IMPROVING CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS TO CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE COMMUNITIES

Organisation: Fire Brigade Employees' Union (FBEU)
Date Received: 17 June 2022
SUBMISSION TO IMPROVING CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS TO CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE COMMUNITIES

FIRE BRIGADE EMPLOYEES’ UNION (FBEU)

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INTRODUCTION

1. This submission has been prepared by the Fire Brigade Employees’ Union (FBEU) on behalf of members for the Select Committee inquiry into improving crisis communication to culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities.
2. The FBEU will address part (b) of the Inquiry’s Terms of Reference: ways to improve channels of communication with CALD communities.
3. As a Registered Industrial Organisation with industrial coverage of professional firefighters and other employees involved in fire and emergency response services in New South Wales, the FBEU is ideally placed on behalf of all members to provide valuable insight into, and recommendations arising from, crisis communications to members of CALD communities.
4. This submission will largely flow from member interactions within their employment with Fire Rescue NSW (FRNSW).
5. FBEU members assist all members of the community, including those who are culturally and linguistically diverse.
6. The FBEU commends its members in their devotion and commitment to serving these communities.
7. Nearly every interaction FBEU members have with all communities could turn into a crisis whether that be: fires, floods, car accidents and other emergencies.
8. NSW, and Australia, by its nature, is a diverse and multicultural population.
9. With the increasing diversity that our members are facing, it’s critical that FRNSW staff are supported and trained to engage in crisis communication and that FRNSW have clear strategies, programs, and processes to ensure trust and engagement is built between firefighters and members of the CALD community.
10. In its submission, the FBEU will make recommendations on how the Government can improve channels of communication between firefighters and CALD communities, in their commitment to the protection of life, community and property.
11. For this submission, FBEU will make three recommendations to improve FRNSW communication with CALD communities in a crisis:

   - to introduce a Multicultural Liaison Officer (MLO), expands its indigenous pathway program to members of CALD communities; and utilise the skills of bi-lingual staff to build on trust within these communities.

Fire Brigades Employees’ Union (FBEU)

12. The Fire Brigade Employees’ Union of NSW is a trade union registered under the Industrial Relations Act 1996 (NSW).
13. Formed in 1910, the FBEU is the most established and democratic firefighting organisation in NSW. The FBEU is Australia’s oldest firefighting Union and represents over 6000 members in the largest fire and rescue service in Australia, in both metropolitan and regional areas.
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14. It is vital that all members of the community should be able to rely on and trust Government services, most importantly, emergency services, including FBEU members, employed at Fire Rescue NSW (FRNSW).

15. The NSW Government requires a ‘deliberate, persistence concentration and effort’ to improve the experience and efforts or working with members of the CALD community.

16. FRNSW has some multicultural resources for CALD communities. However, this could be remarkably improved.

17. FRNSW has translated factsheets and videos, for example, on their website, in a wide array of languages.

18. While there are translated documents and transcripts, FRNSW would benefit from understanding potential ‘digital literacies and capabilities, as well as information consumption.’

19. Studies have found that ‘cultural groups respond to risk and crisis communication based on their perceptions and ways of thinking, and these differ from group to group.’

20. FRNSW also has a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Communities Program, where it is recognised that a third of NSW residents were born overseas, and over 1.8 million have a first language other than English, entailing over 275 languages and 144 religions being practiced in NSW.

21. The FRNSW CALD program aims to reduce the frequency and severity of fires and other emergencies with CALD communities.

22. The FBEU however is concerned that strategies and current practices for engagement with CALD communities in relation to crisis events is currently lacking.

23. FRNSW can look towards Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV), who currently have education programs for CALD community members. FRV promote cultural events which community members may engage in, similar to FRNSW Open Days. In addition, FRV appoints District Multicultural and Community Liaisons positions which are roles filled by firefighters, directly tasked with the role of building trust and confidence amongst CALD communities in the Fire Services in Victoria along with developing and implementing ongoing communication strategies.

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24. While physical engagement activities have been put on hold because of the COVID-19 pandemic, FRV Multicultural Liaison Officers have engaged with the community virtually, including running home fire safety and smoke alarm information sessions online.6

Recommendation: FRNSW should consider the introduction of a new position of a Multicultural Liaison Officer (MLO) within its firefighting positions. This MLO position should engage directly with members of the CALD communities, and leaders and should be tasked with designing and implementing communication and engagement strategies for CALD communities.

25. Many members of CALD communities come from places where communities lack a trust in its government, or do not understand the Australian government.
26. FRNSW must focus on building relationships and community trust to ensure safer outcomes in the lives and property it protects.
27. To build on this trust, FRNSW has, for example, an Indigenous pathway program.
28. FRNSW’s pathway program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people under the Indigenous Fire and Rescue Employment Strategy (IFARES). Through this program, FRNSW works with the Aboriginal Learning Centre TAFE NSW, where indigenous persons may gain a recognised qualification into FRNSW, through a Certificate IV in Fitness.
29. This program supports the employment of indigenous communities through education and employment support.

Recommendation: FRNSW should expand or create a similar program as the IFARES program for members of the CALD community to promote a program in which qualified participants for indigenous and CALD community members are gainfully employed as active members of FRNSW and the Community.

30. CALD community members may be unfamiliar with Australian governmental systems, ‘in addition to language and communication barriers, [this] can further contribute to lower levels of trust among CALD communities.’7
31. In 2017, FRNSW had at least 10 bi-lingual staff speaking 10 different languages to help close the gap in multicultural communities.8

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32. To fully close any gap to ensure that communities are fire conscious, FRNSW must have the funding and resources to employ and train bi-lingual staff to improve crisis communication to CALD communities.

**Recommendation:** FRNSW must do an assessment of employees who speak other language in a view to properly recognise and utilise their skills and resources to gain further trust in members of CALD communities. Bi-lingual staff, especially, should receive training in crisis communication.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

33. For this inquiry, the FBEU recognises the importance of crisis communication to members in CALD communities.

34. Firefighters are at the forefront of many crises in many communities, and for that, the FBEU makes 3 recommendations that FRNSW could make to improve communication with CALD communities:

35.

1. FRNSW should consider the introduction of a new position of a Multicultural Liaison Officer (MLO) within its firefighting positions. This MLO position should engage directly with members of the CALD communities, and leaders and should be tasked with designing and implementing communication and engagement strategies for CALD communities.

2. FRNSW should expand or create a similar program as the IFARES program for members of the CALD community to promote a program in which qualified participants for indigenous and CALD community members are gainfully employed as active members of FRNSW and the Community.

3. FRNSW must do an assessment of employees who speak other language in a view to properly recognise and utilise their skills and resources to gain further trust in members of CALD communities. Bi-lingual staff, especially, should receive training in crisis communication.