

ECCV Submission to Emergency Management Victoria On Victoria's Fire Management Strategy

January 2018

Introduction

The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria Inc. (ECCV) is the voice of multicultural Victoria and the peak policy advocacy body for eight regional ethnic community councils and up to 220 members including ethnic and multicultural organisations across Victoria since 1974. For over 40 years, we have been the link between multicultural communities, government and the wider community. ECCV has a strong history in advocating for the rights of Victoria's multicultural communities.

We aim for a culturally diverse and harmonious society that is just, fair and inclusive where all people have the opportunity to participate in and contribute to community life. We advocate for freedom, respect, equality and dignity for multicultural communities, and strive with others to build a strong, vibrant Victorian community.

ECCV welcomes the opportunity to comment on Emergency Management Victoria's (EMV) *Discussion Paper: Victorian Fire Management Strategy 2017* (the Discussion Paper). ECCV applauds EMC for recognising the importance of a comprehensive and proactive strategy for minimising the risk of fires causing harm to members of the Victorian community.

Fire Safety and Victoria's Culturally Diverse Communities

Issues regarding fire safety often emerge during ECCV's community consultations. We commend the Government for recognising the case for change in providing pathways to reduce the number and the consequences of harmful fires across Victoria for all types of fire, and for all communities, through to 2030.

The Discussion Paper's emphasis on prevention is important given Victoria's increasing population growth and ageing population. For ECCV, there is certainly a gap in the term 'changing demographics', which clearly refers to the 49.1% of Victorians who were born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas. Addressing this gap in the Discussion Paper would be especially timely, given the context of the international focus on the deaths of the mostly migrant residents in the Grenfell Tower fire disaster in London.

Recommendation 1: That Emergency Management Victoria plans specific strategies to communicate with Victoria's culturally diverse communities on fire safety issues.

Diverse communities currently live disproportionately in high-density/high-rise rental properties and public housing throughout Victoria. Diverse residents that require tailored education strategies

include recent migrants, unemployed and low-income community members, and international students renting in Melbourne’s CBD.

In November 2017 the Victorian Cladding Taskforce conducted an audit that identified 1,100 health and housing government buildings, 44 high-rise public housing units and hospitals “as most likely” to have potentially unsafe cladding materials and reported them as being safe. However, dangerous flammable cladding was still found on 1,400 Victorian buildings and 8 hospitals. ECCV looks forward to being briefed as more information becomes available.

Some regional Victorian settlement communities are also at risk during bushfire season. Especially vulnerable are culturally diverse seniors, who often report confusion during fire emergencies over the medical capacity of fire fighters to treat their loved ones.

Prioritising Capacity-Building

ECCV supports capacity-building as highlighted in the Victorian Government’s research into communication with diverse communities. In October 2013 the Victorian Fire Services Commissioner (FSC) published research for its ‘2021 Research Program Strategic Issues Series’ in Volume 28, Issue 4 of the *Australian Journal of Emergency Management* (Foster, Holly; Whittaker, Joshua; Towers, Briony; Handmer John, 2013). The paper ‘Metropolitan Melbourne in 2021: changes and implications for the emergency management sector’ explained that “...overseas migration will require a capacity to communicate information and warnings to an increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse population, and to engage diverse groups in emergency preparedness, response and recovery.”

ECCV supports the paper’s conclusions on prioritising Victoria’s culturally diverse communities and refer the VFMS Project Manager to the document URL at:

<https://ajem.infoservices.com.au/items/AJEM-28-04-03>

ECCV’s Feedback on the Discussion Paper’s Focus Areas

1) Connections and networks: Connecting with communities is central to developing culturally appropriate (tailored) communication. Language barriers, cultural and faith practices and degrees of social cohesion in local government areas (LGAs) vary and affect the capacity of some communities to understand crucial fire prevention information. Self-reliance as a cultural value differs across ethnic communities, some of which rely heavily on community leaders, faith congregations and family networks for trusted information. Complex intergenerational and inter-cultural relationships also influence the effectiveness of community connections and networks.

Recommendation 2: That Emergency Management Victoria ensures awareness of the cultural values of different communities and works closely with community and faith leaders where appropriate.

2 & 3) Incentives & Innovation: In verbal communities where boundaries of trust, cultural practice and work are often less clear cut, incentives and innovation are often inter-dependent. Building a sustainable approach to fire prevention in culturally diverse communities requires motivating communities, individuals and business to get involved in fire prevention. ECCV endorses the use of interpreters and translators in order to aid communication, but also believes that EMV should

consider other innovative means of increasing fire safety awareness amongst diverse and multicultural communities.

Recommendation 3: That grants be made available for the development of mobile technology apps that help to connect communities and disseminate information.

Recommendation 4: That Emergency Management Victoria works with culturally diverse communities and local businesses in order to co-design solutions and facilitate greater fire safety awareness.

Recommendation 5: That Emergency Management Victoria considers funding social enterprise projects that provide education about fire safety while also creating employment in culturally diverse communities.

Recommendation 6: That information for culturally diverse communities is provided in the form of videos and podcasts in community languages produced by young community members.

3) **Investment:** Victoria's best resource is its people, and Victoria's prosperity has been built on the innovation that diverse communities bring to this state. ECCV can see great benefits in creating grants that motivate diverse community members, businesses and entrepreneurs to find permanent fire prevention solutions that become self-funded and part of the fabric of local, metropolitan and regional communities.

Recommendation 7: That Emergency Management Victoria considers the creation of grants to assist the establishment of permanent, self-funded fire prevention solutions in culturally diverse communities.

ECCV commends Emergency Management Victoria for seeking new pathways to reduce both the number and consequences of harmful fires across Victoria for culturally diverse Victorians. For further information please contact Robert Gruhn, ECCV Acting Senior Policy Officer, on 9354 9555 or rgruhn@eccv.org.au.