

Emergency Preparedness Program Fire, Flood, and Heat Health 2022 – 2023



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BCHS would like to thank the local Karen, Afghan and South Sudanese Communities for recognising the importance of the flood, fire, and heat health information for refugee communities and welcoming the implementation of this program. Many thanks to the BCHS Refugee and Cultural Diversity teams, and Bendigo TAFE for their support and cooperation throughout the process. BCHS also would like to express its gratitude to local church groups, community groups and agencies where local refugee communities gather, for supporting the delivery of emergency preparedness messages.

Gratitude also goes to 15 community champions for their involvement in the program and efforts in delivering the fire, flood, and heat health messages to the former refugee communities.

BCHS would like to acknowledge the work of Nido and Eh Ta Mue for coordinating this program.

Funding source: Victorian State Government, Safer Together



Background

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 (Red Cross Australia 2011, cited in VCOSS 2022, p.4).

Some factors that may contribute to this disadvantage include: the difference in type and characteristics of natural disaster in Australia compared to their country of origin; lack of access to relevant translated information; low literacy levels including literacy in first language, and/or English literacy, service literacy and digital literacy; challenges accessing and navigating local services; lower levels of social support and an underlying fear of uniforms and authority due to negative past experiences

It is well recognised responding to impacts of climate change should be everyone's business. The following information highlights the evidence of need for future investment into vulnerable communities in this case the those of refugee background to enable adaption to climate change impacts.

VCOSS 2021 Feeling the Heat report described Victoria as "heating up". This report stated climate change is warming Victoria in line with the global average. The state can expect a temperature increase of up to 2.4C by 2050 if greenhouse emission remains high. Low-income households and private rental properties are more at risk of being impacted by heat, this also impacts those who don't own cars. The report also states English language barriers are a major driver of heat vulnerability.

The Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2019-2023 identifies 10 key health priorities and priority groups. These priorities and actions intend to build the public health and wellbeing system that responds to diverse community needs and tackles disadvantage, stigma and discrimination that impacts health and wellbeing. This report states: Victoria will experience increased temperatures harsher fire weather and longer fire seasons and unpredictable flooding. It highlights the culturally diverse as a priority population.

Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria (ECCV and VCOSS have developed a Multicultural Emergency Management Partnership Model (MEMP). The aim is to bring build safer and more multicultural resilient communities in Victoria with sustainable and collaborative partnerships. This model has developed 6 priorities. The BCHS Emergency Preparedness Program aligns with these priorities and will work to complement this work. I am currently contacting key ECCV and VCOSS staff involved in this model.

The report: Investing in Refugees: Investing in Australia February 2019 conducted by Peter Shergold, Kerrin Benson, Margaret Piper supports the need to invest further in refugee settlement strategies. The review undertaken explored how Government can better support refugees and humanitarian entrants to make valuable contributions to the social fabric and optimizing settlement opportunities. Amongst the recommendations was to actively pursue regional settlement to help fill skill shortages and create new economic opportunities.

Australia is a signatory of the United Nations Convention. Therefore, Australia has an obligation to welcome Humanitarian entrants. The borders are open. Bendigo Community Health Services is a Humanitarian Settlement Provider. BCHS has received 192 refugees between May 2022 to June 30, 2023, with another 70 scheduled for arrival.

The summer of 2019/2020 was an extremely severe fire season, and the spring of 2022 was a scary flood event. Bendigo is home to some 4,000 Karen and 300 Afghan Hazaras and increasing numbers of South Sudanese. In recognition of the increased vulnerabilities of local refugee community members in the event of bushfire, flood, and heat, BCHS in partnership with the City of Greater Bendigo (CoGB), the Victoria State Emergency Services (VICSES) and the local Country Fire Authority (CFA) codesigned and delivered a bushfire, flood and heat health awareness and capacity building program. This comprised of a review of available translated literature including, co-design of culturally safe easily understood resources addressing gaps as per review of literature, provision of community education, training of community champions and further delivery of key messages through these champions. This the fourth year of the project. CoGB staff also participated in service providers capacity building sessions. This project had reach of **1,189** people through community education and community champions in 2022/2023 bushfire season.

This project's findings, experiences, and recommendations of 2021 – 2022 informed the 2022 – 2023 project which was funded by the Victorian State Government, Safer Together grant.

Project 2022 – 2023

This project aim was to provide access to detailed visual and culturally appropriate, user-friendly easily understood resources related to emergency preparedness; fire, flood, heat, and information sessions and resources to support residents of refugee background. It was also to engage and create a culturally safe and welcome space for them to learn. This included building capacity of service providers to better understand these communities.

Objectives:

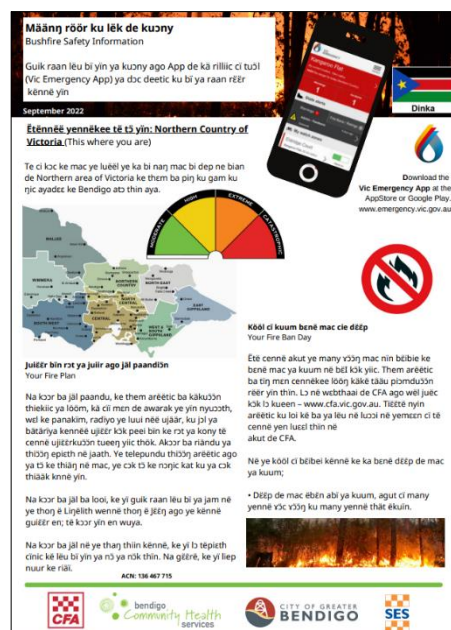
1. Review all project resources with community and partners.
2. Undertake community engagement and education in collaboration with content experts, CFA, VICSES and CoGB
3. Codesign capacity building session with partners and build capacity of CoGB, VICSES and CFA emergency personnel, relief staff and volunteers to better understand the resettlement experiences and complexities of settlement for the local refugee communities.

Process:

Objective 1 - Review all project resources with community and partners.

a) Bushfire Safety Information

A4 factsheets on bushfire safety and heat health developed in 2019/2020 season were reviewed by bilingual workers and CFA for validity and currency. The new Fire Danger Rating sign was introduced on September 1, 2022, the information in the current factsheet was updated accordingly. The updates included the new Fire Danger Rating graphic and the explanation of “extreme and catastrophic”. All other information was still relevant. A magnet was affixed to the resource so it could be kept on the fridge for easy access. The resource was developed to supplement community information sessions, providing an overview of the key topics, and an in-language description of warning icons used on the Vic Emergency App (VEA). The factsheet was translated in Karen, Dari and Dinka.



Similarly, the audio-visual resources of bushfire, flood and heat health developed in 2019/2020 were also reviewed by BCHS bilingual workers and partners for validity and currency.

d) Bushfire Safety Information Video

A three-part bushfire series was developed in 2020-2021 project topics included '*Introduction to bushfire safety*', '*How to prepare for bushfires*' and '*How to stay informed during a bushfire*'. They were reviewed by BCHS bi-cultural workers, CFA and partners every year to ensure that the information is valid. The bushfire video was updated slightly due to the change in Fire Danger Rating sign. The rest of the information was still relevant and CFA content experts were happy for this information to be used as a supplement for community educations.

e) Flood Safety Information Video

A three-part educational series that was developed in 2020-2021 covered the following topics, *Staying safe in a flood and how to get help*, *How to prepare for floods*, and *How to stay informed during a flood*. It was reviewed by VICSES annually to check the validity and currency of the information. With the current videos, VICSES content experts have noticed that the phrase of "avoid using the tap water" during a flood might cause confusion for the community members, as the tap water may not be contaminated and can still be used. As a result, the VICSES and all project partners agreed that this phrase was to be removed. Some images in the videos have also been replaced to reflect where we live and to reduce anxiety for the viewers.

"I've never seen people got killed and properties destroyed by the bushfire back in my home country.

In converse, after attending the bushfire information session, I've found that the Australian bushfire is more dangerous than I could think of.

But now I know what I have to do to prepare for the bushfire and know where to ask for help when I need it".

f) Heat Health Information Video

The content and messages in the current heat health video reviewed by content experts and confirmed that the information was still valid and could be used as a supplement for community educations. However, BCHS and the heat health content experts of the CoGB both agreed that this video needs to be updated in the next financial year, adapting the information that was put together in the current “Beat the Heat” factsheet.

Community members have reported that the information in the videos were very useful, and they were appreciative that they could access such important information in their own languages.

All partners will be monitoring any changes of emergency preparedness information and resources will be modified as necessary.

Objective 2 - Community engagement and education in collaboration with content experts, CFA, VICSES and CoGB

Community understanding of fire, flood and heat health was raised through dissemination of developed resources and community education sessions. Community education sessions for flood were co-facilitated by VICSES and BCHS bilingual staff. Heat health and bushfire safety sessions were combined and co-delivered by CFA and CoGB with BCHS bilingual staff as language support. Place based groups and community leaders were engaged as avenues to connect with community. The long-standing trusted relationship the community has with BCHS enhanced and contributed to this engagement.

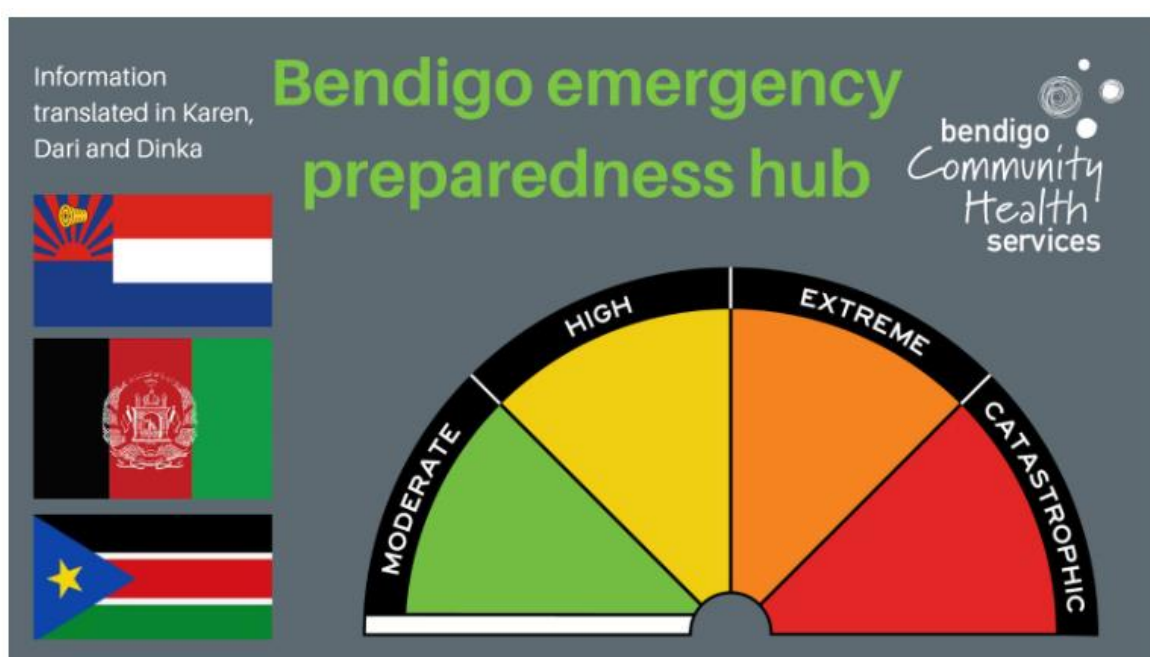
Community champions from the Karen, Afghan and South Sudanese communities were also invited to attend two training session on bushfire safety, flood and heat health delivered by CFA, VICSES and CoGB. Following these sessions, community champions delivered key messages and resources to their respective communities by having conversations with them. BCHS project workers continuously supported the champions while there were in the communities having conversations with the families and friends. In mid program, BCHS bicultural staff met with all the champions to obtain feedback and to identify any assistance they might need. Towards the end of the fire season, community champions were once again invited to come back to share their comments and feedback about working with their communities, and present other feedback provided by community members that they’ve worked with and had conversations with. This included numbers reached, information learnt, intention to use the new information. Community champions were rewarded with a ‘*Certificate of Appreciation*’, with a description of the works they have done on the back.

The champions were also provided with vouchers to further acknowledge their work. It was a real celebration with valuable feedback captured.



Project evaluation, reach and impacts.

A Bendigo Bushfire and Summer Safety Refugee Resource Hub was set up in 2019, on the BCHS website as a central location to host all the developed resources [Bendigo Fire, Flood and Heat Safety Refugee Resource Hub - Bendigo Community Health Service \(bchs.com.au\)](https://bchs.com.au). The hub consists of an introduction page with links to each language (Karen, Dari, and Dinka).



Each year in summer, I am very afraid of the fires because my house is in a bushfire prone zone.

Project staff and community champions recorded attendance, captured uptake of knowledge and intention to use new knowledge and any addition comments and concerns. This information was captured via group feedback in language.

The tables outlined below demonstrates the reach of developed resources.

Table 1 – Number of videos viewed via BCHS Facebook page.

Language	Date of post	Topic	Number of video views
Karen	October 2022	Flood videos - part 1, 2 3	5,693
	January 2023	Bushfire videos – part 1, 2, 3	1,145
	January 2023	Heat health video	1,100
Dari	October 2022	Flood videos - part 1, 2 3	1,406
	January 2023	Bushfire videos – part 1, 2, 3	900
	January 2023	Heat health video	383
Dinka	October 2022	Flood videos - part 1, 2 3	1,335
	January 2023	Bushfire videos – part 1, 2, 3	Reach unavailable
	January 2023	Heat health video	Reach unavailable

Table 2 – Number of printed resources distributed.

Language	Bushfire Safety	Heat Health
Karen	910	910
Dari	172	172
Dinka	-	-

“Before I thought that there wouldn’t be floods in Bendigo because it’s situated in an up country.

I’ve seen the riverine flooding in my village but never seen flash flooding.

But now I’ve got very scared of the flash flooding because I’ve seen with my bare eyes that my garage got flooded just in a few minutes from the heavy rain”.

A total of 12 community information sessions were held with a total of 812 participants attending the sessions. The following table outlines the sessions were held, the target group audience, the agencies facilitating and number of attendees.

Table 3 – Reach via community education sessions

Date	Community groups	Facilitators	Number of attendees
23/12/2022	BCHS Settlement Clients	BCHS	35
31/12/2022	Karen New Year	BCHS/CFA/SES	250
16/02/2023	Karen women walking group	SES/CFA/BCHS	20
19/02/2023	Karen Anglican Church group	SES/BCHS	55
23/2/2023	Karen Women Health Navigator	BCHS	10
24/02/2023	Karen Culture Social Support Foundation group	CFA/BCHS	30
25/02/2023	Afghan Community	BCHS/SES/CFA	80
05/03/2023	Karen Htoo Moo Plaw Church - Junortoun	CFA/BCHS	85
12/03/2023	Karen Kangaroo Flat Church	BCHS/CFA	99
17/03/2023	Karen Seventh Day Adventist Church	CFA/BCHS	25
19/3/2023	Karen Calvary Church	BCHS/CFA	88
26/3/2023	Karen Hosana church group	CFA/BCHS	35
Total			812

Table 4 – Breakdown of reach by community groups

Participant groups	Community education	Community champions	Total reach
Karen	732	365	1,097
Afghan	80	12	92
South Sudanese	-	-	
	812	377	1,189

Evaluation

As indicated participants have low levels of literacy in their own language and low level of English. Therefore, evaluation was obtained in group responses in spoken Karen language.

Participants were asked to raise their hands to indicate 'Yes' or 'No' to the questions '*Did you learn something new today*', '*Will you do anything differently after today?*'. As a group they were then asked to share thought on what the most valuable information was and examples of things they may do differently.

Table 5 outlines evaluation data obtained from group participants. A total of 812 people participated in the evaluations.

Table 5 – Thematic group-based uptake of knowledge and intended behaviour change.

What was the most valuable thing you learnt about today? (Thematic group-based responses)	Number of groups responses
Wear loose and long sleeve shirt in a hot day	10
Vic Emergency App	12
Leaving early is always the best option	11
Preparing for an emergency	12
Avoid cooking during the day in a hot day	12
Clean the dried leaves and twigs in the gutter and the surrounding of the house	9
Total Fire Ban	12
Never drive in the flood water	10
Fire Danger Rating	12
Warning signs	10
Where to get help	11
What do you intend to do differently after today?	Number of groups responses
Check Vic Emergency App regularly	11
Do not camp under the big tree where there is a risk of branches falling	9
Have a grab and go bag	12
Look after elderly people during a hot day	9
Keep the house cool during a hot day. - Close the blinds, windows, and curtains. - Turn on air-conditioning	10
Never leave children and pets in a car in a hot day	12
Write down the contact details of 3 people you may need to contact in the case of an emergency	10
Tell others family and friends about what I've learnt	12
Do not driving in a flood water	12
Make sure phone always has credit	12
Do not light fire in a Total Fire Ban Day	12
Have a full tank of petrol during summer	11

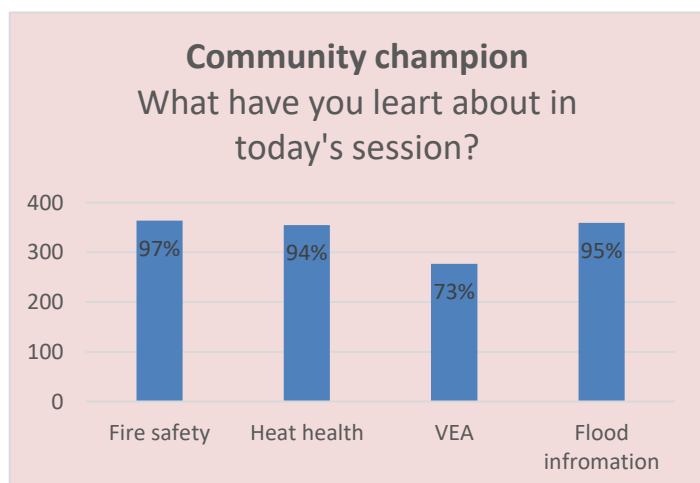
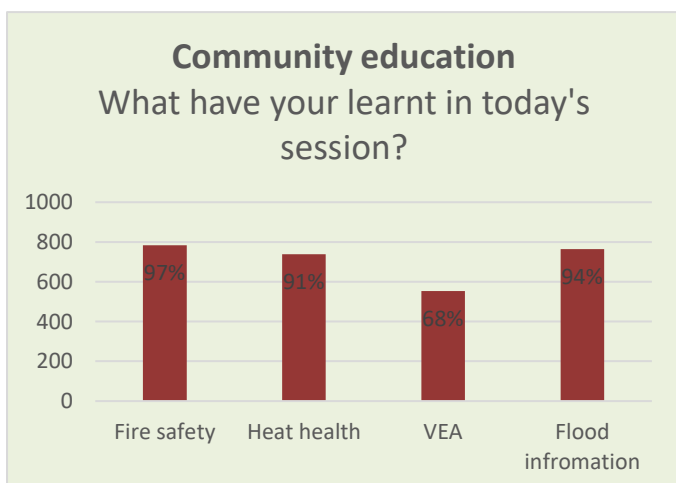
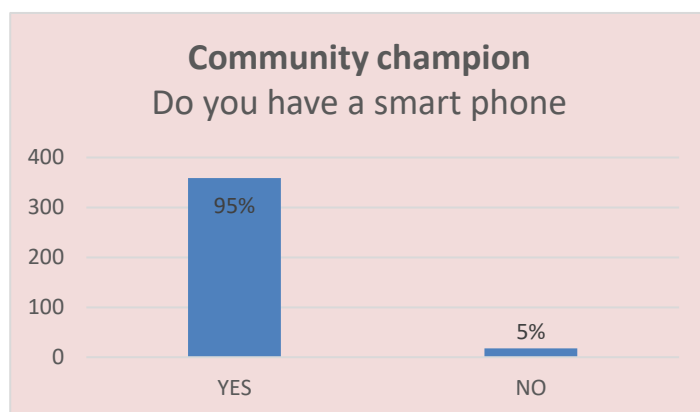
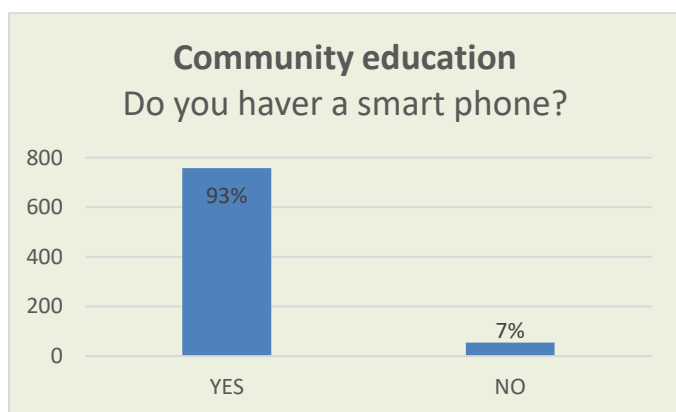
Fifteen community champions from the Karen (11), Afghan (2) and South Sudanese (2) communities were recruited and invited to attend two information sessions covering information on fire, floods, and heat health. Those that wanted to volunteer but could not attend the session were supported by BCHS staff to ensure they had a good understanding of the messages to be delivered to the community.

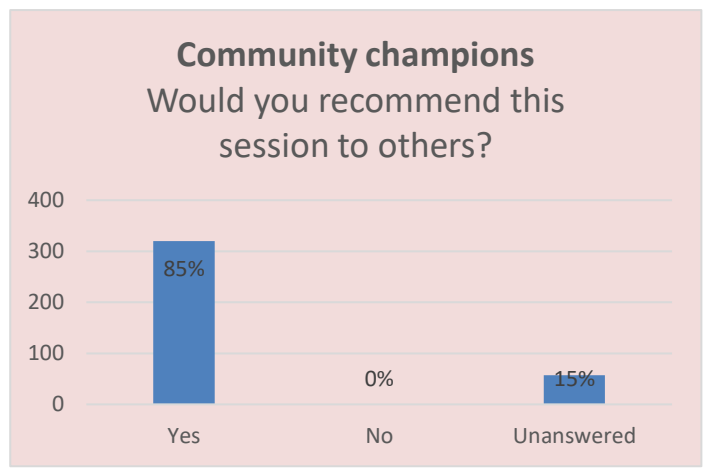
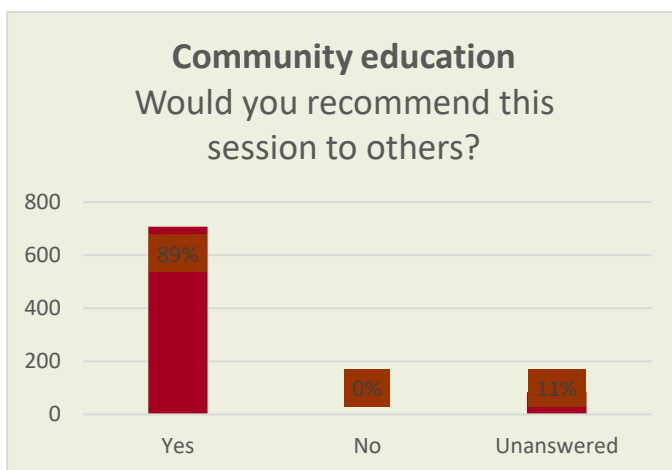
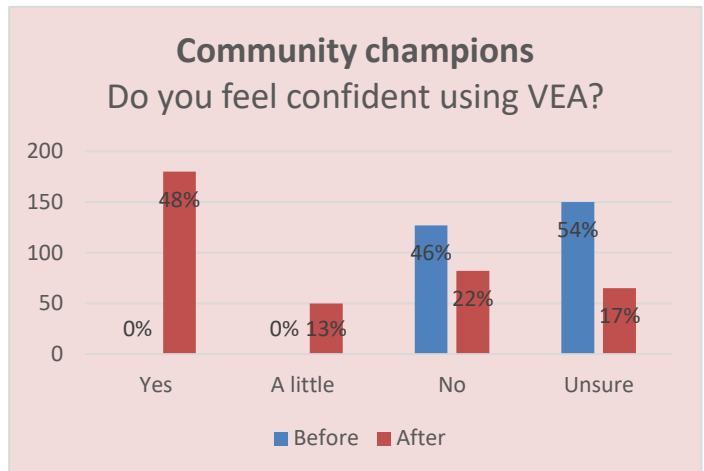
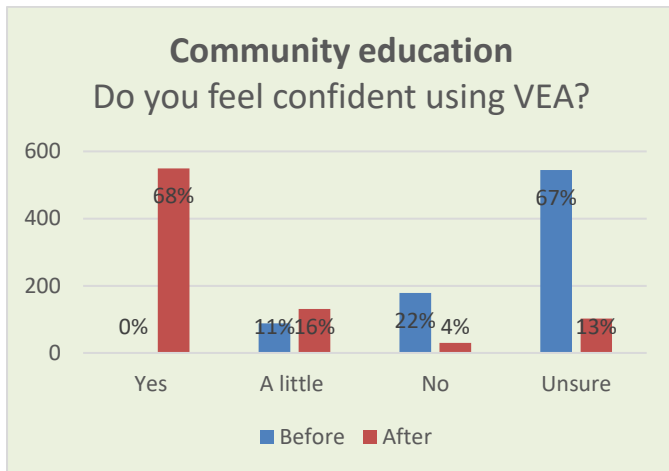
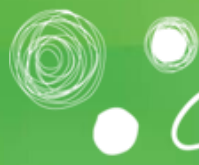
"I think everyone in the community needs to attend these information sessions".

Community champions shared relevant fire, flood and heat health information with their family, friends, and networks, using the developed printed resources as a guide for information delivery.

Community champions delivered information to 377 community members in total.

The following graphs outline evaluation data the community champions provided and BHCS bi-cultural staff collected from the participants during their conversation, and community education sessions.





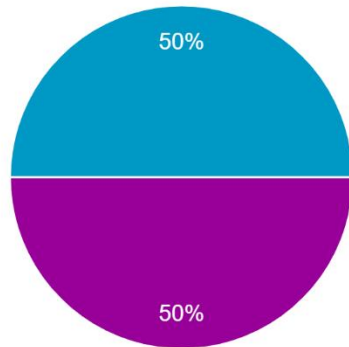
Objective 3 - Codesign capacity building session with partners and build capacity of CoGB, SES and CFA emergency personnel, relief staff and volunteers to better understand the resettlement experiences and complexities of settlement for the local refugee communities.

One 90 minutes face to face session of 'Understanding the Refugee Journey' was held for CoGB staff, to increase understanding of the overall experiences of local refugee communities. The session highlighted the experiences of Afghan, South Sudanese and Karen as former refugees, and their journey from their home country to Australia. The session covered both their pre and post resettlement experiences and the challenges they have faced here in Australia. New Australian environment and differences in extreme weather events of fire, flood and heat activities were highlighted from the countries the project refugee communities had previously lived in. A total of 9 participated in the session. The following data shows evaluation feedback obtained.



1. Overall this session met my expectations

8 responses



2. Did this session provide you with new information?

8 responses

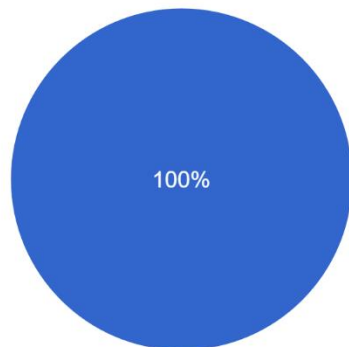


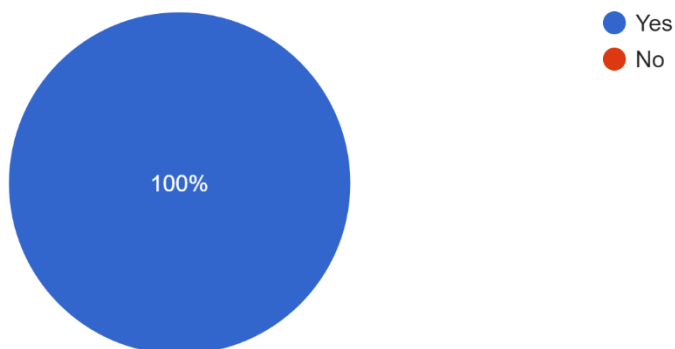
Table 6 – The most useful information that the participants have learnt.

Most valuable information learnt
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting a general understanding of the 'profile' of people from refugee background • The hardship that they have faced and the difficulties in many ways. • How difficult to remain hopeful in such challenging situations • I cannot relate to how living in a refugee camp for so long - the transition to other countries and freedom would be so dramatic and obviously challenging. • Understanding the new countries 'rules' would be strange and challenging and I'm sure locals can be very judgmental. I hope I am more welcoming. • The Karen history - and the promises made by the British before independence. • They may not always ask questions, don't assume that they understand what you have said. • Great overview of community, culture, and considerations for practitioners! • It is important to scope out and work with leaders of refugee communities to strengthen our cultural resilience and assist with transitioning to a totally new area and culture. • Revisiting and understanding people's journeys, challenges, and barriers for day to day living and then the complexities of learning & adapting to a new country, community, language etc. • The hardships and fear that people are put through. • The definition of a refugee compared to migrants and other common terms as per the UN agreement. • Having a greater understanding of the Karen community. • Ongoing impacts it has on future generations e.g., young people accessing higher education rather than factory based/labour jobs, how can we continually work to change and support this It is overwhelming to see and hear about experiences - for me importance as this type of work not as an additional piece to our work but included in our day-to-day planning, thinking, actions. • How scary and difficult it must be to come to a completely different country, often leaving others behind and must learn so much to try to fit in. • What some of the refugees get access to and where I can suggest they go further for help

It's hard for those of us born in Australia to comprehend a life without ready access to cars, phones, internet, housing, emergency services, etc. So, it was valuable to hear more about this and gives you a deeper appreciation for how much these people have overcome.

3. Did this session provide you with a greater understanding of the pre and post settlement experience and the impact of culture and health?

8 responses



4. Do you intend to use this new information?

8 responses

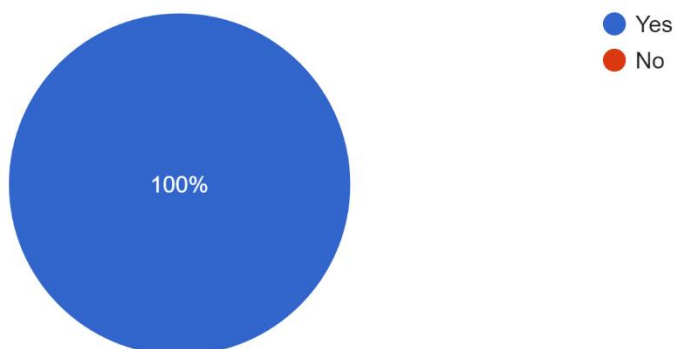


Table 7 – Comments and feedback from workshop participants

<i>Things you would like to do different after the today's session</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate what I've learnt into my work • Find out more about health navigator program • To tell people what I've learnt • Not sure yet but awareness is the first step 	

- Any changes to service delivery and ensure understanding the impact and communities to support change
- Targeted employment - adult apprenticeship and trainingship
- Raised my awareness, which I hope will help my approach to communication and support

To think more broadly about my target audience and their levels of understanding.

Discussion

Social media is great platform for most people to access information they need. One of the resource dissemination strategies of this project was to share the fire, flood and heat health audio-visual resources that were available on social media where most people from refugee background could easily access. When reflecting on the social media reach for those audio-visual resources that were post in late 2022 and early 2023, it was evident that this method of getting information is out to the community is working particularly for the Karen and Dari speaking communities. The other initiative was to create QR codes of those videos that have already been developed and share it with community members who did not know how to access the video through social media. The sharing of the QR code was a key component of the program.

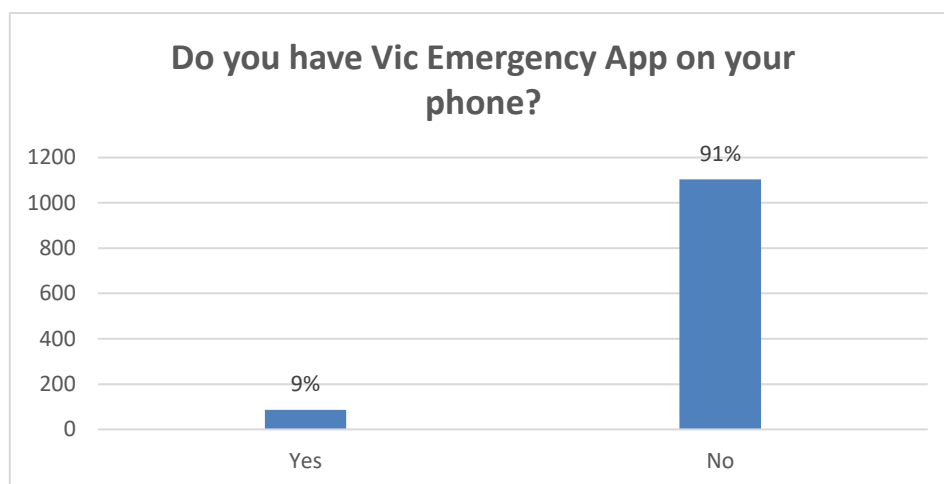


All resources were made available online through the Bendigo Fire, Flood and Heat Safety Refugee Resources Hub on the BCHS website. Majority of access of online audio-visual resources were Karen resources accessed through the BCHS Facebook page.

Printed resources and the QR codes were distributed at the local Karen volleyball and caneball tournaments where around 100 attendees were provided with 3 copies of the resources each and asked to help deliver further afield to their family and friends. These printed resources were also distributed by the project

community champions to their networks and assisted them in facilitating discussions and creating awareness. Community groups, churches and local agencies that work with people from refugee background were targeted for these sessions.

Evaluation data from group sessions demonstrated that a high uptake of knowledge and participants noted their intention to make changes following the sessions. The graph below indicates that only a minority of the participants have heard of and downloaded the VEA in their mobile phone.



It was not surprising to see this figure because, while running the tutorial sessions on how to use the VEA, the participants commented that the app is in English and it was hard to navigate and understand. Other participants that have used the VEA before mentioned that the notification beeping sound has created extra anxiety, as they were thinking of “something bad had happened whenever they heard the beeping”. Despite this, they were having issues navigating the app, participants still considered the app was important to monitor severe weather events. It is recommended that the VEA to be looked and modified to make it more accessible for everyone whose English is their second language.

When groups were asked to share the most valuable thing they have learnt during the session, the most common responses were the VEA, Total Fire Ban, preparing for an emergency and Fire Danger Rating. The most common responses for intention to make change was to check VEA regularly during summer, have a ‘grab and go bag’ ready and share with others what they have learnt.

Fifteen community champions were recruited and attended two 2 hours training sessions on 'fire and heat health' and 'floods safety' in December 2022. Community champions went back to their communities to share what they've learnt with their family, friends, and community members with conversations in small groups. Printed resources were utilised by community champions to assist them in the delivery of key messages. While community champions were conversing with their community members, they also met up with BHCS project bilingual staff from time to time to check if there were any concerns or questions.



At the end of the program, community champions were invited to come back and bring along all the data that they have collected during the consultations with community groups. This meeting was a celebration of the success of their work to the program and to thank all the champions for the work that they have done and rewarded them with vouchers and a '*Certificate of Appreciation*' so that they can use this as a reference on their regime when applying for a job. Community champions spoke with 377 of their community members. Interestingly 272 participants stated that they did not know about VEA prior attending the session. The evaluation data shows that most participants owned a smart phone and 230 felt more confident using VEA after engaging in the sessions. Eighty two participants stated that they were not confident using the VEA. This indicates that despite assistance in downloading the VEA and provision of information on how to use the VEA, there remains a barrier to accessing and interpreting information from the VEA within these cohorts. The barriers include poor digital literacy, the VEA is only available in English and the system is a completely foreign to new arrivals. Therefore, it's important to repeat and build on this information every year for communities.

Building capacity of emergency personnel, relief centre staff and volunteers to better understand the residents from refugee background was an important aspect of this project. One 90 minutes face to face session of '*Understanding the Refugee Journey*' was provided to CoGB staff to help understanding of the overall experience of refugee community members and reinforced concepts of planning, preparing, and managing fire flood and heat and importantly asking for help were all new concepts for the refugee background participants. Feedback was positive, however general feedback was that there was an eagerness to receive

more information about other cultures and newly arrived groups. It's recommended that future work should expand greater numbers of staff and volunteers from all local Emergency Management agencies.

Conclusion

Overall, the program was effective in raising awareness of fire, floods, and heat health amongst former refugee community groups in Bendigo and building their capacity to apply this knowledge. This program needs to continue on an annual basis, extending reach, reinforcing, and reminding communities of these messages and ensuring new arrivals receive this message in a timely manner. Building the capacity of local emergency service providers, emergency planners and relief staff to better understand the local former refugee community was also an important aspect of this project that should continue and be embedded into strategic emergency planning.

Many former refugee community members have faced the challenges of drought, bushfire, heat, and flood in their countries of origin and their previous environment which is vastly different to the Australian environment and severe weather events. The trauma related to these events can impact on mental health with increased feelings of anxiety, depression, and a sense of helplessness. This is compounded by fear related to managing fire, flood, and heat in a new environment where they face all the complexities and challenges of resettlement. There are foreseeable co-benefits to implementing and broadening the reach of this work, with positive impacts on sense of safety and security in a new environment and improved mental health.

Recommendations

1. Enhance focus and reach amongst Afghan Hazara and South Sudanese communities.
2. Consider delivering information to both small and large groups as necessary
3. Collect participant data on age range and length of settlement (over 5 year and under 5 year) to see if this has any bearing on prior knowledge and uptake of knowledge and to inform future work.
4. Promote and support volunteering opportunities with local emergency services.
5. Reinforce the need for emergency warning systems to be accessible for all local refugee community members with a focus on a more accessible use of the VEA. Identify resource to further investigate knowledge and experiences of using VEA.
6. Consider adapting TechReady content for refugee communities in language
7. Replicate this model for additional vulnerable ethnic/language groups and new arrivals.
8. Scale up and test this model in other regional and metropolitan sites.
9. Develop and implement advocacy campaign about the need to embed emergency preparedness as a core component of refugee settlement programs across Australia e.g., embed this model into Refugee Settlement programs.

10. Embed model with existing international and nation framework, e.g., the Risk Reductions national Disaster Framework (SENDI). Recommendation will inform 2023-2024 work plan

References

Victorian Council of Social Services (VCOSS) 2022, Valuing strengths, and building resilience - *Improving emergency management outcomes for multicultural communities in Victoria*, p 4.