Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria

Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Parliament of Victoria
Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

ECCV Submission

July 2020

Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

ECCV acknowledges the unprecedented challenges that the Victorian community is currently facing, and congratulates the Victorian Government for its leadership, financial investment, and unshakable commitment to the safety and health of the community. ECCV also congratulates the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, Parliament of Victoria, on holding this **Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic**.

An emergency response of such scale and complexity as the one required due to the COVID-19 pandemic calls for recommendations that will help us all to advance together, and it is with this intention that ECCV presents this submission. For its reference, ECCV drew upon advice received through a survey of our members, direct conversations with community members, regular meetings of the Victorian Multicultural CEO Network, and executives from our regional partners.

The overarching problem cited both by community members and multicultural organisations was the **lack of coordination by the State Government of a taskforce including multicultural organisations and ethnic associations with long experience in working directly with ethnic communities**. Failure to fully bring these bodies on board as active partners in the planning and implementation of Victoria's COVID-19 response meant that their dedicated expertise, and the learnings they have gained on a daily basis through their work in community, was under-utilised. One area in which this engagement gap had clearly negative repercussions was with regard to communications.

Financial stress and unemployment have also been a major concern, particularly for temporary visa holders, asylum seekers and refugees, people who are not proficient in English, and those who have been experiencing racial discrimination. A large group of migrants who were excluded from the federal emergency financial relief package have been left in an extremely precarious situation. The financial imperative to continue working whenever possible, has put them at a greater health risk, in a clear demonstration of how discriminatory measures during a time of crisis can accentuate disadvantage.

Mental health is another area in which existing inequities have been amplified. Multicultural and ethnic communities have faced additional barriers due to challenges accessing in-language support, disruption in trusted community networks, and the prevailing lack of culturally responsive mental health services.

The sudden disruption in social relationships has impacted all Victorians. However, some culturally and linguistically diverse groups, including **seniors and migrant women,** have been more vulnerable to its negative effects. Additionally, the **impact of racism on social cohesion** has also been felt, with fears of increased discrimination as we move out from the lockdown and interactions in public spaces resume.

In view of the above, **ECCV recommends** that:

1. The Victorian Government ensures that there are mechanisms for the regular participation of the multicultural sector and community members, throughout the process of design, implementation, and monitoring of COVID-19 response and recovery.

2. The Victorian Government maintains regular communication with multicultural organisations, faith organisations, ethnic community associations, and youth networks from

various culturally and linguistically diverse communities, so that updated information is not only translated but reaches all community members.

3. The Victorian Government works with the Commonwealth Government to ensure that SBS and ethnic community radio stations are resourced to provide in-language information to culturally and linguistically diverse communities during the pandemic.

4. The Victorian Government adequately funds multicultural and ethnic community-based organisations to continue to deliver their work on the ground, in a safe and sustainable manner.

5. In services directed to migrants and culturally diverse communities, the Victorian Government and service providers promote paid opportunities for bicultural individuals, particularly young people, who already volunteer within their communities, recognising their language and bicultural skills as part of the selection criteria.

6. The Victorian Government properly funds community legal centres and organisations that support migrants to exercise their rights, to continue to provide free legal aid, and education sessions for migrant workers and international students.

7. The Victorian Government works more closely with education providers, including English language course providers, to develop an improved system coordinating social support and information distribution about access to essential services in Victoria, including contact points in local governments.

8. The Victorian Government and service providers work with members of different communities, ensuring the meaningful participation of CALD community members in the design and delivery of mental health services.

9. The Victorian Government funds initiatives led by bicultural counsellors and health professionals who currently offer in-language support to their communities, on a voluntary unfunded basis.

10. The Victorian Government prioritise the implementation of the recommendations made to the RCVMHS that enhance equity and ensure a trauma-informed and culturally responsive mental health system for all Victorians.

11. The Victorian Government and service providers ensure adequate funding for the continued operation of ethnic seniors' clubs and associations, clear and consistent funding processes that allow them to plan ahead, as well as support for technological capacity-building and acquisition of computers and tablets.

12. The Victorian Government, in collaboration with schools, childcare centres and social services, considers the equity aspects of home schooling and engage new migrant parents to identify the best ways to continue providing education to their children during the pandemic, including alternative resources for home schooling that do not rely solely on intensive online learning.

13. The Victorian Government continues to fund multicultural organisations that work closely with women and children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to

coordinate safe referral pathways, accommodation, and financial and legal support for victims of family violence, irrespective of their visa status.

14. The Victorian Government and community organisations work together to advance a clear message of unity through public campaigns and education in schools and of the general public, to prevent an escalation in social divisions.

15. That the Victorian Parliament uses the opportunity presented by the current Inquiry into Anti-Vilification Protections to reform the Racial and Religious Tolerance Act, making it more accessible to victims, strengthening the provisions against online vilification, and including an intersectional approach that recognises overlapping sources of discrimination.

As the Victorian peak body for multicultural and ethnic communities, ECCV is proud of the resilience, community leadership and capacity to unite, that Victorians of all backgrounds have demonstrated on many occasions throughout the pandemic. As we face this unprecedented crisis, it is vital that we draw on the power of our diversity to shape the actions that will help our community to recover, lifting everyone together regardless of race, ethnicity or faith.

About ECCV

The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria Inc. (ECCV) is the voice of multicultural Victoria and the peak advocacy body for eight regional ethnic communities' councils and 220 member organisations, including ethnic and multicultural organisations across Victoria. For over 45 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 multicultural communities, informing industry practice and influencing Government on a range of issues including health, employment, aged care, cultural responsiveness, equitable access and the wellbeing of families and children.

ECCV acknowledges the unprecedented challenges that the Victorian community is currently facing, and congratulates the Victorian Government for its leadership, financial investment, and unshakable commitment to the safety and health of the community. ECCV also congratulates the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, Parliament of Victoria, on holding this **Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic**.

On 20 April 2020, ECCV and 29 other leading organisations in the multicultural sector presented to the Premier of Victoria, the Hon. Dan Andrews MP, a letter outlining the priority actions that the Victorian Government needed to take to ensure that the needs of the more than 2.2 million culturally and linguistically diverse Victorians were fully considered in the planning of COVID-19 responses and recovery (*see* **Attachment A**). Whilst it is expected that multicultural organisations will offer their valuable specialised inputs to this inquiry from a service provider perspective, as a peak body ECCV is pleased to have this opportunity to contribute to a better understanding of how the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded on the ground, with emphasis on the experiences of multicultural and ethnic communities in Victoria.

The COVID-19 Pandemic

An emergency response of such scale and complexity as the one required due to the COVID-19 pandemic calls for recommendations that will help us all to advance together. Through this submission, ECCV aims to highlight factors associated with the higher vulnerability facing some of our ethnic and multicultural communities, and to call attention to the importance of engaging organisations and individuals with expertise and long-term relationships built with these communities, as active participants in the design and implementation of the COVID-19 responses and recovery. To be effective, this engagement must go beyond a consultation model and instead involve equitable and respectful collaboration to ensure that all Victorians, regardless of their race, ethnicity or faith, can feel safe and recognised by the Victorian Government.

To inform this submission, ECCV drew upon advice received through a survey of our members, direct conversations with community members, regular meetings of the Victorian Multicultural CEO Network, and executives from our regional partners.

In mid-April ECCV distributed an online survey to its membership to identify major changes in communities, as well as the main concerns and opportunities arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 10% of members answered the survey. The responses provide valuable insights and largely confirmed ECCV's own observations during the first weeks of the pandemic.

Asked to specify their main areas of concern for the future, the three top selections made by respondents were: **unemployment, financial wellbeing and social isolation**. Mental health came fourth, and given its correlation with the other priorities, should also be highlighted. Additional comments from survey respondents revealed concerns with **access to information regarding COVID-19 isolation, loss of income, access to Centrelink and myGov, immigration restrictions, funding for cultural and social activities, and the risk of increasing socioeconomic disparities, with groups that already face disadvantage being likely to be even more exposed to the negative impacts of the crisis.**

Those themes closely aligned with individual comments from respondents about how their communities had been affected. Similar to the experience of other Victorians, fear and anxiety were commonly used to describe people's feeling about their finances and employment. Rupture of social gatherings and social isolation (particularly for seniors), stress within households, risk of mental health deterioration, family violence, and racism, were all cited as immediate effects.

What are your community's major areas of concern for the future? (Please select at least four as applicable)
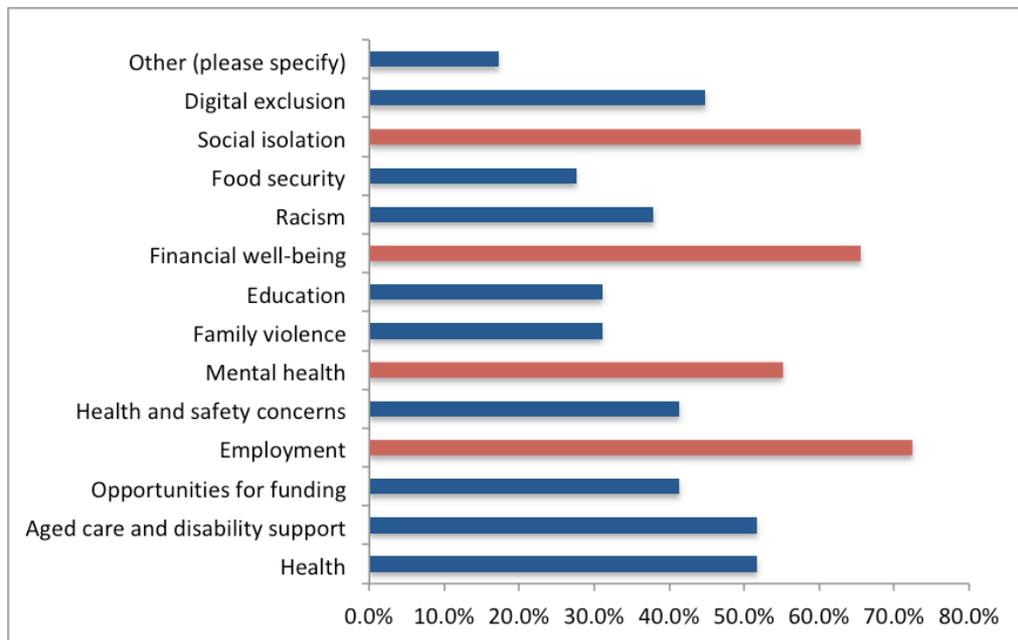
Source: ECCV survey with members.

On the other hand, the pandemic created opportunities for strengthening relationships and community resilience. As the survey respondents observed, their ability to adapt and to work collaboratively have been important sources of support for ethnic and multicultural communities during this emergency. Those actions have in many cases been led by volunteers, at a time when funding is scarce or delayed, and ECCV has continuously heard that this volunteer led response is not sustainable.

What are some of the opportunities (if any) that may arise from the COVID-19 crisis for your community? (More than one choice allowed)
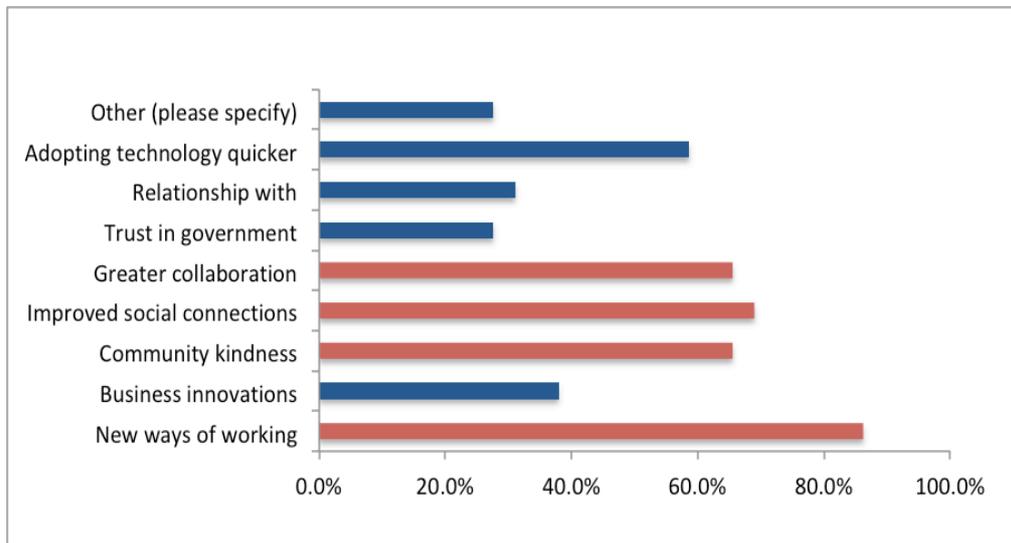
Source: ECCV Survey with members.

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated government responses are still evolving. Considering the large scope for action, in this submission ECCV selected the areas that we believe have, up to this stage, emerged most clearly as issues of concern for multicultural Victoria, and for which support measures should be prioritised in order to avoid further negative impacts.

Key Themes

Engagement and communications with multicultural Victoria

By far the overarching problem cited both by community members and multicultural organisations was the lack of coordination by the State Government of a taskforce including multicultural organisations and ethnic associations with long experience in working directly with ethnic communities. Failure to fully bring these bodies onboard as active partners in the planning and implementation of Victoria's COVID-19 response meant that their dedicated expertise, and the learnings they have gained on a daily basis through their work in community, was under-utilised.

One area in which this engagement gap had clearly negative repercussions was with regard to communications. **Communities and organisations mentioned difficulties in accessing updated, official information in different languages, in a timely manner.** It is important to stress that the issue was not only the online availability of official translated information, but also the methods used for communication. Given the varied languages and levels of fluency in English, these should include different forms of communication resources - especially cartoons, simple videos, audio materials, and hand-outs - as well as engagement with community connectors and channels which are commonly accessed by diverse communities. This required an integrated communications strategy defined with multicultural organisations and ethnic associations, and funding for the delivery of the official messages in ways that were most appropriate to the groups these organisations usually work with. This could have led to the mobilisation of established relationships and connections in community to ensure regular, quick information flow, and feedback.

During the first weeks of the pandemic, until SBS became a major source of COVID-19 communication in various languages, the main official source of in-language information was translated materials produced by the Department of Health and Human Services, with the assistance of the Victorian Multicultural Commission, and posted onto their website. In a round of phone calls ECCV made during the very first days to community members, ECCV heard that some seniors with low levels of English were in a state of near-panic and confusion. Many ethnic communities regularly access international channels for news rather than domestic channels, and there were different explanations circulating within communities. Some community members who work with young people, including in the public housing estates, also raised concerns early on about a lack of trust in government and official media information, and how they were trying to fill this gap.

Lessons from Regional Victoria

There has been an enormous amount of material in-language, but more focus is needed on the method of delivery. Materials in traditional media will miss most of the target audience, and social media and web sites are only marginally better when a large part of newly arrived communities have international television as their primary source of news and information.

At a local level, SMS messaging using video has been effective. The videos have been produced on mobile phones by community members, and have achieved good level of penetration into communities. Large translated documents have been ineffective when a significant part of our new arrival communities are illiterate in first language. Material in graphic or even cartoon format has been more successful. Targeting young people as messengers has proven effective, as they are bilingual and familiar with technology.

(Ethnic Council of Shepparton and District)

To deal with the immediate need, many individuals voluntarily performed translations, produced in-language communication materials such as videos, and collaborated with local governments. However as lockdown restrictions came in stages and changes were regularly announced, ensuring that they were accurately communicated and in a timely manner was a challenge. In a meeting with the City of Moreland in April, ECCV heard a local health service provider sharing concerns with seniors with low levels of English who were unaware of the exact restrictions in place, and others who were increasingly isolated and fearful of any contact with carers or other service providers.

The delay in engaging multicultural organisations also meant that critical lessons coming from those on the ground were not immediately transferred to government actions. A key learning that has been consolidated through this crisis is **the importance of mapping levels of risk and prioritising support to specific groups, rather than generalising experiences under the culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) category.** As will be discussed below in specific sections, individuals with low levels of English, socially isolated migrant seniors, temporary visa holders, those with lower levels of income or in casual work, residents in public housing and high density households, as well as groups experiencing racism, have faced exposure to higher levels of negative impacts as a result of the pandemic. In this context, the ability to customise support would have made the responses more effective, yet that required deep knowledge of placed based circumstances and differences within and between multicultural communities across different areas.

Some service providers also mentioned the difficulties they faced accessing interpreters on time. The transition to remote service provision meant that access, including for health and mental health services, was not always easily accessible when an interpreter was needed. It is known that in new migrant communities, younger people who were born or raised in Australia often perform the role of interpreters for families, due to their ability to navigate both local systems and culture. In the current crisis, their role as bicultural connectors was accentuated, as exemplified in the coordination of young volunteers and support within the locked-down public housing estates in Flemington and North Melbourne. **However, in areas that involve complex information and risk management, such as health and legal matters, it is essential to make use of professional interpreters when communicating with community members.**

As the pandemic will continue to impact all Victorians for months to come, it is important to create a stable, regular mechanism for collaboration with the multicultural sector, coordinated by the Victorian Government, as well as ensure that community-based organisations are adequately funded to keep delivering the support on the ground.

Considering the above, ECCV recommends that:

Recommendation 1

The Victorian Government ensures that there are mechanisms for the regular participation of the multicultural sector and community members, throughout the process of design, implementation, and monitoring of COVID-19 response and recovery.

Recommendation 2

The Victorian Government maintains regular communication with multicultural organisations, faith organisations, ethnic community associations, and youth networks from various culturally and linguistically diverse communities, so that updated information is not only translated but reaches all community members.

Recommendation 3

The Victorian Government works with the Commonwealth Government to ensure that SBS and ethnic community radio stations are resourced to provide in-language information to culturally and linguistically diverse communities during the pandemic.

Recommendation 4

The Victorian Government adequately funds multicultural and ethnic community-based organisations to continue to deliver their work on the ground, in a safe and sustainable manner.

Financial stress and unemployment

With rising unemployment and risks of an overall increase in financial hardship across Australia, ECCV and its members are concerned that **temporary visa holders, asylum seekers and refugees, people who are not proficient in English, and those who have been experiencing racial discrimination, especially African Australians, will encounter more barriers to participate in the labour market, or will be more exposed to the risk of exploitative work conditions.**

The Federal Government's decision to exclude most temporary visa holders from the emergency financial relief package deprived them of a safety net, and placed upon State Governments the responsibility of providing assistance.

This has left a large group of migrants in Australia in a precarious situation in a highly uncertain environment. The financial imperative to continue working whenever possible has also put them at greater health risk, in a clear demonstration of how discriminatory measures during a time of crisis can accentuate disadvantage. ECCV is aware that many temporary visa holders may also fear the consequences of engaging with the health system and government authorities and the potential of them remaining in Australia. This apprehension is likely to sometimes delay seeking health assistance, including mental health support.

A snapshot of regional Victoria

Regional Victoria is home for many temporary migrant workers. Advice provided by ECCV's regional councils since mid-April makes clear that navigating and recovering from the pandemic demands actions tailored to specific regional contexts.

Ethnic Communities' Councils pointed to gaps in communication, not only in relation to translations but also in the methods used to reach out to migrant communities. Moreover, in some regions such as Shepparton, seasonal movement of migrants was common prior to COVID-19, but is now unrealistic, and social and economic support in the case of job shortages must be planned. The issue of overcrowded shared accommodation, where social distancing is not possible, was also mentioned as a health risk factor. Decline in hospitality and retail jobs has left many temporary migrants in financial difficulties, and food insecurity was identified as a problem. With jobs threatened and uncertainty about economic reactivation, ECCV's regional partners have noticed increased levels of anxiety and distress associated with isolation, migrants' concerns with their families and relatives' wellbeing overseas, and confusion around COVID-19 information. Housing and employment pressures are starting to build up, and in regions with university campuses, there was concern about the situation of international students.

International students

Amongst temporary visa holders, international students have emerged as one of the most unprotected groups in Australia. In Victoria there are approximately 200,000 international students who contribute to our vibrant multicultural community, and are a major source of revenue for the Victorian Government and for education providers. These young people were not only denied financial assistance by the Federal Government, but felt abandoned as members of the community when the Prime Minister recommended that they return home if they were unable to support themselves, even though in many cases travel restrictions made this difficult or impossible.

International students can lawfully work 40 hours per fortnight, and many work in casual positions in hospitality. Given the lack of support for business to keep casuals employed, let alone those without permanent work rights, meant that international students were amongst the first to lose work. It should be stressed that the possibility of earning income through legal work has always functioned as an attractive element for international students to come to Australia, as it offered them the opportunity to at least partly cover some of their living expenses, while they were committed to paying high international study fees. The sudden interruption of this source of income, for a group generally lacking assets or accessible savings, generated immediate financial stress.

ECCV, concerned with the gap in support for these young migrants who suddenly felt unwelcome in our community, organised a meeting with representatives from local, state and federal government, the education industry, and representatives of various student bodies in April. **Housing stress, food insecurity, social disconnection, lack of culturally appropriate and free counselling, and the need for better data on international students in different local government areas, were all cited as major issues of concern. Most direct support for international students was provided by charities, interfaith and ethno-specific groups, who organised themselves and voluntarily provided assistance, especially for food parcel and meal distribution.**

The Victorian Government support agency for international students, *Study Melbourne*, was very responsive and actively involved. Nonetheless the level of demand and the emergency nature of the situation made it hard to establish connections with the required stakeholders at the pace that would allow communication to flow easily. One example was the absence of a mechanism for local governments to provide effective communication about the relief assistance available for international students in their local areas. ECCV took the initiative to request the information from all councils, and, with the assistance of the Municipal Association of Victoria, compiled the information received and provided it to Study Melbourne, which posted it on its website. This time-consuming activity could have been avoided if an integrated social support system for international students was already in place.

On 29 April the State Government announced a $45 million *International Student Emergency Relief Fund*, to support international students in Victoria who are facing financial hardship through lost wages as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The funding, distributed via Study Melbourne and capped at $1,100 per student, was expected to benefit up to 40,000 international students enrolled at Victorian universities, TAFEs, and private vocational education and training providers. International students were entitled to apply for a rent relief grant, and for the *Working for Victoria* program[1], and Study Melbourne became a major source of information, legal assistance and support, including with the provision of translated materials. However, almost two months after the commencement of the state's first lockdown, there was still confusion amongst students about their eligibility to access this emergency assistance.

As with temporary migrant workers, for international students there is also a risk that financial stress and lack of government support may contribute to their exposure to exploitative work practices, as they seek any possible means of securing an income.

Young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds

The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds has been disproportionately high. Between March and April, the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) interviewed 41 young people (aged between 18-25) from 17 different cultural backgrounds, connected to their *Employment Empowers* program. **The study results showed that, with a majority of respondents in casual employment, 38% of those who were working prior to lockdown had lost their jobs, and 32% had had their hours reduced.** Many of these young people who were searching for employment prior to COVID-19 reported a loss of confidence and lack of motivation in the current labour market, and negative impacts on

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[1] Australian Red Cross, Resource Information (nd), *International Students in the Context of COVID-19*, https://www.redcross.org.au/getmedia/c747850c-49c3-40b2-9526-179ad3de0999/Info-Sheet-COVID19-Resources-for-International-Students.pdf.aspx

their future aspirations. Moreover, for some of them, the pandemic also led to an increased level of responsibility within their families, including for interpreting, care roles, and financial pressure due to a drop in household income.[2]

CMY did not explore racial discrimination in this particular survey, but members of African Australian communities have shared with ECCV their concern **that for those who were already experiencing discrimination when entering the workforce, the pandemic will make it even harder to find employment.** The potential intersection of racism, unemployment and social tensions will be addressed below in the specific section on racism, but it is an outcome of the pandemic that demands clear, targeted government responses.

In view of the above, ECCV recommends that:

Recommendation 5

In services directed to migrants and culturally diverse communities, the Victorian Government and service providers promote paid opportunities for bicultural individuals, particularly young people, who already volunteer within their communities, recognising their language and bicultural skills as part of the selection criteria.

Recommendation 6

The Victorian Government properly funds community legal centres and organisations that support migrants to exercise their rights, to continue to provide free legal aid, and education sessions for migrant workers and international students.

Recommendation 7

The Victorian Government works more closely with education providers, including English language course providers, to develop an improved system coordinating social support and information distribution about access to essential services in Victoria, including contact points in local governments.

Mental health

Beyond physical health, social and economic implications, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a major challenge to mental health systems worldwide, with people experiencing fear, anxiety, loneliness, financial and family stressors associated with the pandemic and the measures needed to contain it. The rise of mental health as a priority in the public agenda is evidenced by the Federal Government's January announcement of a $500 million package of measures to support mental health and suicide prevention. An additional $48.1 million was recently announced to support the *Mental Health and Wellbeing Pandemic Response Plan*. The Victorian Government's $59.4 million coronavirus mental health package has seen a further $19.5 million in funding to deliver essential reform recommendations from the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System (RCVMHS) Interim Report and to help prevent an increase in

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[2] Centre for Multicultural Youth (2020), *Locked down and locked out? The impact of COVID-19 on employment for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds in Victoria*, CMY, Melbourne.

mental illness. As we prepare for cycles of lockdown, economic downturn, and worsening conditions in the labour market - all stressors of mental health - it is critical to place mental health considerations at the centre of the COVID-19 response.

While for many individuals, mental health issues might be mild and transient, for others, they can manifest in short-term mental distress or a long-term decline in mental health and wellbeing.[3] It is well known that Victorians from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds face a number of systemic barriers in seeking and accessing mental health assistance, many of which existed long before the onset of the pandemic. **The COVID-19 crisis has amplified some of the existing barriers for multicultural and ethnic communities[4] due to challenges accessing in-language support, disruption in trusted community networks, and the prevailing lack of culturally responsive mental health services.**

People from migrant and refugee communities may experience specific mental health needs relating to their pre and post-migration experiences of traumatic events, discrimination based on various identity markers, language and communication barriers, and the impacts of acculturation and community attitudes towards migration and settlement.[5] Those who have experienced past hardship might be more vulnerable to experiencing negative psychological impacts from the pandemic. For people seeking asylum with insecure visas, the state of prolonged uncertainty is often related to poor mental health.[6] At the same time, it is vital to recognise that many people who have gone through difficult experiences have drawn upon their mental resilience and ability to coordinate community actions, and have handled some of the restrictions better than Victorians who have not been exposed to previous hardship.

Indeed amongst Victoria's multicultural communities, there has been a range of grassroots actions to offer informal support. ECCV is aware of at least two initiatives in Melbourne involving the collaboration of bicultural counsellors and health professionals to establish telehealth support to their communities, all on a voluntary (unfunded) basis. For those with internet access, online groups and communities have been formed to share information, reinforce social connectedness, disseminate positive messages, and mobilise community volunteers. Many of these initiatives do not fit into the conventional model of individualised counselling, yet they are trusted and play a central role in collective recovery and mental health support.

To improve mental health support to culturally and linguistically diverse communities during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the recovery phase, ECCV recommends that:

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[3] Patrick McGorry (2020) 'We all need to work to flatten the mental health curve', *The Australian*, 29 June; National COVID-19 Health and Research Advisory Committee (2020), *Mental health impacts of quarantine and self-isolation.* Australian Government, 19 May.

[4] In its submission to the RCVMHS, ECCV noted a number of systemic barriers, including the psychological impact of systemic discrimination; stigma and shame about mental health difficulties; lack of accessible translated information about mental health services and routine lack of provision of interpreters when needed; culturally responsive and trauma informed care practices that are not embedded in routine practice, processes and procedures of the mental health system; and lack of consultation and collaborations with communities.

[5] VTMH Reference Group, *Roundtable discussion on transcultural mental health with the RCVMHS*, 28 May 2020.

[6] Angela Nickerson, Yulisha Byrow, Meaghan O'Donnell, Vicki Mau, Tadgh McMahon, Rosanna Pajak, Susan Li, Amber Hamilton, Savannah Minihan, Candy Liu, Richard A. Bryant, David Berle & Belinda J. Liddell (2019). 'The association between visa insecurity and mental health, disability and social engagement in refugees living in Australia', *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 10:1, DOI: 10.1080/20008198.2019.1688129

Recommendation 8

The Victorian Government and service providers work with members of different communities, ensuring the meaningful participation of CALD community members in the design and delivery of mental health services.

Recommendation 9

The Victorian Government funds initiatives led by bicultural counsellors and health professionals who currently offer in-language support to their communities, on a voluntary unfunded basis.

Recommendation 10

The Victorian Government prioritise the implementation of the recommendations made to the RCVMHS that enhance equity and ensure a trauma-informed and culturally responsive mental health system for all Victorians.

Social Cohesion

Ethnic seniors' associations

Concern with older family members is high for Victorians of all backgrounds, and the Victorian Government's dedication to ensuring their safety is widely recognised. The extent to which seniors from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds experience higher vulnerability to social isolation depends on a variety of factors and no generalisation should be made. Familiarity with technology or at least with platforms such as Facebook, being partnered or living with family, fluency in English, and strong social connections with ethnic clubs and associations, all play a role in preventing extreme social isolation, even under physical distancing rules. At the same time, for CALD seniors living alone, with low levels of English and with no engagement with online information or mainstream Australian channels, the first lockdown created an extreme risk of social disconnection and isolation.

Aware of the risk of disconnection, ECCV mailed out, at the beginning of the pandemic, hard copies of the Department of Health and Human Services' COVID-19 posters, to around 500 ethnic seniors' clubs and associations. It also conducted a round of telephone calls to ethnic seniors' clubs to assess how they were dealing with the immediate impact of the lockdown. In the first weeks of lockdown, requests to ECCV included advocacy for mobile data allowance, taxi vouchers, and access to in-language books and audio-visual resources from local libraries. Moreover, access to tablets and computers also became important with the closing of libraries.

Many ethnic seniors' clubs and groups quickly created their own systems for information distribution, including the establishment of phone call chains to members who do not access online platforms or who are not fluent in English, collaboration with local councils for translation and timely distribution of information, and use of Facebook and apps to keep communication active and maintain regular virtual group activities, including physical exercise programs and prayer groups. The Tamil seniors' group, for instance, has produced a monthly

newsletter sent electronically and by mail, introduced a system of regular checks on people's access to medication, and established a sub-committee to coordinate recurring checks on members by phone. Other ethnic clubs have relied on younger members to help with the delivery of food and other basic necessities.

Ethnic seniors' associations are one of the most effective examples of community connectors, but for many the pandemic has threatened their organisational survival. With the postponement of new rounds of some State Government grants, and faced with extra costs associated with assisting their members during the pandemic, ethnic seniors' clubs have consistently communicated to ECCV their fear that they will not be able to continue to operate, and plan for a post-pandemic future.

In order to maintain this vital protective factor, a long established system of social inclusion for ethnic seniors, ECCV recommends that:

Recommendation 11

The Victorian Government and service providers ensure adequate funding for the continued operation of ethnic seniors' clubs and associations, clear and consistent funding application processes that allow them to plan ahead, as well as support for technological capacity-building and acquisition of computers and tablets.

Women and children[7]

> 'Women reported inadequate representation of women's voice and knowledge in COVID-19 policy spaces. Women highlighted the importance of incorporating their voices, experiences, and knowledge and ensuring equal representation in all COVID-19 response planning and decision making.' (Settlement Services International)

The gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic should not be underestimated.[8] Women have experienced a disproportionate accumulation of duties, such as those related to working from home, care responsibilities, and home schooling, in a scenario in which many families are facing job losses and increasing financial stress.

Providers specialising in supporting women have also noticed an increase in complex family violence issues, and conflicts between parents and children, especially with teenagers. inTouch, an organisation that provides services to migrant and refugee communities experiencing family violence, has reported increased demand in Victoria during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, it has highlighted the difficulties of reaching out to women remotely under restrictive conditions at home, as well as new challenges with changing and limited referral pathways. **inTouch estimates that between 50-70% of their clients are women on temporary visas,** including spousal/partner visas, skilled workers or dependents of those on skilled work visas, student visas, and tourist visas. These women face additional barriers, such as financial

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[7] This sub-section benefited particularly from inputs received from the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights, and Settlement Services International.

[8] Sara E Davies, Sophie Harman, Jacqui True, Clare Wenham (2020). 'Why gender matters impact and recovery of Covid-19'. *The Interpreter*, 20 March, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/why-gender-matters-impact-and-recovery-covid-19

hardship coupled with lack of eligibility, poor knowledge of local institutions, language limitations and, at times, full dependence on a perpetrator to maintain their legal status.[9]

ECCV, together with other members of the Multicultural CEO Network, welcome the additional state funding announced to support women and children at risk of family violence, as well as investments in community mental health in response to COVID-19. However, we are concerned about the lack of sufficient funding for ethno-specific and multicultural organisations to meet the needs of migrant women and children, at a time when the complexity and demand for service is increasing, leaving many unprotected.

Service providers have also revealed that the move of most social services to remote provision, difficulties accessing interpreters, lack of access to internet and computers at home, and varied levels of English and tech literacy, have all generated higher demand for material, emotional and culturally appropriate family supports. For many large migrant families, for instance, home schooling has created a major source of stress, with children from different ages requiring individualised support and equipment, and with parents often being ill equipped to support both the online learning environment and the curricular requirements in Australia. Some residents of public housing estates reported the challenge of home schooling and access to tablets as a critical concern of migrant and refugee mothers, and crowded households as a major factor contributing to anxiety and conflict, including amongst young people.

Given these concerns regarding the impact of the pandemic on culturally diverse women and children, ECCV recommends that:

Recommendation 12

The Victorian Government, in collaboration with schools, childcare centres and social services, considers the equity aspects of home schooling and engage new migrant parents to identify the best ways to continue providing education to their children during the pandemic, including alternative resources for home schooling that do not rely solely on intensive online learning.

Recommendation 13

The Victorian Government continues to fund multicultural organisations that work closely with women and children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to coordinate safe referral pathways, accommodation, and financial and legal support for victims of family violence, irrespective of their visa status.

Racism

Racist incidents have risen in Australia under COVID-19. At the start of the pandemic in February, the Australian Human Rights Commission recorded more complaints under the *Racial Discrimination Act* than at any time during the previous twelve months. Since February 2020, a third of complaints

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[9] inTouch (2020), 'The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on inTouch clients', Issues Paper, April, https://intouch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/inTouch_COVID19IssuesPaper_April2020_website.pdf

received by the Commission were related to COVID-19.[10] Between March and April, the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission received a total of 97 enquiries (or 10.3% of all enquiries during that period) specifically related to COVID-19. Of those enquiries, 53% were related to racism or racial vilification.[11] The Centre for Multicultural Youth also conducted a survey (March-April) with more than 350 young Victorians participating that captured experiences of racism since the beginning of the pandemic. The results showed a disturbingly high level of experience of racism, either by the respondent themselves, or by people in their family or friendship group.[12]

In addition to groups normally targeted by racists, the COVID-19 pandemic has seen a resurgence in anti-Asian attitudes and attacks. Primarily directed towards individuals of Chinese background and those of "East Asian appearance", aggressions have included verbal and physical assaults. A national survey conducted by the Asian Australian Alliance and Osmond Chiu recorded 377 reports of COVID-19 related racist incidents in the period between 2 April and 2 June, with 65% of them involving female victims. Victoria was the state with the second highest level of reported incidents (32%), behind New South Wales (37%).[13]

Concerned with the risk that the rise of racism during the pandemic represented, ECCV and the Victorian Multicultural Commission hosted a closed roundtable in May. Many participants reported that they knew of racism against "Asian looking" individuals, including incidents in regional Victoria. Participants felt that it was vitally important to improve the effectiveness of anti-vilification legislation, bystander training, and government leadership, and spoke about the need for better data and reporting.

Other minorities have also experienced COVID-19 related racism. The identification of an outbreak in northern Melbourne that may have involved a Muslim family, immediately raised concerns about generalised criticism of Muslim communities. At the same time, a Sky News journalist's misleading association of the new outbreak in Melbourne to the South Sudanese community spread misinformation and reinforced racism.[14] Antisemitism continues to be a major concern, with the Anti Defamation Commission denouncing online abuses, cartoons, and incidents such as the antisemitic, homophobic graffiti sprayed at a golf course in southeast Melbourne in May.[15]

Within this context, the way in which the hard lockdown was implemented in the public housing estates of Flemington and North Melbourne, with a heavy and immediate reliance on police and an uncoordinated approach across towers, accentuated the perception, particularly amongst young residents, that they are discriminated against and do not receive fair treatment.[16] In fact, residents

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[10] Chin Tan. Race Discrimination Commissioner (2020). 'Where's all the data on the COVID-19 racism?', Australian Human Rights Commission, 9 May, https://humanrights.gov.au/about/news/opinions/wheres-all-data-covid-19-racism

[11] Data provided by the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, July 2020.

[12] Centre for Multicultural Youth, *Racism and COVID-19 survey*, July.

[13] Asian Australian Alliance & Osmond Chiu (2020). *COVID-19 Racism Incident Report*. Asian Australian Alliance, July.

[14] Naveen Razik (2020). 'Peta Credlin apologises for inaccurately blaming South Sudanese for coronavirus outbreak. *SBS News*, 29 June, https://www.sbs.com.au/news/peta-credlin-apologises-for-inaccurately-blaming-south-sudanese-for-coronavirus-outbreak

[15] Freya Michie (2020). 'Neo-Nazi graffiti sprayed at Cranbourne Golf Club in Melbourne's south-east'. *ABC News*, 21 May, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-21/anti-semitic-graffiti-attack-at-melbourne-golf-course/12272350

[16] For an excellent coverage of stories with young African-Australians who have grown up in public housing estates, see Scanlon Foundation Research Institute (2020), *Lives in the Sky: A look at African-Australian*

of these public housing estates reported they had vocalised to the Government their concerns about their higher exposure to health risks, including problems with lifts, cleaning of common areas, and the lack of hand sanitisers in the towers, weeks before the intervention, but had not received a proper response.

All these threats to community life and social cohesion justify the concerns, amongst community representatives and experts, that COVID-19 related racist incidents might increase again once social distancing measures are eased and people begin to return to workplaces, schools and public spaces. From a public policy perspective, it is vital that the government and the media promote messages that highlight the contributions of our diverse communities to the COVID-19 response, and learn from the volunteers within each community, many of them young people, who have shown an incredible capacity for emergency coordination and delivery of culturally appropriate support during this very difficult time.

Considering the threat racism poses to mental health[17] and community wellbeing, as well as to human rights, ECCV recommends that:

Recommendation 14

The Victorian Government and community organisations work together to advance a clear message of unity through public campaigns and education in schools and of the general public, to prevent an escalation in social divisions.

Recommendation 15

That the Victorian Parliament uses the opportunity presented by the current Inquiry into Anti-Vilification Protections to reform the Racial and Religious Tolerance Act, making it more accessible to victims, strengthening the provisions against online vilification, and including an intersectional approach that recognises overlapping sources of discrimination.

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*communities inside Melbourne's high-rise public housin*g, Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, July, https://scanloninstitute.org.au/sites/default/files/2020-07/Scanlon%20Institute_Narrative%205_v2.1.pdf

[17] Kathleen Blair, Kevin Dunn, Alanna Kamp & Oishee Alam (2017). *Challenging Racism Project 2015-16 National Survey Report*. Sydney: Western Sydney University, https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/1201203/OMAC1694_Challenging_Racism_Report_4_-_FINAL.pdf; A Ferdinand, Y Paradies & M Kelaher (2015). 'Mental Health Impacts of Racial Discrimination in Australian Culturally and Linguistically Divers Communities: A cross-sectional study'. *BMC Public Healt*h 15 (401), p.12.

Conclusion

ECCV reiterates its support to and acknowledgement of the Victorian Government's actions to ensure that public health and the lives of all Victorians remain the highest priority throughout this pandemic. By exposing the higher vulnerability of specific groups within the broad culturally and linguistically background category, this Submission offers a more complex perspective that exposes the fragility of a one-size-fits-all approach or of simple adaptation of a mainstream plan to serve all communities. Victoria is a multicultural state, and the Government response to the COVID-19 pandemic must be grounded in the recognition of the expertise held in communities and amongst those who serve them directly, particularly the multicultural sector.

Some of the recommendations made in this Submission require more time for implementation, others must be taken into consideration immediately to avoid further social disruption and to reduce the risk for particular groups that unnecessarily are more exposed to health risks, or to the negative consequences of this pandemic.

As the Victorian peak body for multicultural and ethnic communities, ECCV is proud of the resilience, community leadership and capacity to unite, that Victorians of all backgrounds have demonstrated on many occasions throughout the pandemic. As we face this unprecedented crisis, it is vital that we draw on the power of our diversity to shape the actions that will help our community to recover, lifting everyone together regardless of race, ethnicity or faith.

Appendix

Attachment A. Open Letter from the Victorian Multicultural CEO Network – COVID-19

20 April 2020

The Hon. Daniel Andrews, MP
Premier of Victoria
Chair, Crisis Council of Cabinet

CC: James Merlino: Minister for the Coordination of Education and Training – COVID-19
  Tim Pallas: Minister for the Coordination of Treasury and Finance – COVID-19
  Jacinta Allan: Minister for the Coordination of Transport – COVID-19
  Jenny Mikakos: Minister for the Coordination of Health and Human Services – COVID-19
  Jill Hennessy: Minister for the Coordination of Justice and Community Safety – COVID-19
  Martin Pakula: Minister for the Coordination of Jobs, Precincts and Regions – COVID 19
  Lisa Neville: Minister for the Coordination of Environment, Land, Water & Planning – COVID-19
  Ros Spence: Minister for Multicultural Affairs

Open Letter from the Victorian Multicultural CEO Network – COVID-19

Dear Premier Andrews,

The undersigned ethnic and multicultural organisations thank the Victorian Government for its leadership and collaboration with other governments across Australia to prioritise the health and wellbeing of our communities during this unprecedented public health emergency.

Your decisive measures have seen a slowing in the transmission of the COVID-19 disease, have addressed a broad range of emergency needs for vulnerable people and have invested in options to support employers and employees to stay in business, remain employed and/or transition to new priority areas of employment. We acknowledge the hard work and difficult decisions that have been taken in a short period of time and we seek to both support and strengthen them.

As leaders of organisations that directly represent and service more than 2.2 million Victorians of culturally and linguistically diverse background, including 1.6 million Victorians who speak a language other than English at home, we believe our skills, capability and community connections can and should be better utilised, to positively inform appropriately tailored responses that address the impacts of COVID–19 on multicultural communities.

We strongly recommend the following actions from the Victorian Government to ensure the needs of culturally diverse Victorians are at the forefront of our response and recovery from COVID-19.

1. **Deem SBS as an official emergency broadcaster and other ethnic media as essential services**

Access to trusted in-language information on the coronavirus has been problematic for culturally diverse communities. Issues have ranged from delays in translated material being made available, to the closure of trusted mediums for information dissemination such as ethnic radio broadcasters, to conflicting sources of available in-language information through social media and from overseas. Australia is fortunate to have a public multiplatform media company dedicated to multicultural and multilingual communities, yet unlike fellow public broadcaster ABC, SBS does not have emergency broadcaster status. The Victorian Government should work with the Commonwealth Government to ensure that SBS is deemed and resourced alongside the ABC to communicate with culturally diverse communities during an emergency. This would allow for real time, trusted information to reach CALD communities in over 60+ community languages from which they can respond and navigate fast paced and changing emergency situations.

2. **Establish a CALD Taskforce in Victoria to support community planning and service implementation as part of the State's response and recovery from COVID-19**

Harnessing the capability and leadership of ethno-specific and multicultural service providers in partnership with the Victorian Multicultural Commission, should be viewed as a priority by the Victorian Government as part of a coordinated approach to COVID-19 for CALD communities. Our organisations directly service more than 300,000 people each year in areas ranging from children, youth, creative arts, family violence, disability, aged care, education, training, employment and humanitarian settlement. This capability, along with our cultural expertise and trusted relationships with CALD communities means that we can connect with and inform government about hard to reach groups, identify and inform on points of stress within communities and collaborate with both government departments and mainstream service providers to ensure that responses to the pandemic are tailored, targeted and have an appropriate impact for those in need. Representatives from the Multicultural CEO Network would be pleased to work with the VMC as part of a CALD Taskforce to meet the current, emerging and future needs of culturally & linguistically diverse communities across Victoria as a result of the pandemic.

3. **Provide funding certainty for all ethno-specific and multicultural organisations to ensure resources remain in place to support CALD communities through the pandemic**

The Multicultural CEO Network urges the State Government to renew funding for organisations whose contracts are due to expire in the next six months, ensuring critical investment in organisational capability is maintained during and after the coronavirus crisis. This decision will allow our organisations to plan effective business continuity to meet the health, economic and civic needs of culturally diverse communities in Victoria in the immediate period. The delayed State budget and new and increasing costs and demands on servicing clients, families and carers as a result of COVID-19, means that a minimum 12 month extension on funding for all existing State Government contracts due to expire should be approved. This will support continuity of service, allow for service adjustment and for seamless transition to new social priorities as they arise for CALD communities. Maintaining existing capability will also allow the State Government to better consider options for increasing and enhancing funding for multicultural communities as part of our recovery from COVID-19 over the medium to long term.

4. **Ensure consistency across all government departments with regards to funding flexibility in current contracts**

The Multicultural CEO Network welcomes recent communication from various government departments acknowledging the service disruption and impact of COVID-19 on business continuity, as well as expressing their commitment to being flexible in these circumstances. To avoid disadvantaging contracted community service organisations that are unable to fully meet their current service agreements, we strongly recommend the State Government ensures similar flexibility frameworks and principles are applied by all state government departments. Similarly we ask the Premier to use his leading role on the National Cabinet to encourage a similarly consistent approach is taken by the Commonwealth. Our organisations are prepared to work with all government departments collaboratively to re-purpose current deliverables to support immediate COVID-19 priorities wherever feasible.

5. **Multicultural events and festivals funding to be paid out for organisations that have expended money in preparing for events which were cancelled as a result of COVID-19**

Multicultural events and festivals grant funding made through the Victorian Multicultural Commission to organisations and ethnic community associations in the current financial year, should be paid out in full, where organisations have already expended money to prepare for events and festivals. It is unreasonable to expect that organisations that have already spent a large proportion of limited funding from allocated budgets, should now look for ways to re-purpose this funding. This is not realistic given the nature of festivals and events delivery and the containment measures that remain in place for COVID-19.

6. **Financial packages to better support vulnerable groups within CALD communities, including women and children, young people, seniors, people with disability, new and emerging communities and those without welfare rights**

The Multicultural CEO Network welcomes additional state funding announced to support women and children at risk of family violence, as well as additional investments in community mental health in response to COVID-19. These are absolute priorities at a time when the most vulnerable in our community are at further risk of negative outcomes because of isolation. We are however concerned by the lack of dedicated funding for ethno-specific and multicultural organisations to meet the needs of migrant communities. This includes a lack of funding for specialist service providers such as InTouch – Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence and Foundation House to be able to respond to the significant increase in demand for their services.

Our network of organisations are keen to be included in community based responses for priority cohorts from CALD communities, that face a range of additional barriers and exclusions as a consequence of COVID-19. This includes seniors, people with disability, new and emerging communities as well as people on temporary migrant visas. These groups are disproportionately impacted by the loss of employment, face heightened risks of food insecurity, are burdened by keeping children engaged in remote learning with limited home resources, and cannot get the language and technology support they need to effectively navigate an already stressed health and welfare system. We want these issues considered and addressed through forward planning with our organisations (via a CALD Taskforce) as part of a coordinated response.

7. Prioritise addressing the threats to social cohesion as a result of a rise in racism

The rise in reported incidents of racism as a consequence of COVID-19, namely against Asian-Australians, is alarming. We take pride in Victoria being a world leader in multiculturalism and to this end, we expect a continuing strong commitment from all our political leaders on the issue of social cohesion. We are proud to be part of a State that has in place legislative provisions to protect multiculturalism, to protect people from racial and religious vilification, as well as public policies to support anti-racism and those communities disproportionately impacted by this issue. The threats to our proud legacy of social cohesion and inclusion are amplified at present and we expect the State Government to continue to resource the VMC, Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, Victorian Equal Opportunity & Human Rights Commission and other community based organisations to continue working with our wider society to counter the damaging effects of racism and discrimination as propagated through misinformation and the narratives of fear & xenophobia.

Signed Multicultural CEO Network:

ACTION ON DISABILITY IN ETHNIC COMMUNITIES

ALBURY-WODONGA ETHNIC COMMUNITIES' COUNCIL

ARABIC WELFARE

AUSTRALIAN CROATIAN COMMUNITY SERVICES

AUSTRALIAN MULTICULTURAL COMMUNITY SERVICES

AUSTRALIAN VIETNAMESE WOMENS ASSOCIATION

BALLARAT REGIONAL MULTICULTURAL COUNCIL

CENTRE FOR MULTICULTURAL YOUTH

CO.AS.IT

DIVERSITAT

ETHNIC COMMUNITIES' COUNCIL OF VICTORIA

ETHNIC COUNCIL OF SHEPPARTON & DISTRICTS

FRONDITHA CARE

GIPPSLAND MULTICULTURAL SERVICES

INDIAN CARE

INTOUCH – MULTICULTURAL CENTRE AGAINST FAMILY VIOLENCE

ISLAMIC COUNCIL OF VICTORIA

JEWISH CARE

JEWISH COMMUNITY COUNCIL OF VICTORIA

LODDON CAMPASPE MULTICULTURAL SERVICES

MALTESE COMMUNITY COUNCIL OF VICTORIA

MICARE

MULTICULTURAL ARTS VICTORIA

PRONIA

RUSSIAN ETHNIC REPRESENTATIVE COUNCIL OF VICTORIA

SETTLEMENT SERVICES INTERNATIONAL

SOUTHERN MIGRANT & REFUGEE CENTRE

SPECTRUM

SUNRAYSIA MALLEE ETHNIC COMMUNITIES' COUNCIL

VICSEG NEW FUTURES