IMPROVING CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS TO CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE COMMUNITIES

Organisation: Settlement Services International

Date Received: 16 June 2022

Submission on
Improving crisis communication to CALD communities
NSW Legislative Assembly Committee on Community Services

Background

SSI welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry on Crisis Communication to CALD communities.

Settlement Services International (SSI) is a community organisation and social business that supports newcomers and other Australians to achieve their full potential. We work with people who have experienced vulnerability, including refugees, people seeking asylum and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, to build capacity and enable them to overcome inequality.

Formed in 2000, SSI is a member-based organisation with 11 Migrant Resource Centres and multicultural organisations across NSW, including two in regional NSW, as members. SSI recently merged with Access Community Services in Queensland and we have also established programs in Victoria which significantly extend our service footprint and reach.

SSI is the largest provider in NSW of the Humanitarian Settlement Program, funded by the Australian Government, to newly arrived refugees and other humanitarian entrants. It also leads a consortium, the NSW Settlement Partnership, of 20 partner agencies which deliver the Settlement Engagement and Transition Supports program, also funded by the Australian Government, to refugees and eligible family stream migrants in the first five years of settlement across NSW. Access Community Services in Queensland is also a provider of the Settlement Engagement and Transition Supports program and delivers the program in regional areas. We also provide a range of other social services, including foster care, employment and disability services.

While this Inquiry focuses on crisis communication to CALD communities, SSI maintains that strong engagement of CALD organisations and communities in disaster planning and preparedness is an essential foundation to effective communication at the time of a disaster or crisis. Essentially, it is not helpful to separate good practice in crisis communication from disaster planning and preparedness with CALD communities. We therefore include discussion on engagement of CALD communities in disaster planning in our submission.

Summary of key principles for effective crisis communication with CALD communities

- **Work closely with trusted settlement services and CALD community leaders to inform and keep communities safe:** Newcomers and members of vulnerable communities are more likely to follow government advice when delivered through someone or an organisation they trust. SSI, its

members, and partners provide invaluable social infrastructure that the Government should harness more purposefully.

- **Collaboration with settlement services and CALD leaders needs to be sustained over time** (rather than only at the time of a crisis). Ensuring all people receive crucial information regardless of their cultural or linguistic backgrounds cannot be an afterthought. It must be a core component of government communication and engagement strategies for crisis/disaster planning and response and include proactive consultation.[1]

- **Communication to CALD communities** about health crises and environmental disasters **needs to be tailored**, rather than using with a one-size-fits-all approach. Tailored approaches are especially important to reach older people and those more recently arrived in Australia.[2]

- **Use a range of communication channels that are appropriate and accessible to CALD communities:** Appropriate channels will vary from community to community. For example, the WeChat platform plays an important role in disseminating COVID-19 information to the Chinese community in Australia, providing up-to-date information in Chinese languages. Other communities may rely on other forms of social media (e.g. Facebook and WhatsApp), ethnic language print, radio and TV media.[3] Provision of resources in audio and video formats is crucial to reach people who are not literate in their own language.

- **Peer-to-peer community engagement and education within CALD communities should be harnessed in crisis/disaster messaging and behaviour change**: CALD community leaders are a vital asset and ambassadors for peer-to-peer communication to keep newcomers and other diverse communities safe and informed. For example, pictographs, which have minimal or no text, can be rapidly shared by trusted peers online using digital or social media.

Learning from the COVID-19 pandemic

As a community organisation providing settlement and a range of other social services, SSI has experienced the impacts of COVID-19 on vulnerable individuals and communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed major gaps in government communication and engagement with multicultural communities. Communication with CALD communities was initially problematic with major negative impacts on health and social outcomes. For example, community leaders from locked-down "hotspots" in Western Sydney reported that communication of public health orders was insufficient for people with limited English.[4] Lack of engagement with multicultural communities eroded trust between communities and governments, leading to poor reach and support for diverse communities. Communication issues were exacerbated by rapidly changing advice from government and media and the spread of misinformation.

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[1] Federation of Ethnic Communities Council of Australia. (2022). *Advancing Multicultural Australia, Policy platform* 2022.

[2] Settlement Services International. (2020). *Western Sydney Community Pulse Report on COVid-19.* https://www.ssi.org.au/images/stories/documents/Western_Sydney_Community_Pulse_Report_on_COVID-

[3] Wild, A., Kunstler, B., Goodwin, D., Onyala, S., Zhang, L., Kufi M., Salim, W., Musse, F., Mohideen, M., Asthana, M., Al-Khafaji, M., Geronimo, M., Coase, D., Chew, E., Micallef E. &Skouteris, H. 'Communicating COVID-19 health information to culturally and linguistically diverse communities: insights from a participatory research collaboration.' *Public Health Res Pract*. 2021.31(1).

[4] Settlement Council of Australia. (2020). *Communicating with migrant and refugee communities during COVID-19: Learnings for the future.*

In contrast, communication with CALD communities in later stages of the pandemic was successful because it was supported by settlement providers and CALD community leaders sharing information with newly arrived communities. These organisations played a critical role in facilitating engagement between government and communities.

SSI has worked to keep our clients and communities connected to information and support throughout the health crisis. In 2020, SSI established one of the first online community portals for CALD communities in anticipation of the need for easy-to-understand and translated information on COVID-19, vaccinations and the various testing, tracing and compliance protocols. The site was promoted by an intensive social media pictograph campaign in nine community languages. This included, for example, an in-language campaign on WeChat and postings on Australian Chinese News was used to reach the Chinese community.

In addition to fulfilling contractual commitments, when the second wave hit Western Sydney, case managers phoned all their clients to ensure they were COVID-confident, aware of risk, knew how to seek information or advice and were able to care for their children safely in remote learning and during school holidays.

SSI also worked with NSW Health to establish a pop-up vaccination hub NSW out of a western-Sydney SSI office. SSI initiated this collaboration to increase confidence in vaccination in CALD communities and activate eligible individuals to protect themselves and their families. The high demand we had for this service shows the need for innovative solutions that create safe pathways to health services and information.

In 2020, SSI conducted a survey of refugee clients in South-West Sydney. The findings showed that COVID-19 health messages were getting through to people in case management arrangements like SSI's Humanitarian Settlement Program. 94% of respondents reported that they engage in three or more COVID safe practices (e.g. social distancing, washing hands).[5] This affirms the need to use existing settlement workers and other trusted community pathways to reach communities whose first language is not English.

Since the emergence of COVID-19 in Australia, SSI has consulted CALD leaders to better understand community experiences though the pandemic. These consultations affirm the importance of peer-to-peer engagement and education in effective health messaging and behaviour change. CALD community leaders and community organisations were extremely proactive in engaging their community and addressing misinformation. They played a critical role in garnering community support for important health behaviour such as physical distancing, testing and hand hygiene. Communities have used social media, phone calls and virtual information sessions to help people stay connected and provide essential information. They engaged health experts that were able to share information in-language in ways that were best suited to their communities. Many focused their efforts on older people as they were less likely to have the skills or confidence to use digital technology to obtain information.

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[5] Settlement Services International. (2020). Op cit.

For example, NSW Settlement Partnership member Lebanese Community Council of NSW started engaging with its elderly cohort in late February 2020 (before public measures began) and began activities and messaging on social media (Facebook, WhatsApp). Its biggest concern was how rapidly information was changing and the difficulty of keeping up with this. It found community members wanted to see community leaders speaking about the issue. It was a matter of trust – it was better if you knew who was speaking. Similarly, throughout the pandemic the Australian Mesopotamian Cultural Association, led by OAM nominee Bashar Hanna, brought the community together online. He collaborated with the creative community to develop Arabic videos to support wellbeing and reduce stress during COVID-19.

Infectious disease outbreaks create feelings of fear that can exacerbate racist and xenophobic behaviour.[6] The COVID-19 pandemic has been accompanied by increased reports of racism and scapegoating of people born in Asia[7] and temporary migrants.[8] Care should be taken to ensure that extra efforts to reach and support communities that are disproportionately affected by COVID-19 are not interpreted as singling out particular groups as more likely to spread disease or to not heed health messaging. Not only could this increase instances of racism, but it would also be counterproductive to health outcomes, as stigma is a key barrier to people seeking vaccination, testing or treatment.[9]

Strengthen engagement and consultation with the social sector in disaster planning
The National Strategy for Disaster Resilience acknowledges that non-government organisations play a critical role in strengthening disaster resilience in Australia.[10] As the New South Wales Council of Social Services (NCOSS) outlines, social services organisations are often the first responders in crises and go 'above and beyond' to perform this role which is outside their contractual obligations.[11]

However, non-government organisations fulfil these roles without additional resources, training or input to an overarching emergency management plan, relying on their own resources and volunteers to provide support. All too often they are not formally recognised in the NSW emergency management system or are a late inclusion in the response. This means valuable know-how, preventative measures and tailored solutions are lost. For example, since 2016, it was known that the Northern Rivers region was home to the most disadvantaged and disaster-prone LGAs in NSW. Despite this – and the 2017 floods and 2019 bushfires – there seemed to be no evidence that the NGO sector was included in disaster planning and preparedness in the lead up to the recent flood crisis.[12]

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[6] Wild, A., Kunstler, B., Goodwin, D., Onyala, S., Zhang, L., Kufi, M., Salim, W., Musse, F., Mohideen, M., Asthana, M., Al-Khafaji, M., Geronimo, M., Coase, D., Chew, E., Micallef, E., & Skouteris, H. (2021). *Communicating COVID-19 health information to culturally and linguistically diverse communities: insights from a participatory research collaboration*. Public Health Res Pract. (31:1).

[7] Markus, A. (2021). *Mapping Social Cohesion 2021*. Scanlon Foundation and Monash University.

[8] Berg, L. & Farbenblum, B. (2020). *As if we weren't humans: The abandonment of temporary migrants in Australia during Temporary migrants in Australia during COVID-19*.

[9] Wild et al. (2021). Op cit.

[10] Council of Australian Governments. (2011). *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience.*

[11] NCOSS. (2022). *Submission, Independent Flood Inquiry*. https://www.ncoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/NCOSS-Submission-NSW-Independent-Flood-Inquiry-20-May-FINAL.pdf

[12] Ibid.

Involve CALD organisations and communities in disaster planning and preparation

The National Strategy for Disaster Resilience acknowledges information on disaster risk should be communicated in a manner appropriate to its audiences considering different needs of communities.[13] However, in practice, information about emergency preparedness is typically delivered through campaigns that are generalised to an entire population.

Engagement of trusted community service organisations and leaders in targeted community education can increase awareness of disaster risk and support improved planning and preparation for disasters in CALD communities. As outlined previously, proactive collaboration with settlement services and community leaders in disaster planning will also provide an essential foundation for effective partnership at the time of a crisis or disaster.

Case study – developing capacity of CALD community leaders in emergency preparedness

Through our work with people with disability from CALD communities, SSI identified a gap in knowledge about risks associated with natural and other disasters and the need for emergency preparedness in this group. SSI received a grant from the NSW Government under the Community Resilience Innovation Program[14] to deliver information in a culturally sensitive way for CALD communities to increase capacity for emergency preparedness.

The aim was to increase partnership between SSI and emergency services to work together to deliver messages about local hazard risk and emergency preparedness with CALD communities. An additional goal was for both the community leaders and SES volunteers to learn about the extra supports that people with disability from CALD communities might need in an emergency.

The project used a model of community leadership to provide information to CALD communities in their own language, delivered in a culturally appropriate way. It targeted people with disability, their families and carers from the seven most prominent language groups across the Blacktown, Hawkesbury, Nepean, Blue Mountains & Hills areas of Sydney.

The model engaged a small group of community leaders to learn about local hazard risks and emergency preparedness steps. The community leaders were paid to attend the workshop and to conduct two disaster preparedness sessions in their communities. Participants were encouraged to co-facilitate their sessions with emergency service personnel who are experienced in delivering this information. Examples of strategies used to provide culturally appropriate education sessions about risk awareness and emergency preparedness included use of videos, web links to emergency services information including resources in multiple languages, pictures and a more informal teaching style.

The post-program evaluation found that community leaders indicated that their involvement in the training program assisted their ability to understand and prepare for emergencies, and that they could use this information support and teach others. They reported that the involvement of emergency

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[13] Council of Australia Governments, (2011). *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience*.
[14] The Community Resilience Innovation Program is funded by the NSW and Australian Governments through the National Partnership Agreement on Natural Disaster Resilience.

service and local council representatives greatly strengthened the impact of their sessions. One participant remarked that:

> *He came in uniform so they could identify and visualise and then [we] say 'these men in their orange overalls and with all the emblems and everything they'll be the ones door knocking or, you know, giving a helping hand on the day.*

This example highlights the critical importance of engaging CALD organisations and leaders in disaster planning and preparedness as an essential precursor to effective crisis communication.

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