.
- Many communities have strong oral cultures, meaning that information is understood and trusted when it is provided verbally.
- Those who can't read in English are unlikely to be able to access an English-language website (e.g. CFA's website), so the dissemination of written information relies on services or community leaders finding it, printing it, giving it to a community member and explaining its purpose. This is rarely practical in a time-poor world, and utterly impracticable in an emergency.

Participants reported a range of methods that had worked during the pandemic to convey information about changing regulations and to support COVID-safe behaviours. These communication methods are highly transferrable to other kinds of emergencies. The ones reported as most commonly used were:

- In-language WhatsApp groups (or WeChat for Chinese communities and Viber for some Middle Eastern communities)
- In-language Facebook pages and groups

- Phone tree systems
- Face-to-face or Zoom gatherings where community members can ask questions.

All examples of effective messaging were created by communities themselves or co-designed between communities and services. This provided vastly improved quality of communication compared to translating/interpreting information developed by services (generally with Anglo-Australians designing the content).

Across all communities, voice and video recordings were preferred to written resources (e.g., written Facebook posts). Three different types of video messaging were used effectively during the pandemic:

- Illustrated videos with voice-overs and written translations, useful for more lengthy, factual information. Example in Vietnamese [here](#) (Victorian Department of Health).
- Community members telling their story as it relates to a topic. These types of videos are the ones most likely to be shared on social media and to achieve the most behaviour change. Example in Arabic [here](#) (Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria).
- Community leaders speaking to camera, in a conversational style, about a topic. These are also highly shareable but can convey more factual information than the 'story' format. Example in Cantonese [here](#) (North Western Melbourne Primary Health Network).

Community leaders who were developing content for their communities reported that they prefer short, plain English documents rather than translated materials, as do community members with higher levels of English. Community leaders also reported that simple, in-language, pictorial-based documents are useful for community members to take away after a verbal information session or gathering.

● Case study

Fire Safety in the Wimmera²²

Nhill is a small town in North-Western Victoria, almost exactly halfway between Melbourne and Adelaide. Ten years ago, the local Luv-a-Duck factory was on the brink of closure due to labour shortages. In response, it started supporting newly arrived members of the Karen community to relocate to Nhill and work for the business. Today, more than 20 per cent of the town's population is Karen, and this population boost has led to a range of positive knock-on effects to social and economic development.

During the 2017–18 fire seasons, several Karen community members were fined for lighting fires on total fire ban days. Karen community leaders quickly identified an important knowledge gap around total fire ban restrictions and other fire safety information,

and the community were eager to learn and make sure they were doing the right thing.

A partnership was developed between the local Karen community, CFA, Nhill Learning Centre, and University of Adelaide. Over a period of months, partners came together to plan and produce a short film. Most critically, using a community-based approach, the Karen community produced the film, focusing on fire restrictions and total fire bans in a way that was meaningful to them, in their language, with local community actors.

“This approach shows what can be achieved when CFA take off our ‘telling hats’ and put on our ‘listening hats’ and really listen to what the community want to do,” Karen Enbom, Manager Community Engagement, CFA.



²³ Find out more or watch the film go to news.cfa.vic.gov.au/news/celebrating-the-launch-of-a-karen-fire-safety-film-in-nhill.

Engagement

As well as communication and education, another priority for many consultation participants and interviewees was increased and more culturally responsive engagement.

Research suggests there is a general lack of partnerships between local emergency services, settlement and multicultural services, community-based organisations, places of worship, and community leaders, with no effective outreach to new residents of refugee communities. These findings indicate that local settlement and multicultural services can play a key role in informing newly arrived community members of local hazards and risks.²⁴

The Bushfire & Natural Hazards CRC research institute encourages partnerships with multicultural communities, seeing these communities as important for the emergency management sector for the following reasons:

- Improved community access and safety
- Innovative solutions
- Trust
- Increased ability to achieve desired outcomes
- Knowledge and capabilities
- Reduced conflict
- Social benefits.²⁵

Partnering with community organisations is one way to reach cohorts who may not engage through mainstream channels, including multicultural communities. Community organisations have developed positions of trust and legitimacy in their communities by building positive long-term relationships with people over years or even generations. Often employing peer workers and people with lived experience of disadvantage, community organisations create a safe environment where people feel their experiences are validated and understood.

For many newly arrived groups, engaging with authorities – particularly those ‘in uniform’ – is intimidating. In many countries, police and other government agencies are primarily associated with abuse of authority. For people arriving as refugees, violence and extortion at the hands of police and the military may be common community experiences. In Australia, these experiences are often projected onto a range of uniformed services and agencies, from paramedics to the CFA.

²⁴ People from refugee backgrounds contribute to a disaster-resilient Illawarra, Australian Journal of Emergency Management, April 2019

²⁵ Ooi and Young, *Building inclusive partnerships with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities*, BNHCRC 2021

Several consultation participants and interviewees had good examples of bicultural agencies and service staff engaging with their community, breaking down barriers, building trust and increasing understanding. This was cited by many as the best kind of community engagement. For example, one community leader commented:

“ When it’s someone from your own community, or even just a different ethnic background, then it’s relatable. They’re in the uniform but we instantly know they’ve had the same experiences as us. We know they know what it’s like.

The role of community leaders was also reported as critical to engagement. While some community leaders hold a formal role – such as a priest, monk or Chair of a cultural association – most hold an informal role but are trusted conduits between mainstream services and their own cultural community.

Community leaders rarely hold a paid position. Consultations highlighted the immense respect and trust that communities have for these leaders. Community leaders reported that they answer their phones day and night in response to questions and problems as diverse as what to do when the emergency department of the hospital turns you away, whether the smell of smoke in the air means a fire is near, or what to do when your car breaks down on the side of the road.



● Case study

Supporting COVID-19 vaccine uptake among seniors

As the COVID-19 vaccination program was rolled out in Australia in 2021, many multicultural communities began to hear misinformation about the dangers of the vaccine. Some of this misinformation came from overseas, while a number of local people made in-language content on Facebook, Instagram and TikTok spreading misinformation about the dangers of getting vaccinated. ECCV identified that seniors were at highest risk, both because of their higher vulnerability when they catch COVID and their lower ability to read English language information about vaccination.

Working with community leaders, ECCV developed a series of 15 films in 15 languages. Each video tells the personal and often emotional story of a community member who overcame hesitancy and misinformation. They played an important role in helping their community to navigate the pandemic and vaccination program. Being community-led, story-based and culturally relevant has helped make these films a success. Videos can be viewed [here](#).



Multicultural Emergency Management Partnership



One of the outcomes of the Multicultural Emergency Management Project was the establishment of the Multicultural Emergency Management Partnership (MEMP).

VCOSS and ECCV identified that strengthening partnerships between multicultural communities, government and emergency management agencies and organisations would require:

- Creating a formal partnership model for the multicultural and emergency management sectors
- Creating ongoing opportunity for collaboration
- Embedding ongoing learning and enhancement

To help achieve these outcomes, a cross-sector Multicultural Emergency Management Partnership (MEMP) was established.

Membership of MEMP includes:

- 16 community leaders from a range of multicultural communities

- Representatives of the following organisations:

- Ambulance Victoria
- Australian Red Cross
- Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria
- Emergency Management Victoria
- Country Fire Authority
- Fire Rescue Victoria
- Life Saving Victoria
- Municipal Association of Victoria
- Victorian State Emergency Service
- Victorian Council of Churches
Emergency Ministry
- Victoria Police
- Victorian Council of Social Service

Throughout late 2021, the MEMP developed a Partnership Model using a co-design approach. The MEMP is currently working on agreed priorities which include:

- Building stronger relationships at local levels
- Developing a stronger understanding of local community strengths and needs
- Developing relevant and tailored emergency plans and processes
- Providing communities with access to simple and accurate information
- Increasing cultural safety and inclusion in emergency management organisations
- Adapting recruitment and induction processes to increase workforce diversity

The evaluation report for the MEMP found that the project has, for the first time, fostered a genuine

dialogue between multicultural community leaders and emergency management agencies. The evaluation also found that, while the MEMP had provided an important foundational step to building shared responsibility for emergency management between agencies and participating multicultural representatives, more needs to be done to affect structural change in organisations – at a strategic level – and foster grassroots action at a tactical level.

“ I’ve never seen it before – 35 community leaders in front of those agencies. There’s a fervour and a passion in the community about this. They’re mixing with a completely different group.

– Emergency Management Agency representative



● Case study

Emergency management masterclass program for community leaders

In 2021, VCOSS and ECCV partnered to deliver a series of masterclasses on emergency management for multicultural community leaders. Between July and December, 94 community leaders participated in the program. The project used an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) framework, recognising and building on the existing strengths and knowledge of community leaders. This included recognising that many community leaders came with a vast knowledge of diverse emergencies such as war, famine, tsunamis and environmental degradation. The project team applied best practice inclusion and engagement approaches by making the masterclasses optional, practical and responsive

to identified needs, and by remunerating participants for their time. The project evaluation found that community leaders considered the content and approach highly valuable. Comments from evaluation interviewees included:

"At last I feel invited to the table, with people who understand what I'm going through."

"I'm learning and changing and my community is changing with me."

"We need more support for the roles we play."



Picture: Community leaders at a masterclass follow-up zoom session, March 2022.

Recommendations

Insights from these case studies, alongside learnings from the consultations and the broader VCOSS-ECCV project and research, highlight the opportunities for the emergency management sector to value the strengths, address the needs and improve emergency management outcomes for multicultural communities in Victoria.

Multicultural and other community organisations build the resilience of individuals, families and communities. They work on a day-to-day basis to increase people’s capacity to adapt and rebound from stressful life events, and become stronger and more resourceful.

Shifting to shared responsibility in emergency management means integrating emergency services, volunteers, business, community organisations and all levels of government to build resilience to emergencies and disasters.²⁶

The ongoing emergency management sector reforms – including in governance, policy and practice – will help to improve outcomes for all Victorians, including those from multicultural communities. However, it is vital that the commitment to connecting better with communities, in inclusive and culturally responsive ways, be a central component of the reform process.

Without stronger links between government, agencies and community, the potential shared responsibility cannot be realised, and the inequitable outcomes experienced by migrant and refugee communities during and after emergencies will continue.

EMV Emergency Management Diversity and Inclusion Framework	Our Recommendations
<p>Connecting with a Diverse Community</p> <p>Lead: Build on and support community momentum</p>	<p>1. Co-design emergency communications with multicultural communities and organisations.</p> <p>Invest in co-designed, culturally relevant videos and face-to-face information sessions. Keep written translations short and pictorial-based. At a minimum, pre-test all communications prior to publishing. Focus efforts on newly arrived and refugee communities.</p>

²⁶ VCOSS, *Building resilient communities: Working with the community sector to enhance emergency management*, 2017

EMV Emergency Management Diversity and Inclusion Framework	Our Recommendations
<p>Connecting with a Diverse Community</p> <p>Lead: Build on and support community momentum</p> <p>Act to create opportunity: Encourage broad participation in planning and service design and delivery</p>	<p>2. Invest in community engagement.</p> <p>Invest in community engagement to build mutual trust and positive relationships with multicultural communities. Focus efforts on newly arrived and refugee communities. Invest in the continuation of the Multicultural Emergency Management Partnership (MEMP).</p>
<p>Connecting with a Diverse Community</p> <p>Listen and Learn: Understand needs, expectations and capability</p> <p>Be accountable: Consult community on priorities and actions</p>	<p>3. Engage with key peak bodies and community organisations.</p> <p>EMV should regularly engage with and brief selected peak bodies, multicultural organisations and multicultural community leaders on progress towards increasing diversity and inclusion in the EM sector. EMV should commit to future action based on feedback by these organisations and leaders.</p>
<p>Becoming a Diverse and Inclusive Sector</p> <p>Lead: Actively cultivate culture of respect and inclusion</p> <p>Be accountable: Provide regular and transparent reporting</p>	<p>4. Model and communicate commitment to diversity and inclusion.</p> <p>EM agency leaders should model and demonstrate their commitment to reform around diversity and inclusion. This should include reporting against progress towards greater diversity and inclusion. In this way EM leaders can help foster a culture of zero tolerance for discrimination.</p>
<p>Becoming a Diverse and Inclusive Sector</p> <p>Act to create opportunity: act on learning</p>	<p>5. Act at the local level.</p> <p>EM agencies should identify local level needs and opportunities (learning, training, roles, jobs) and disseminate these to multicultural organisations and leaders.</p>
<p>Connecting with a Diverse Community</p> <p>Act to create opportunity: Encourage broad participation in planning and service design and delivery</p>	<p>6. Invest in community leaders.</p> <p>Strengthen and equip/enhance the skills and capacity of community leaders with knowledge about local emergency management processes and tools.</p>
<p>Becoming a Diverse and Inclusive Sector</p> <p>Listen and learn:</p> <p>Gain a detailed understanding</p>	<p>7. Undertake cultural competency training.</p> <p>All departmental and agency staff should attend cultural competency and anti-racism training, tailored to the EM sector.</p>
<p>Becoming a Diverse and Inclusive Sector</p> <p>Act to create opportunity: act on learning agility to adopt the new</p> <p>Be accountable: Establish measures with clear responsibilities for all</p>	<p>8. Increase workforce diversity.</p> <p>Review and adapt recruitment, induction and retention processes to increase workforce cultural diversity. Regularly collect and review data on workforce cultural diversity.</p>

Appendix

Terms and definitions²⁷

Disaster – a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society at any scale due to hazardous events interacting with conditions of exposure, vulnerability and capacity, leading to one or more of the following: human, material, economic and environmental losses and impacts. Note, there are jurisdictional legislative variations.²⁸

Emergency – an emergency due to the actual or imminent occurrence of an event which in any way endangers or threatens to endanger the safety or health of any person in Victoria or which destroys or damages, or threatens to destroy or damage, any property in Victoria or endangers or threatens to endanger the environment or an element of the environment in Victoria including, without limiting the generality of the foregoing:

- (a) an earthquake, flood, windstorm or other natural event; and
- (b) a fire; and
- (c) an explosion; and
- (d) a road accident or any other accident; and
- (e) a plague or an epidemic or contamination; and

(f) a warlike act or act of terrorism, whether directed at Victoria or a part of Victoria or at any other State or Territory of the Commonwealth; and

(g) a hijack, siege or riot; and

(h) a disruption to an essential service.

Emergency management sector – the sector comprising all agencies, bodies, Departments and other persons who have a responsibility, function or other role in emergency management.

Mitigation – the elimination or reduction of the incidence or severity of emergencies and the minimisation of their effects.

Peri-urban – denoting or located in an area immediately adjacent to a city or urban area.

Phone tree – a phone tree is a prearranged system for activating a group of people by telephone. The phone tree system can help you spread a brief message quickly and efficiently to a large number of people.

²⁷ Unless identified otherwise, the definitions above are provided in the *Emergency Management Act 2013 (Vic)*, as at 1 December 2020, <https://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/in-force/acts/emergency-management-act-2013/019>

²⁸ Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience's definition. See Australian Disaster Resilience Knowledge Hub, <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/glossary/?wordOfTheDayId=&keywords=&alpha=&page=1&results=50&order=AZ>

Recovery – the assisting of persons and communities affected by emergencies to achieve a proper and effective level of functioning.

Resilience – the capacity of individuals, communities, institutions, businesses and systems to survive, adapt and thrive no matter what kind of chronic stresses and acute shocks they experience.²⁹

Response – the combating of emergencies and the provision of rescue services.

Shared responsibility – political leaders, governments, business and community leaders, and the not-for-profit sector all adopting increased or improved emergency management and advisory roles and contributing to achieving integrated and coordinated disaster resilience. In turn, communities, individuals and households taking greater responsibility for their own safety and acting on information, advice and other cues provided before, during and after a disaster.³⁰

Undocumented migrants – a person who is living in Australia unlawfully.

Vulnerability – the conditions determined by physical, social, economic and environmental factors or processes which increase the susceptibility of an individual, a community, assets or systems to the impacts of hazards.³¹

²⁹ Emergency Management Victoria (2017). *Community Resilience Framework for Emergency Management*, EMV.

³⁰ National Strategy for Disaster Resilience 2011 <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/emergency/files/national-strategy-disaster-resilience.pdf>

³¹ United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. See Australian Disaster Resilience Knowledge Hub, <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/glossary/?wordOfTheDayId=&keywords=&alpha=&page=1&results=50&order=AZ>

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