

Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria

Submission on the Draft Health and Human Services Climate Change Adaptation Action Plan 2022-2026

August 2021

The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the Victorian Government's draft Climate Change Adaptation Action Plan 2022-26 in the area of Health and Human Services.

ECCV is the peak advocacy body in Victoria for multicultural communities and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. ECCV has over 220 member organisations, including ethnic associations and multicultural service providers, and eight regional ethnic communities' councils across the state. Since 1974, we have been advocating for human rights, freedom, respect, equality and dignity for ethnic and multicultural communities, and for the building of a socially cohesive and inclusive Victorian community. Addressing climate change through supporting our communities and our members to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, address risks, and manage the consequences of climate change is a strategic priority for ECCV.

Summary of Recommendations

Based on the evidence presented in this submission, ECCV recommends:

1. That the Victorian Government commissions the ECCV to lead research and build an evidence base about the risks faced by migrant and refugee communities from the effects of climate change.
2. That the Victorian Government funds research into the uptake rate of energy efficiency measures by Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds.
3. That regional and outer metropolitan ethnic communities' councils are resourced to deliver emergency preparedness training to new migrants in their areas.
4. That settlement services providers be resourced to provide education about the likely effects of climate change in Australia as a standard part of settlement services orientation for eligible migrants.
5. That ethno-specific community organisations are commissioned by the Victorian Government to develop tailored and culturally appropriate resources about responding to the effects of climate change.
6. That community organisations are resourced to provide education and key messaging to their communities about what to do in emergencies.
7. That the Victorian Government develop a strategy to ensure the inclusion of people from migrant and refugee backgrounds in emergency management and decision making.
8. That the Victorian Government develops a scheme to support multicultural sector organisations to develop climate change adaptability strategies.

Climate change adaptation priorities for migrant refugee communities

ECCV is pleased that the Health and Human Services Adaptation Action Plan (HHS AAP) sets out to “address the disproportionate impact of climate change on vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, and the associated risks of increasing social and economic inequalities” (page 4). Although culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities are identified as a community for whom the effects of climate change may be especially pronounced, there is no clear indication of how the Health and Human Services system will assist them in their adaptation.

Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds will require support to adapt to the effects of climate change along with all Victorians. They are however in some ways particularly susceptible to these effects, and have higher needs requiring targeted strategies to ensure that their communities are suitably supported in their adaptations. This submission does not propose to cover all issues related to climate change adaptation in migrant and refugee communities, but to respond to some of the questions asked in the draft HHS AAP in order to highlight what we believe to be the key issues.

What role do you see your organisation playing in the achievement of climate change adaptation by the Health and Human Services system?

With regards to Action H2 - “Improve the evidence base and monitoring of climate- related health impacts now and in the future” - the AAP notes that “to support engagement and improve understanding of current and future health impacts, further information and intelligence would be beneficial”. It calls for the Department of Health to take the lead in producing “a report on current and future impacts of climate change on the health of all Victorians and on health service demand, under various climate and intervention scenarios”. ECCV recommends that this report should include research into the likely impacts of climate change on specific populations such as people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, to better identify needs and target awareness raising and support with adaptation.

Recommendation 1: That the Victorian Government commissions the ECCV to lead research and build an evidence base about the risks faced by migrant and refugee communities from the effects of climate change.

What support do you need from the Health and Human Services system to better prepare for climate change? What support do you need for your household? Your organisation? Your community?

At the household level, the HHS AAP prioritises adaptation of social housing infrastructure to be made resilient to the effects of climate change. ECCV supports this priority and emphasises that many residents of social housing are from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and therefore would benefit significantly from targeted support.

Priority should also be given by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) to ensuring that residents of social housing are supported to enhance the energy efficiency of their homes and to learn about saving energy and reducing water use, and that residents from migrant and refugee

backgrounds are able to access and benefit from programs like the solar rebate and Victorian Energy Upgrades.

Evidence collected by the Ethnic Communities' Council of New South Wales identifies a low take up rate of energy assistance measures available to consumers experiencing payment difficulty by people from CALD backgrounds.¹ ECCV believes that the Victorian Government should make it a priority to collect data on the take up rate by Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds of energy efficiency measures like the solar rebate and Victorian Energy Upgrades.

Recommendation 2: That the Victorian Government funds research into the uptake rate of energy efficiency measures by Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

It is important that migrants settling in rural and regional areas, whether as part of primary or secondary migration, are informed about the particular risks related to extreme weather in the area in which they are settling. A report by the University of Adelaide on *Extreme heat and climate change: Adaptation in culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities* noted that “being unacclimatised to local environmental conditions and lacking awareness of adaptive behaviours can lead to increased vulnerability, particularly for the old and the very young.”²

Migrants settling in bushfire-prone areas, for instance, should be assisted to develop bushfire safety plans and taught about what to do when Code Red Days are declared. With appropriate resourcing, regional Victorian and outer metropolitan ethnic communities' councils and would be ideally placed to use their cultural knowledge and community relationships to deliver this training to new migrants settling in their areas.

Recommendation 3: That regional and outer metropolitan ethnic communities' councils are resourced to deliver emergency preparedness training to new migrants in their areas.

How can the Health and Human Services system help vulnerable communities adapt to climate change?

In July 2021 ECCV conducted a series of focus groups and interviews with leaders and members of migrant and refugee communities in metropolitan and regional Victoria, to learn about their preparedness for emergencies such as disease pandemics and natural disasters, and how their communities could be supported to build their emergency resilience. The inherent adaptability and resilience of migrant and refugee communities was a common theme in these consultations, with many participants noting that the difficult journeys of many community members had imbued them with a resilience borne of adversity. Strategies aimed at supporting Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds to adapt to the effects of climate change must therefore not only be responsive to their particular needs, but also leverage this high adaptive capacity.

¹ Ethnic Communities' Council of New South Wales, “[Energy Advocacy](#)” [Accessed 12 August 2021]

²

Alana Hansen, Peng Bi, Arthur Saniotis, Monika Nitschke, Jill Benson, Yan Tan, Val Smyth, Leigh Wilson and Gil-Soo Han, University of Adelaide (2013), [Extreme heat and climate change: Adaptation in culturally and linguistically diverse \(CALD\) communities: Final Report](#), p.2.

Although the draft HHS AAP identifies people from CALD backgrounds as a group which faces specific risks, in reality 'CALD communities' are not homogenous and represent more than 22% of Victoria's population.³ The entire Victorian population is highly diverse. However, certain communities and population groups face particular risks and barriers in relation to the effects of climate change.

The University of Adelaide report noted that:

"A number of inter-related factors were identified that may place some people in the communities at increased risk during extreme heat. These relate to socioeconomic disadvantage; cultural factors; health issues; poor housing conditions and limited access to air conditioning; linguistic and social isolation; and language barriers and low literacy rates limiting access to health warnings. People in CALD communities who are reportedly at risk during extreme heat tend to be older people, new arrivals and people in new and emerging communities."⁴

The COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted the risk to communities that have high numbers of individuals working in affected industries, such as hospitality, retail, and aged care. Many people from migrant and refugee backgrounds work in industries that will be essential in responses to extreme weather, such as aged care and health services, which is another reason why their adaptability to climate change should be given special consideration.

In the consultations held in July 2021, leaders and members of migrant and refugee communities mostly said that they had not had the opportunity to consider the likely impacts of climate change on their communities. Most said that the large number of concerning issues that they currently face, particularly amongst newer migrants who are still settling into their new homes, do not allow time to consider changes that are not immediately confronting. These observations highlight the importance of targeted awareness raising on the effects of climate change and adaptability for migrant and refugee communities.

Awareness raising is of particular importance to newly arrived migrants, for whom the manifestations of climate change in Australia will not be immediately familiar. ECCV recommends that education about the likely effects of climate change and how to respond to extreme weather events should be part of the settlement services orientation for humanitarian and other eligible migrants.

Recommendation 4: That settlement services providers be resourced to provide education about the likely effects of climate change in Australia as a standard part of settlement services orientation for eligible migrants.

ECCV's consultations regarding emergency preparedness and resilience in migrant and refugee communities highlighted the important role played by community organisations and leaders in building the capacity of diverse communities to respond to and prepare for emergencies. The

³ Victorian State Government, "[Victoria's Diverse Population: 2016 Census](#)." Melbourne: Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2017.

⁴ Hansen et al, p.2.

consultations identified community leaders as a key asset and driver of preparedness and response to emergencies.

To this end, ECCV supports the direction in the Health and Human Services Adaptability Action Plan to “enable community-led actions to stay healthy in a changing climate” (page 26). The draft Plan further recognises that “health and human services professionals are also often trusted voices within communities and will be increasingly called upon to support community adaptation to climate change impacts”.

Community leaders and ethno-specific community organisations are ideally placed to be the primary providers of education to migrant and refugee communities on how to adapt to the likely effects of climate change, such as heat waves, extreme weather events, natural disasters, decreased air quality and changes to energy availability and costs. Multicultural sector community organisations have experience and expertise in community engagement and education, as well as service provision, and networks and structures that reach far into communities. They also have experience in collaboration and forming partnerships which should be leveraged to build climate change adaptability.

The University of Adelaide study recommends that “a range of approaches be considered to facilitate information transfer including bi-cultural community engagement, translated fact sheets, multi-lingual media broadcasts, or messages via community leaders or schoolchildren”.⁵

During the COVID-19 pandemic ECCV has consistently emphasised the importance of resources and information sheets to be not just be translated, but also tailored to communities and presented in a culturally appropriate manner. Resources such as the Better Health Channel’s guide to Climate Change and Health⁶ could be developed into valuable community resources with the communications expertise of ethno-specific community organisations.

Recommendation 5: That ethno-specific community organisations are commissioned by the Victorian Government to develop tailored and culturally appropriate resources about responding to the effects of climate change.

ECCV’s consultations also revealed the concerns of community members about the spread of misinformation in their communities about many issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic and public health response. It is important therefore for community leaders and health and human services professionals from migrant and refugee backgrounds to be employed and resourced to disseminate accurate information through their own channels. Community organisations should be the conduit to develop and deliver key messaging about what to do in emergencies, such as the roles of particular emergency response organisations (e.g. the State Emergency Service and Country Fire Authority) and how to contact them.

Recommendation 6: That community organisations are resourced to provide education and key messaging to their communities about what to do in emergencies.

⁵ Hansen et al, p.3.

⁶ Victorian Department of Health, Better Health Channel, “[Climate Change and Health](#)” [Accessed 12 August 2021]

ECCV's recent consultations with community leaders and members also revealed a general absence (with some exceptions) of ongoing relationships between emergency services and multicultural and ethno-specific community organisations. Consultations by the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) with community organisations in 2019 also revealed a lack of connection with local emergency managers and services.⁷

Adaptation to the effects of climate change for multicultural communities should include outreach strategies for emergency services organisations and a commitment to enhancing their diversity and inclusion practices to become attractive places for diverse community members to work and volunteer. (Many participants in ECCV's consultations mentioned the high rates of volunteering in migrant and refugee communities, but that emergency services were generally not seen as being welcoming and inclusive places for volunteers.) Face-to-face conversations and interactions are critical in building relationships. Stronger connections between emergency services agencies and communities would allow for better preparedness and help to build long-term community resilience.

Stronger relationships would also assist community members to gain a better understanding of the roles of the different emergency services organisations and therefore allow for better access when confronting emergency situations.

How else can we reduce barriers to climate change adaptation within the Health and Human Services system?

ECCV notes and applauds the initiative highlighted on page 25 of the Adaptation Action Plan, whereby as part of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing's inclusive approach to emergency management planning, a strategy is in place to ensure the inclusion of people with disabilities in emergency management planning and decision making. ECCV emphasises the importance of having people from all backgrounds involved in adaptability planning and decision making, including representatives of multicultural sector organisations. From ECCV's experience, this engagement has not occurred in a systematic way thus far.

Recommendation 7: That the Victorian Government develop a strategy to ensure the inclusion of people from migrant and refugee backgrounds in emergency management and decision making.

Do you have any feedback on how these actions could be improved? Do you have any feedback on how these actions could be implemented?

Action H11 proposes to "leverage the Health and Human Services' delivery footprint" to "embed sector-wide climate change adaptation and risk management". A survey conducted by VCOSS in 2019 revealed that 43% of community organisations were affected by extreme weather or a disaster in the past 12 months.⁸ However, only 10% of those surveyed had developed a climate change risk assessment or plan.⁹ Under its 10 Year Community Services Industry Plan developed with VCOSS, the Victorian Government has committed to "develop the ability of community service organisations to

⁷ Victorian Council of Social Service, "[10 years of emergency management reform](#)" [Accessed 12 August 2021]

⁸ Victorian Council of Social Service, "[A State of Wellbeing Victorian Budget Submission 2020-21](#)", p.47.

⁹ Ibid.

prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies, for themselves and people who use their services.”¹⁰

Given the expertise, trust and understanding that the multicultural community sector can bring to the task of building resilience and adaptability, it is important that sector organisations are supported to build their own organisational resilience and emergency preparedness. Multicultural community organisations, particularly in regional areas, will be under increasing pressure as members of their communities face increasing health, social and economic impacts from climate change.

However their capacity to build their responsiveness is constrained by the generally short-term funding they receive which, together with the daily demands of service provision, does not allow for long-term strategising in areas such as climate change adaptability. Multicultural and ethno-specific community organisations require funding and support to access tools, resources and training to build their resilience and capacity so that they are available to support communities as needs arise under the increasing impacts of climate change. The Victorian Government should provide a scheme under which community organisations can develop their own climate change adaptability strategies.

Recommendation 8: That the Victorian Government develops a scheme to support multicultural sector organisations to develop climate change adaptability strategies.

¹⁰ Victorian Council of Social Service (2018), [10 Year Community Services Industry Plan](#), p.43.