



**ethnic
communities'
council of
victoria**

1 November 2007

ECCV SUBMISSION TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

THE NEW VICTORIAN MENTAL HEALTH STRATEGY

1. The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria welcomes the opportunity to present a submission to the Department of Human Services in relation to *the new Victorian Mental Health Strategy*.
2. ECCV is the state-wide peak advocacy body representing ethnic and multicultural communities in Victoria. For over 30 years ECCV has remained the principal liaison point between ethnic communities, government and the wider community in Victoria. ECCV has been a key player in building Victoria as a successful, harmonious and multicultural society.
3. ECCV supports the new strategy's aim to ensure that an effective approach in mental health is developed. ECCV understands that the delivery of mental health services present significant challenges. People from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities may have lower rates of access to mental health services due to language and/or cultural differences and increased rates of socio-economic disadvantage. For people who do not possess high level English language skills and those who come from a variety of cultural backgrounds, addressing and receiving mental health care can be a bewildering experience. CALD consumers face challenges giving informed consent in their care and treatment or sharing information with service providers.
4. ECCV recommends that the new Victorian Mental Health Strategy should incorporate the already existing ***cultural diversity plan for Victoria's special mental health services***. ECCV also supports the maximisation of opportunities for participation in mental health services for people from CALD backgrounds.
5. ECCV would also like to emphasise that mental health care for CALD and new and emerging communities should be a key future priority for the strategy. Therefore, ECCV recommends that a new strategic direction should be added in the mental health strategy.

Proposed strategic direction 7: Improving access to mental health services for CALD communities.

- To ensure stronger engagement and CALD consumer and carer participation in mainstream mental health services.
- To improve prevention and early intervention through community education about mental health and services available to people from CALD backgrounds.

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- To ensure that mainstream service providers are delivering culturally competent, appropriate and sensitive services to their client groups.
 - To support ethno-specific agencies in delivering appropriate mental health services to their communities.
 - That providers' work towards ensuring their workforce matches their client bases through appropriate recruitment strategies.
 - To ensure that professionals in the mental health sector receive adequate training in cultural competency either before or during their mental health careers.
6. The strategy must recognise the fact that many CALD people do not have a good understanding of English and do not fully understand the mental health sector and its services. Barriers to participation and effective engagement that have been identified by ECCV include:
- Mental health stigma preventing discussion and access to services
 - People from CALD and new and emerging communities often feel disempowered and uninformed
 - Lack of knowledge of relevant services
 - Lack of knowledge and/or understanding of mental illness
 - Lack of mental health information in relevant community languages
 - Lack of bilingual mental health professionals
 - Lack of culturally and linguistically relevant services
 - Lack of community education in respect to mental illness
 - Past experiences and/or trauma in respect to the mental health system in country of birth or elsewhere
 - Expectation and/or pressure within families to deal with mental health problems within the family and not seek assistance.
7. An education campaign which involves CALD community leaders to promote mental health education and further inform CALD communities of the strategy and its relation to the mental health sector is recommended. ECCV recommends the education campaign should use interpreters and hold additional consultations with ethno-specific workers and agencies. Ongoing ethno-specific based community education to raise awareness and understanding of mental health issues is needed. The education campaign needs to deliver the key messages that CALD consumers need to acknowledge symptoms, recognise that mental health is treatable, understand that receiving help should not negatively affect their social relationships and knowing who to contact.
8. Inviting ethno-specific agencies into the service framework provides a direct connection with CALD communities. ECCV recommends that ethno-specific workers be assisted to communicate directly with CALD mental health consumers. Ethno-specific agencies should be directly funded to provide counselling services to their respective communities. CALD consumers often feel more comfortable when speaking in their own languages. Ethno-specific agencies may also refer clients to mainstream agencies if they don't have appropriate resource or services. Service partnerships between ethno-specific multicultural and mainstream providers supported by DHS should also be highly encouraged.
9. Other recommended strategies developed by ECCV include:
- Establishment of ethno-specific carer support groups at a local level
 - Establishment of a mental health cultural diversity reference group comprising (where possible) of bilingual representatives from the mental health sector, including health



professionals, community and other workers, carers and consumers to share their knowledge and experiences, discuss issues affecting CALD communities and recommend appropriate responses.

- Continue to empower and encourage General Practitioners to engage with interpreters when treating consumers with low levels of English.
- Ensure bilingual workers are appropriately funded and supported.
- Provision of ongoing education of health professionals on cultural issues.
- Increased funding for mental health, hospital, community and other relevant settings.
- Provision of culturally and linguistically relevant support services and resources for CALD and new and emerging mental health carers and care recipients.
- Cross cultural training of health workers to increase sensitivity and knowledge of cultural issues and attitudes.
- Utilise different publicity formats as platforms for information sharing and awareness to CALD patients through Channel 31, SBS and ethnic radio stations.

10. ECCV is of the view that policies must be developed and implemented regarding mental health services to people from CALD backgrounds. The Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities 2006 confers an obligation on public authorities "to act in a way that is compatible with human rights." The Victoria Multicultural Act 2004 also sets a framework for equal access to services. When considering the fact that people from diverse populations do not access mental health services to the same extent as the general population, it is clear that much work remains to be done in this area.

11. In conclusion, ECCV supports the new mental health strategy and its objective to develop policies to assist consumers, health professionals, carers and government services. ECCV strongly recommends that the strategy puts emphasis on researching and addressing cultural diversity issues as a core strategic direction. Appropriate policy directions in this area will ensure CALD and new and emerging communities have equal access to mental health services and programs.