



The Voice of Multicultural Victoria

The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria

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Connecting CALD Seniors during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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As Victoria becomes more multicultural, ethnic seniors' clubs are an excellent example of how to build positive ageing experiences for older people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. As 'positive ageing' hubs, these clubs deliver preventative (early intervention) support for their hard-to-reach members, which is more cost effective and socially beneficial than secondary and tertiary interventions that place a significant financial burden on the health and aged care system.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed a heavy burden on seniors in Victoria. As the health risks and social impacts continue, planning the care and well being of older people in our community is one of the most pressing challenges.

While prolonged isolation from family and friends is necessary to reduce the risks of transmitting coronavirus, it is increasing other health risks for older people, from aggravation of prior health problems, to reduced engagement with supports, to mental health deterioration. Finding ways to keep older people socially connected is essential, and solutions must include more than a focus on institutional care. A continuing sense of belonging to community and being supported to pursue a meaningful life requires seniors to keep strong links with those they have long established relationships of trust and friendship.

When considering the various support mechanisms that can be mobilised as part of a pandemic response, we should assess existing forms of social inclusion that have proven to be successful. **While most of the focus on seniors during the pandemic is directed to their vulnerability to COVID-19, their strengths and value to the emergency relief effort is largely untold.** This is particularly the case in the contribution of seniors' clubs led by communities from non-English speaking backgrounds.

This **Issue Brief** is based on the inputs culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) seniors' clubs and ethnic seniors' federations have provided to ECCV since the beginning of the pandemic. Their actions, mostly voluntary, confirm the vital protective role they play in supporting communication and providing emotional and physical health support to their members. This includes assisting with food relief, medication delivery, and regular, in language, 'check ins' with those who are isolated.

Despite the integral function of these associations during the COVID-19 pandemic in keeping older people safe, there are concerns about the lack of financial support to assist them in their work. Pressing social and health needs, combined with an insecure funding environment, is creating fear that many CALD seniors' clubs may be forced to close in the coming months. If this were to occur, a proven community asset that is an access point for hard-to-reach CALD seniors may be lost, increasing the pressure on the health and aged care system to respond to the risks posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background

“Before people go to nursing homes, the clubs keep them culturally and religiously connected.”

(ECCV Seniors' clubs consultation participant)

A 2016 report from the Municipal Association of Victoria revealed that Victoria was home to 735 ethno-specific seniors' groups, which together supported around 68,000 members [1] through cultural activities, information sessions, emotional and social connectedness, and group exercises. These clubs also provide a physical space for CALD seniors to *literally speak their language*.

Whilst the contribution of CALD seniors' clubs to social inclusion is often highlighted, their role for positive ageing is less understood. In Victoria, the positive ageing strategies led by local councils promote a community, strengths based approach that empowers older people to stay independent and to find, alongside their communities, solutions to their challenges. [2] This approach aligns with the fact that older people are increasingly unwilling to move into residential care, and instead, want support for a healthy and independent life at home.

Victoria's CALD seniors' clubs have for decades assisted seniors to stay connected, celebrate their language, culture and traditions, and to retain a sense of belonging to the wider community. This is critical to all seniors, and particularly to migrants. As Victoria becomes more culturally diverse, CALD seniors' clubs are an excellent example of how to build positive ageing experiences for older people as part of their settlement experience. As 'positive ageing' hubs, these clubs deliver preventative (early intervention) support that is more cost effective and socially beneficial than secondary and tertiary interventions that place a significant financial strain on the health and aged care system.

The COVID-19 Pandemic Implications

Concern about the wellbeing of older people is a very high priority for all Victorians at present regardless of cultural background, and the Victorian Government's commitment to ensuring their safety is widely recognised. Within the context of COVID-19, the extent to which CALD seniors have experienced higher vulnerability than other seniors is dependent on a variety of factors. Familiarity with technology, being partnered or living with family, fluency in English, good health, and strong social connections with ethnic clubs and associations have all played a role in keeping CALD seniors well and connected during the pandemic. Alternatively, for CALD seniors living alone, with low levels of English language proficiency and with limited engagement with online information or mainstream Australian channels, the lockdown has created a very high risk of social disconnection, isolation and health deterioration.

CALD seniors' clubs have continued to play a central role in serving their communities during the pandemic, by finding alternative ways of keeping their members safe and connected. For the many seniors who are not fluent in English and might be illiterate in their own language, the lack of timely, culturally appropriate information, as well as the disruption in services they would normally access, has seen club leaders and volunteers work to fill the gap. This has included sharing COVID-19 information by undertaking translations and interpreting, conducting welfare checks and distributing resources that encourage mental and physical wellbeing. Some clubs have even set up dedicated working groups to ensure older members who are isolated at home or in residential care can continue to be supported during the pandemic.

Despite their pivotal role as connectors, CALD seniors' clubs have experienced significant challenges during COVID-19. This has included limited community engagement by government bodies, lack of accessible, real time information tailored to CALD communities, and lack of financial assistance for ethnic seniors' clubs to resource additional hygiene and safety measures that sustain their support for members in an onerous environment. Seniors' clubs' representatives are alarmed that a lack of funding is creating an environment where they are unable to sustain the increased costs of keeping their members safe and connected.

“Finances are required to maintain online and on the phone communication, deliver newspapers and other hard copy resources. Our volunteers are still active in supporting seniors during COVID.”
(ECCV Seniors' clubs consultation participant)

Many club representatives and members are contributing their own financial resources to ensure they can continue to reach and support seniors in isolation, purchase essential items such as hand sanitisers and face masks, organise transportation for medical appointments, and secure medication for their members.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, financial pressures have been exacerbated by the delay in the announcement of the Victorian Government's Multicultural Senior Citizens Organisational Support Grant, with the last funding cycle ending in June 2019. Aside from the 12 month void in funding, this grant stream has not seen an increase in the total funding pool in more than eight years (\$1.7m total), while demand for these funds has increased by almost a third during this time to approximately 900 CALD seniors clubs. The financial constraints created by a thinning of the funding pool, the lack of confirmation of further funding and the increased costs associated with keeping older people safe during COVID-19 is threatening the viability of ethnic seniors' clubs today.

During its consultations, ECCV has noted key issues arising from the one-off \$4,000 Multicultural Senior Citizens Funding, delivered in 2019. [3] Firstly, a number of clubs received the election commitment funding later than expected, which left them facing cash flow issues. Secondly, some clubs applied for different grant programs, e.g. Multicultural Festivals and Events, but were unsuccessful and told that this was due to them receiving the one-off funding. Seniors mentioned that at no point were they informed that receiving the one-off funding would make them ineligible for other grants or replace the Multicultural Senior Citizens Organisational Support Grant:

*“We need one source of communication regarding the grants.
Transparency is very important yet lacking.”*

(ECCV Seniors' clubs consultation participant)

Seniors have also raised issues associated with the lack of a simple application process for grants that allows them to be competitive, including lack of paper-based application options or support with online forms. Further issues identified include recent changes in alternative funding streams such as cancellation of the Department of Health & Human Services CALD Seniors Grants Program and a lack of access for new migrant and refugee communities to the Commonwealth Home Support Programme Sector Development Program. [4]

Ethnic seniors' associations are one of the most effective examples of community connectors that are sustained through the dedication and commitment of their members, but for many the pandemic has heightened the threats to their organisational survival. ECCV fears that without urgent financial support, a number of ethnic seniors' clubs face the prospect of not being able to continue to operate beyond the end of 2020. This will further reduce our collective capacity to respond to the pandemic, making older people from CALD backgrounds more vulnerable to negative health outcomes and increasing the overall cost to Victoria's public health system.

ECCV Recommendations

In order to maintain and enhance an established community asset that supports inclusion and wellness for CALD seniors, ECCV recommends that:

- 1** The Victorian Government provides adequate and consistent funding for the sustained operation of CALD seniors' clubs and associations, including increasing the total funding pool for the Multicultural Senior Citizens Organisational Support Grants program in the upcoming State Budget.
- 2** The Victorian Government and Local Governments make available COVID-19 emergency grant funding for CALD seniors' clubs, to help them address the essential needs of vulnerable community members' and the increased costs of servicing them during the pandemic.
- 3** The Victorian Government confirms public liability insurance for all seniors' clubs beyond 31 December 2020, which is required for them to operate sustainably, especially in a high-risk environment.
- 4** Grant application processes are simplified for older Victorians of CALD background, including options for paper-based applications as well as culturally appropriate training for seniors' clubs on how to engage with online grants.
- 5** The Commonwealth Government establish additional community service roles to link seniors' and their clubs with up to date information, resources and supports as part of post-COVID planning.
- 6** The Victorian Government and Local Governments invest in advancing CALD seniors' internet accessibility, digital literacy, and access to computers and tablets in partnership with peak bodies such as Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, Universities of the 3rd Age and ECCV.
- 7** The Commonwealth Government support seniors with subsidies for mobile phone and internet data bills as part of a priority need for them to remain socially connected during the pandemic.
- 8** Local Governments provide CALD seniors' clubs with taxi vouchers to help with their members' transportation to medical appointments and pharmacies during the COVID-19 pandemic given public transport risks.
- 9** Research be undertaken to examine the contribution that CALD seniors' clubs make to positive ageing in Victoria, looking at the social value they create as well as the economic benefits of investing in such organisations as a form of health prevention.

Acknowledgement

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Endnotes

- [1] Municipal Association of Victoria (2016). New Futures for Senior Citizen Centres and Clubs: A Report for Local Government. MAV, Melbourne, pp.33-34.
- [2] See Municipal Association of Victoria's Positive Ageing Priorities, <https://www.mav.asn.au/what-we-do/policy-advocacy/social-community/positive-ageing>
- [3] The Hon Dan Andrews, MP. Premier of Victoria (2018). 'Honouring our Multicultural Senior Citizens', Media release, 13 November, <https://www.danandrews.com.au/policies/honouring-our-multicultural-senior-citizens>
- [4] Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (2018). 'Ethnic seniors' clubs and groups. Planning for the future of seniors' groups in Victoria', Discussion Paper, ECCV, February, https://eccv.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/ECCV_Discussion_Paper_Ethnic_Seniors_Clubs_and_Groups_FEB2018.pdf