

Child and Family Welfare Services in Multicultural Victoria

Background

The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) advocates on behalf of people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds of all ages, and is therefore interested in ensuring that the child and family services sector is inclusive and supportive of diverse Victorians. ECCV believes that careful and targeted planning is needed by the child and family services sector to ensure that it is ready to meet the needs of multicultural children, young people and families in the coming years. The views expressed in this paper are based on community consultations and summarise ECCV's key findings and recommendations.

Key Findings

1. Community consultations indicate that culturally and linguistically diverse communities consistently underutilise early childhood services, such as kindergarten and maternal and child health services.
2. Refugee and asylum seeker families are a growing population group in Victoria and the child and family welfare sector is becoming increasingly aware of the need to be responsive to their special circumstances. Increasingly, consideration is being given to how the sector can best complement the five years of settlement services that the Federal Government provides to migrants coming through the humanitarian stream.
3. There is also a growing awareness amongst service providers of the importance of training and supporting a culturally competent workforce, as part of a wider commitment to ensuring a culturally safe environment.
4. People from diverse backgrounds, particularly in new and emerging communities, are underrepresented in the TAFE training courses that train child and family services industry workers and would benefit from targeted support to improve access to training.
5. Young people from new and emerging communities and from refugee backgrounds are overrepresented in the youth justice system and require targeted support. They are a particularly vulnerable group, and one with which the workforce should be appropriately trained and equipped to work.
6. Many refugee and asylum seeker parents are forced to work in occupations for which they are over-qualified, because their professional qualifications are not recognised in Australia. This leads to frustration in families and can place an unnecessary extra burden on Family Services.

Key ECCV Policy Positions and Recommendations

Based on these consultation findings, ECCV believes that there are a number of ways in which the child and family services sector could enhance the quality of services that it provides to culturally diverse Victorians. Targeted measures to reach out to isolated communities, and plans to provide specific assistance to vulnerable groups, should be a core component of the industry's multicultural strategy.

ECCV recommends:

1. That the child and family services industry prioritises planning that specifically targets the needs of culturally diverse families and children.
2. That child and family services providers prioritise investment and development of resources to improve the cultural competency of their workforce.
3. That the child and family services industry endeavours to align its principals and objectives with those detailed in the Victorian Government's multicultural policy, *Victorian and Proud Of It*, in order to ensure that the industry operates harmoniously with statewide multicultural strategies.¹
4. That mainstream service providers prioritise employment of bilingual workers in order to tackle the underutilisation of early childhood services by families from diverse backgrounds.
5. That mainstream service providers understand the value of and prioritise employing bilingual and bicultural workers, and demand a well-trained pool of workers skilled in cultural competency.
6. That the sector develops plans to provide children at risk of entering the youth justice system with pre- and post-detention support to assist them staying out of the criminal justice system.
7. That the child and family welfare sector develops strategies to partner with vulnerable groups, such as Pasifika families and youth, to inform tailored service planning.
8. That priority is given to obtaining more comprehensive data about the cultural backgrounds of children in out-of-home care, in order to improve sector and service planning, design and implementation.
9. That child and family welfare service providers and peak bodies commence ongoing consultations with ethnic representatives and peak bodies about how to enhance delivery of culturally competent services.

The Way Forward

The Victorian child and family services sector needs to continue to plan for a future in which an increasing number of children, young people and families are from culturally diverse backgrounds.

In order to move forward in implementing these recommendations, it would be desirable for the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to resource a statewide ethnic and multicultural peak body such as ECCV to drive culturally responsive and competent service planning, design and implementation. This could involve statewide consultations aimed at developing a strategy to enhance the delivery of culturally competent early childhood services. Were DHHS to provide sufficient support, ECCV could employ a Child and Family Welfare Policy Officer and a policy committee to take the lead and coordinate sector efforts. It is important that the sector takes steps to put into practice its plans to enhance support for culturally and linguistically diverse Victorians.

¹ Victorian Government, 2017, [Victorian. And Proud of It](#), p.32.