

**Submission
No 17**

**IMPROVING CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS TO CULTURALLY AND
LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE COMMUNITIES**

Organisation: SydWest Multicultural Services

Date Received: 17 June 2022

*A SydWest response to the inquiry:
Improving crisis communication to
culturally and linguistically diverse communities*

Terms of Reference

- a. use of multicultural encode community groups and networks to distribute in language information
- b. ways to improve channels of communication with called communities
- c. addressing racism and discrimination related to crisis communications

Introduction

SydWest Multicultural Services is pleased to make this submission outlining our recommendations when it comes to improving crisis communication to culturally and linguistically diverse communities (CALD).

NSW is the most culturally diverse State in Australia with 25% speaking a language other than English at home. In Western Sydney, the area we represent, the ratio exceeds 41% in some parts. As such, the needs of our community and how we communicate with them are far more critical.

CALD communities are not homogenous, and to reach as many individuals as possible, it is important to consider how different community groups will receive and process information, especially that emanating from government departments. The processing of information therefore is dependent not just on disseminating information in language but relying more closely on community organisations like ours to facilitate engagement around the information CALD communities receive.

Government needs to consult with multicultural organisations like SydWest Multicultural Services more closely, and much earlier in the process so we can better tailor public information. Because from our experience, communicating to (CALD) communities requires a nuanced understanding of how people receive and understand information in their own language.

About SydWest Multicultural Services

Since 1985, SydWest Multicultural Services has supported diverse refugee and migrant communities across the Greater Western Sydney region to assist their settlement in Australia. People are at the centre of everything we do, and we serve the whole person, not just their current challenges in order to effect long term change.

At SydWest, we recognise that culture and language play a key role in our philosophy of person-centred care which nurtures community connection, integration, and awareness to access services that provide the supports, the security they need to face life's challenges and reach their full potential.

Today, SydWest Multicultural Services is the leading community services organisation across the Greater Western Sydney region. We provide culturally responsive care through our settlement support services, youth and family services, homelessness services, employment, and training programs as well as home care and disability services.

Our credentials

For the past 36 years, SydWest Multicultural Services has been assisting and empowering thousands of newly arrived refugees, humanitarian entrants and people from non-English speaking backgrounds to become valued members of a cohesive society.

Based in Greater Western Sydney, we assist people of all ages and cultures through our diverse programs which include settlement services, and women and families' programs. We are a premier organisation specializing in Settlement Services, In-Home Care and Disability Services as well as other support services in the areas of Domestic Violence, Employment, Youth programs and Homelessness, Women and Families programs. Our flagship programs throughout the years are those of Settlement, Aged Care and NDIS.

Our services cover the Greater Western Sydney (multiple LGA's) including Blacktown – the largest Outer West region by population in NSW, representing 188 nationalities and 182 languages. The fact that we have operated successfully in this area for so long, is a testament to our expertise and vast experience relating to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities and their needs.

Our Feedback

Outlined below are our responses to the issues as outlined in the Terms of Reference

Use of multicultural and CALD community groups and networks to distribute in-language information

During the COVID crisis, SydWest expressed its disappointment and concern at the Government's failure to consult and engage with multicultural community-based organisations in Western Sydney, who had the respect and trust of their respective CALD communities. We called upon the Government at the time to ensure we played a greater role in the process, but effective consultation and communication came much later.

We appreciate there is no one size fits all solution to this communication challenge, but to be sidelined from the conversation was unnecessary, which can be construed as disregarding the significant role of the community groups and networks we work with to support government in its endeavours.

As such, we maintain a view that during periods of crisis like that of COVID, that Government must put in place a Taskforce with representatives from multicultural organisations so we can better assist in the decision-making process alongside other agencies including NSW Health, emergency management agencies, the Police, and Local, State and Federal MPs in areas with high representation of CALD communities.

The best way to communicate with people from a broad array of language groups is through community leaders who are known and trusted, such as doctors, priests, or sheiks. Had we been able to facilitate such action through a taskforce, it would have ensured essential information and messaging regarding the latest COVID guidelines and restrictions was sent out to CALD communities, and across Western Sydney more quickly and effectively.

Without an effective and efficient communication mechanism in place, we mobilised ourselves to utilise our established community leader's forum, whom we empowered and supported to connect, engage, and refine messaging to their respective communities about COVID requirements.

Our virtual door knocking initiative to reach communities via technology and bridge the gap in their knowledge could not be underestimated. This contributed for example, to the local government area of Blacktown reaching 95% vaccination quicker than other locations when initial government communication had minor impact in this area. This was because of Government's failure to understand the need to actively engage communities - written translated content is not enough and did not work well. Any written information should be provided in plain English without colloquial language that can be translated quickly and accurately for the members of the CALD communities.

We utilised our expert knowledge of multicultural communities and our vast community connections to engage and help people better understand what was required of them and why. It is also important to note that community organisations such as SydWest are connected to the whole of community regardless of social philosophy, political affiliation or religion, which is a key factor in why the community was trusting and listened to our messaging during the engagement process.

If we had a regular seat at the table during the COVID lockdown periods, over the last 18 months and beyond, our ability to support Government in its attempts to convey their messages would have made a positive impact.

This is a cautionary tale for Government on the importance that translating information into language is only one part of the solution. Much more is needed during a crisis.

Ways to improve channels of communication with CALD communities

a) Use of Cultural and Religious facilities

The identification and understanding of the cultural and religious assets in places would have been a better and important communication channel in reaching CALD communities quicker that was not deployed. From our experience, the governments approach was limited in the choice of communication channels they distributed information.

A broader approach using these pathways and providing connections points, with our support, would have been an advantage. The mapping of these cultural and religious assets would be an effective tool in the development of future communication strategies that could be assessed and validated by leading community groups like SydWest Multicultural Services to be appropriate.

b) Engagement with young people from CALD communities needs to be different

Our recommendation is that engaging with local police and producing communication campaigns, shared through social media was a needed approach for young people from CALD communities. Our experience shows us, relying on the COVID restrictions, that communication campaigns that gave practical examples relating to a young person's social and family context (for example - who they could and could not visit) would be more effective. We understand, this does need to be managed to avoid rumours and misinformation. However, through our engagement with young people, the more they understood how it applied to them, the easier it was for them to understand and comply with restrictions.

c) Integration of communication into community service delivery programs

Community organisations like SydWest deliver key community programs to vulnerable and CALD communities. These programs could have been more effectively used as a communication mechanism to those who we support through our In-Home Care services, Disability Services, Youth, Settlement services, as well as our Women and Families programs.

SydWest Multicultural Services, like many other multicultural organisations, have experienced staff with case work credentials, care workers and youth workers and are supporting sections of the community. Our staff have the rapport, connection, linguistic and cultural understanding, as well as the trust of those who we serve.

The ability for us to have leverage and be supported to use these communication channels through our day-to-day activity was not realised.

A process with key messaging to enable our staff to engage and communicate on matters of crisis did occur particularly through the role played by NSW Health, but this approach was not consistent across all agencies we work with. This was a missed opportunity to increase engagement activity particularly because we have bilingual staff who could have conducted conversations in first language.

d) Virtual door-knock initiative

Typically, door-knocking campaigns are a crucial tool for contacting hard-to-reach populations — especially vulnerable CALD communities that who were at risk of being shut out from accessible vaccine information.

But with lockdowns in place, we placed emphasis on video tools and virtual scheduling platforms than on door-to-door community organising. While this approach had its challenges as it risked leaving behind those without digital literacy and Wi-Fi access, the ability to conduct virtual information sessions in partnership with community groups proved to be effective and was an approach that could be adapted again.

Addressing racism and discrimination related to crisis communications

During the COVID crisis, the inconsistency in lockdown restrictions between East and Western Sydney exacerbated issues in our view that heightened racism and classism tensions for our communities. This was not helped by the mainstream media.

Because of the rapid rise in COVID infections, and a concentration of infections in certain areas of Western Sydney despite previous COVID infection waves occurring in other locations; the Government itself was less compassionate in expressing a view that migrant and refugee communities were flaunting the laws put in place, did not trust government and in one particular instance, a statement was made that Western Sydney migrants and refugees might be “stupid.”

As stated, this same attitude was not expressed when infections earlier in the COVID pandemic sharply rose, particularly in the city’s East. At that time, communities were instead encouraged and motivated to work better together and counter the spread.

As a consequence, parts of Western Sydney were forced to endure greater police presence and a much more authoritarian attitude enforced on the community.

These actions subsequently left CALD communities feeling stigmatised. In some respects, our CALD communities with lived experience of government and military conflict did become fearful, which triggered past traumas which added to their mental health. For CALD communities, it led to judgement of their attitude and behaviour by others – creating a stigma about Western Sydney without an ardent appreciation that the approach to communication to date did not resonate or work effectively.

These communities felt victimised which created more of a necessity for organisations like ours, without additional or adequate resources to continue engaging our communities to explain these actions of Government and assure CALD communities such actions were not a threat nor a judgement of them. This was a challenging task for us and a position we should not have been placed in; instilling confidence back in the community who felt they had been badly let down and effectively blamed for the rapid spike in infections.

Rather than labelling CALD communities as lacking in trust and harbouring disrespect to Australian social values, leveraging their existing social capital and breadth of their community relationships and networks was in fact a critical resource in the battle to contain COVID-19.

Starting from a position of trust, the challenge becomes how to activate and effectively resource the span of multicultural and community organisations and networks that refugees and migrants engage with in their daily lives.

This approach, coupled with clear and consistent messaging in community languages and particularly with peer-to-peer engagement from community members and trusted organisations - we argue is incredibly effective to support behavioural change and maintain health and safety as was required.

Conclusion

We maintain the view that during periods of crisis like that of COVID, that Government must put in place a Taskforce with representatives from multicultural organisations so we can better assist in the decision-making process alongside other agencies including NSW Health, emergency management agencies, the police, and Local, State, and Federal MPs in areas with high representation of CALD communities.

The best way to communicate with people from a broad array of language groups is through community leaders who are known and trusted, such as doctors, priests, or sheiks.

For CALD communities, crisis communication used during the COVID pandemic did lead to racism, discrimination and judgement of their attitude and behaviour by others – creating a stigma about Western Sydney without an ardent appreciation that the communication approach to-date did not resonate or work effectively.

Rather than labelling CALD communities as lacking in trust, there is an advantage in leveraging their existing social capital and breadth of their community relationships and networks. It is in fact, a critical resource in facilitating appropriate communications.

The written information that was disseminated throughout this crisis lacked cultural sensitivity - it was written in cumbersome ways that made it extremely difficult to interpret key messaging to adequately translate the same.

We encourage government to factor our recommendations into their future strategies when delving into such matters of extreme importance.

We look forward to participating in any future discussions about the inquiry. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me on [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]

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Yours faithfully,

Elfa Moraitakis

Chief Executive Officer