



Federal Pre-Budget Submission 2024-25

Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria

About ECCV

Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) is the peak body for people from migrant and refugee backgrounds in Victoria. ECCV works closely with more than 220 member organisations including ethnic associations, multicultural service providers, and regional ethnic communities' councils.

ECCV has been advocating for human rights, freedom, respect, equality and dignity for migrant and refugee communities, and for a socially cohesive and inclusive Victorian community, since 1974.

ECCV has a strong record of informing industry, practice and influencing Federal, State and Local governments to promote culturally responsive approaches and equitable access to services, anti-racism and socially just policy.

Acknowledgements

ECCV would like to gratefully acknowledge our members, Networks, Policy Advisory Committees and stakeholders for participating in consultation sessions and sharing their insights and expertise. Thank you to everyone who contributed to the development of this submission.

A note on language

The term 'people from migrant and refugee backgrounds' is used in this document to refer to people and communities who have entered Australia through a variety of pathways, including through humanitarian, family, and skilled migration pathways. ECCV uses this term to refer to people with backgrounds and ancestry that is not part of the dominant Anglo-Celtic Australian population. This term is inclusive of people seeking asylum in Australia, people on temporary visas, undocumented migrants, and people born in Australia.

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ECCV acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Victoria and their continuing connection to land, water and community. We pay respect to their Elders past and present.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Summary of Recommendations.....	5
1. Support communities struggling with rising cost-of-living to access essential services and welfare support.....	8
2. Fund initiatives to address racism and create lasting systemic change	10
3. Support multicultural communities to effectively prepare and respond to emergencies	12
4. Strengthen relationships between multicultural and First Nations communities.....	13
5. Support older people from migrant and refugee communities to access in-home care.....	14
6. Fund programs to boost digital literacy and reduce the digital divide	15
7. Promote gender equality and support migrant and refugee women to stay safe from family violence.....	17
8. Improve inclusion, equity and advocacy for people with disability from refugee and migrant backgrounds	18
9. Help secure the rights of migrant workers	20
10. Ensure multicultural communities are preparing for the impacts of Artificial Intelligence	22

Introduction

Australia's diverse communities have demonstrated remarkable strength and resilience throughout the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Supported by organisations across the multicultural sector, with the support of government, they are now committed to rebuilding and recovering the lost ground in terms of economic well-being and social cohesion. ECCV congratulates the Australian Government on providing leadership in multicultural affairs through the Multicultural Framework Review.

However, the return to relative normality following the pandemic years has been accompanied by immense strains from rising costs of living. Many people from migrant and refugee backgrounds are experiencing high levels of financial stress. These strains are felt across the community, but the voices of multicultural communities are often unheard in conversations about addressing the crisis. This means that Australians from migrant and refugee backgrounds who are struggling to maintain the basic essentials of life, face additional barriers to accessing support.

Vulnerable migrant and refugee communities must be supported with support packages, and through expanded subsidies and measures that increase their capacity to access relief. These should be available to everyone, regardless of visa status.

With climate change leading to increasing incidence of natural disasters, migrant and refugee communities must be equipped to prepare and respond to emergencies. Emergency services should have the resources and knowledge to work with multicultural communities, and workforces that reflect the diversity of the communities they serve. Funding should therefore be provided for projects that improve the cultural diversity and cultural responsiveness of the emergency services, and strengthen engagement with multicultural communities.

The pandemic years have been accompanied by a rise in racism and vilification. Initiatives at the local level are needed to confront racism and Islamophobia, promote community harmony, build the capacity of communities to confront racism and extremism, and to build multicultural infrastructure.

The publication of findings of both the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, and the recent NDIS Review, provide an opportune time to consider how to better respond to the needs of people with disability from migrant and refugee backgrounds. In particular, funding is required to increase the cultural diversity of the disability workforce, and for bicultural outreach workers to assist with service navigation.

This Submission outlines targeted investments that the Government can make in a range of other portfolios to build the resilience of multicultural communities and allow them to thrive. ECCV and the multicultural sector emphasise the importance of longer-term funding for community organisations working in these areas, to enable sustainable programs and long-term community engagement, and provide certainty to service providers and end the cycle of constant funding applications.

We also emphasise that development of effective multicultural policy requires robust data about indicators of health and wellbeing amongst people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and how they access services. We urge the Government to take steps to ensure that data about multicultural communities is more regularly and consistently captured and publicly reported.

Through the recommendations contained in this submission, ECCV looks forward to continuing our work with the Government and our partners in the multicultural and community sectors to build a stronger and more inclusive multicultural Australia.

Summary of Recommendations

1 Support communities struggling with rising cost-of-living to access essential services and welfare support

- 1.1 Provide access to Medicare, income support, employment, mental health and other vital services to all people seeking asylum.
- 1.2 Deliver cost-of-living packages to parents to help raise children, including support for school, education or extra circular activities, such as vouchers to cover school camps and sporting equipment, uniforms and activities.
- 1.3 Deliver cost-of-living packages to help people on low incomes afford their energy bills, including: mandatory energy performing standards for rental properties, reform of energy concessions, energy debt relief, stronger retail protections, and substantial increase in income support payments.
- 1.4 Raise the rate of Jobseeker Payment and other income support payments to at least \$78 a day.

2 Fund initiatives to address racism and create lasting systemic change

- 2.1 Priority funding over the next four years to implement the national anti-racism strategy, including funding for local government and community anti-racism initiatives.
- 2.2 \$400m over four years for nationwide initiatives that address racial vilification, antisemitism and Islamophobia, and build the capacity of communities to promote community harmony and confront racism and extremism in our communities.
- 2.3 Invest to upgrade, renovate and build new community infrastructure for multicultural and multifaith communities so they can belong and contribute.

3 Support multicultural communities to effectively prepare and respond to emergencies

- 3.1 \$10 million over four years to national and state peak ethnic councils and multicultural organisations for projects that improve the cultural diversity and cultural responsiveness of the emergency services workforce, co-design culturally responsive communications, strengthen multicultural community engagement at the local level, and establish a strong research agenda to examine and evaluate multicultural emergency management outcomes.

4 Strengthen relationships between multicultural and First Nations communities

- 4.1** \$8 million over two years for First Nations and multicultural communities to co-design and implement strategies that strengthen relationships between First Nations People and multicultural communities and highlight our shared responsibilities to work towards justice and reconciliation.

5 Support older people from migrant and refugee communities to access in-home care

- 5.1** \$3 million over three years to ensure that the Victorian Access and Support Program can continue to provide care and support during the national aged care reform process, and that ECCV can continue to coordinate the A&S Network.

6 Fund programs to boost digital literacy and reduce the digital divide

- 6.1** \$3 million for ECCV to trial a bilingual 'Community Connectors' program for seniors from migrant and refugee backgrounds who are unlikely to become digitally literate. The program would support seniors by connecting them with the online services and organisations they need, in face-to-face sessions. Connectors could work with existing community support organisations.
- 6.2** \$100,000 in 2024-25 for ECCV to run a collaborative partnership with relevant sector and research bodies to improve the cultural appropriateness and engagement of programs that help seniors understand the benefits of technology and how digital skills can improve their health and wellbeing.

7 Promote gender equality and support migrant and refugee women to stay safe from family violence

- 7.1** \$2.5 million over three years to build the capacity of the multicultural sector to respond to family violence, including in-language community information sessions across Australia.
- 7.2** \$10 million over three years for targeted economic equity initiatives, including leadership, financial assistance and capacity-building programs.
- 7.3** Increased investment in culturally appropriate public housing for victim-survivors of family violence, regardless of visa status.

8 Improve inclusion, equity and advocacy for people with disability from refugee and migrant backgrounds

- 8.1** Fund ECCV to promote an innovative recruitment strategy to match people with disability from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds with workforce shortages in the NDIS and disability sectors.
- 8.2** Allocate funding from the proposed new NDIS Navigator program to ethno-specific community organisations to employ bicultural outreach workers who would support people with disability from migrant and refugee backgrounds to navigate the services they need, including mental health supports as required.
- 8.3** \$5 million in 2024-25 to improve service coordination between disability and family violence services.

9 Help secure the rights of migrant workers

- 9.1** Provide funding consistent with recommendation 24 of the Grattan Institute's report¹ over a period of at least four years to allow the Victorian Migrant Workers Centre to continue providing casework support for temporary visa holders affected by workplace exploitation, and education to temporary migrants about their employment rights.

10 Ensure multicultural communities are preparing for the impacts of Artificial Intelligence

- 10.1** \$4 million over 4 years for ECCV to partner with a Research Institute and industry group with AI expertise, to research the impacts of AI on multicultural communities and to develop and deliver an awareness raising campaign about the impacts of increasing adoption of Artificial Intelligence.

¹ See Coates, B., Wiltshire, T. and Reysenbach, T. (2023). Short-changed: How to stop the exploitation of migrant workers in Australia. Grattan Institute (p 88)

1 Support communities struggling with rising cost-of-living to access essential services and welfare support

Rising cost of living is affecting all Australians. Wages have stagnated and inflation remains high, placing increased pressure on households to meet basic needs. While the impact is being felt across society, many people from migrant and refugee backgrounds are experiencing particularly high levels of financial stress. For some it is a struggle to maintain the basic essentials of life, such as food, housing, utilities, and medical treatment. People on low, fixed incomes are most at risk of experiencing financial stress, which can lead to chronic mental ill-health and create additional barriers to accessing housing, education, and healthcare.²

Other pressures, such as labour exploitation, insecure work, high-interest loans, family violence, visa sponsorship costs, natural disaster emergencies, and the expectation to support families overseas, can also add to financial stress. Vulnerable migrant and refugee communities can face a range of barriers to accessing financial support, including ineligibility due to visa status, lack of accessible in-language information, and difficulties understanding and navigating service systems. The administrative burdens associated with filling out a form, providing supporting documentation, and determining eligibility can also be onerous and exclude people from accessing programs to which they are entitled.³

Vulnerable migrant and refugee communities must be supported through expanded subsidies and measures that increase their capacity to access relief. ECCV also urges the Australian Government to expand eligibility for all relief packages to people on temporary visas, including international students. Many temporary visa-holders are vulnerable to living in poverty because they do not have the right to work or access income support. Newly arrived refugees from Palestine are also ineligible for some support due to their temporary visa status. Specific funding should also be allocated to ensure that they have the support services they need to live a good life in Australia and to recover from their trauma.

There are no easy solutions to balancing the pressures of inflation. However, many Australians are being pushed into hardship, without the means to eat well, live in secure housing, and pay bills. A strategic approach must be taken in the longer-term, but for now, it is in the best interests of the Australian Government to offer immediate relief through targeted family support packages for parents raising children and struggling to maintain their essentials. This will help take pressure off

² Wilson, E., Churchus, C and Johnson, T. (2022). *'Can't afford to live'. The impact of the rising cost of living on Victorians and Tasmanians on low incomes*. Melbourne, Uniting (Victoria and Tasmania). <https://apo.org.au/node/320475>

³ Brown, J. T., Carey, G., & Malbon, E. (2021). *What is in a form?: Examining the complexity of application forms and administrative burden*. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 80(4), 933–964.

service systems and prevent situations from getting worse, more complex, and ultimately more costly.

Recommendations

- 1.1** Provide access to Medicare, income support, employment, mental health and other vital services to all people seeking asylum.
- 1.2** Deliver cost-of-living packages to parents to help raise children, including support for school, education or extra circular activities, such as vouchers to cover school camps and sporting equipment, uniforms and activities.
- 1.3** Deliver cost-of-living packages to help people on low incomes afford their energy bills, including: mandatory energy performing standards for rental properties, reform of energy concessions, energy debt relief, stronger retail protections, and substantial increase in income support payments.
- 1.4** Raise the rate of Jobseeker Payment and other income support payments to at least \$78 a day.

2 Fund initiatives to address racism and create lasting systemic change

Anti-racism is a core tenet of ECCV's work, and we have contributed to a range of policy and advocacy initiatives and led a range of projects to foster an inclusive, cohesive, safe and vibrant Victoria. One of ECCV's anti-racism projects focused on systemic change, *All One Together*, supports workplaces to advance both diversity and inclusion policies and practices, an approach recommended in research carried out with Victoria University.⁴ More than 25 organisations have become *All One Together* ambassadors, taking the pledge to transform their workplaces into spaces that are culturally safe and inclusive.

Ongoing initiatives to bolster social cohesiveness across Australia are arguably more important than ever in the context of current hostilities in the Middle East. As we know, many Australians feel a close connection to the conflict through family members, friends and history. There is a danger that extreme racist groups may try to opportunistically create or exacerbate divisions here. There has been a rise in antisemitism and some shocking public displays of this. In addition, inflammatory and sometimes racist commentary on social media and in public discourse leading up to the Referendum on an Aboriginal Voice to Parliament shows that there is a lot more work to do to address racism across the nation. Action is urgently required to confront rising tide of hate speech, racism and Islamophobia. Strategies to confront racism must also acknowledge the existence of racism between communities (intercultural racism), which require targeted strategies.

ECCV believes that solid, long-term commitments are required to combat and prevent systemic racism. We applaud the Government's commitment to deliver a national anti-racism strategy, which should pave the way for practical, long-term change to combat racism and discrimination across the nation. It is vital that this Strategy be released soon, and that the required funding is provided to implement its recommended actions. As we have previously highlighted, multi-year funding is needed to sustain lasting outcomes for the population as a whole and at the local level as well.

Multi-year funding should be targeted at:

- Building the capacity of communities to confront racism and extremism within their communities
- Community-led initiatives to promote community harmony
- Upgrading, renovating and building new multicultural community infrastructure
- Community-led antisemitism and Islamophobia initiatives.

⁴ Mario Peucker and Thomas J. Fisher, Victoria University and Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (2021), Evidence Review Anti-racism, diversity and inclusion in organisational settings. <https://www.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/all-one-together-evidence-review.pdf>

These programs must be informed by an evidence base about attitudes to multiculturalism and social cohesion broken down by language/ethnic background, to determine how best to target spending and monitor changes and progress in changing community attitudes.

Recommendations

- 2.1** Priority funding over the next four years to implement the national anti-racism strategy, including funding for local government and community anti-racism initiatives.
- 2.2** \$400m over four years for nationwide initiatives that address racial vilification, antisemitism and Islamophobia, and build the capacity of communities to promote community harmony and confront racism and extremism in our communities.
- 2.3** Invest to upgrade, renovate and build new community infrastructure for multicultural and multifaith communities so they can belong and contribute.

3 Support multicultural communities to effectively prepare and respond to emergencies

Last year ECCV published a joint report examining the experiences of multicultural communities during the 2022 Victorian floods.⁵ This found that multicultural communities, particularly those who are newly arrived and those on temporary visas, were at far greater risk of harm during the floods, had high levels of fear and anxiety, and gained information about the floods in very different ways compared to the mainstream community. It also found that the emergency response was not always culturally responsive.

This report was also informed by learnings from COVID-19 and ECCV's work supporting regional emergency preparedness, including improved coordination of on-the-ground support for regional migrant communities and building the capacity of community leaders to support their communities.

Lack of cultural diversity in the emergency services workforce has been identified in these projects as an important issue, with many services seeking support to better understand and include the needs of multicultural communities. They should be supported to review and adapt their recruitment, induction and retention processes.

Explicit measures to increase and monitor cultural safety, including for volunteers, must also be developed. Data on workforce cultural diversity should be regularly collected and reviewed. Emergency agencies and services must be supported to improve their cultural responsiveness by undertaking cultural responsiveness training tailored to the emergency management sector.

ECCV and our partners have recently received an additional \$1.5 million from the Victorian Government to further our work supporting migrant and refugee communities with emergency preparedness, response, and recovery in regional Victoria. This critical work should be replicated nationwide.

Recommendation

- 3.1** \$10 million over four years to national and state peak ethnic councils and multicultural organisations for projects that improve the cultural diversity and cultural responsiveness of the emergency services workforce, co-design culturally responsive communications, strengthen multicultural community engagement at the local level, and establish a strong research agenda to examine and evaluate multicultural emergency management outcomes.

⁵ Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, Neighbourhood Collective Australia and Regional Victorians of Colour (2023). *Multicultural Communities Experience of the 2022 Victorian Floods*. <https://eccv.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Multicultural-Communities-Experience-of-the-2022-Victorian-Floods.pdf>.

4 Strengthen relationships between multicultural and First Nations communities

There has long been an affinity between multicultural communities and Indigenous communities—one that ECCV is committed to strengthening through our policy, advocacy and project work. The foundations of a strong and inclusive multicultural Australia must include an acknowledgement and understanding amongst multicultural communities of the ongoing impacts of colonisation on First Nations People, and of the shared responsibility to work towards justice and reconciliation.

Progress towards meeting the national socio-economic targets contained in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap requires partnerships between multicultural and First Nations communities. Multicultural strategy in Australia should include education and public awareness strategies to improve understanding of the unique position of First Nations People in Australian society, and of the unique barriers to full social and economic inclusion that they continue to face.

Recommendation

- 4.1** \$8 million over two years for First Nations and multicultural communities to co-design and implement strategies that strengthen relationships between First Nations People and multicultural communities and highlight our shared responsibilities to work towards justice and reconciliation.

5 Support older people from migrant and refugee communities to access in-home care

Funding for the Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP) has recently been extended until 30 June 2027. ECCV believes that it is therefore crucial that the Victorian Access and Support (A&S) program, which has been played a key role in assisting people with diverse needs to navigate available services and connect them to in-home aged care service providers, receives concomitant funding to continue its role.

Since 2012 ECCV has convened and chaired a network of Victorian A&S providers, providing a platform to discuss issues related to A&S services, stay informed of sector updates, share strategies for strengthening A&S services, and engage in dialogue with the Victorian Department of Health and Federal Department of Health & Aged Care to help inform and improve the reform process for the aged care system. This Network must remain to support continued operation of the A&S program while the CHSP remains operational.

Recommendation

- 5.1 \$3 million over three years to ensure that the Victorian Access and Support Program can continue to provide care and support during the national aged care reform process, and that ECCV can continue to coordinate the A&S Network.

6 Fund programs to boost digital literacy and reduce the digital divide

Many older people from diverse cultural and language backgrounds are not digitally literate, and are becoming increasingly disconnected from services they need, such as banking and MyGov. They often have reduced ability to navigate the world and manage their lives. Compounding this are low levels of English proficiency, and they become disconnected and disempowered from the world on a profound level. This has been referred to as ‘forced digital migration’ or a lack of ‘digital citizenship’.

According to our research and networks in the aged support sector, this is making many older people highly vulnerable to isolation, elder abuse, financial abuse, fraud, and online scams.

In 2018-19, ECCV was funded through the Australian Government’s *Be Connected* program to help seniors from migrant and refugee backgrounds to use the internet in a safe and easy way. ECCV partnered with the Good Things Foundation to reach out to seniors who speak English as second language and help them receive funding for their organisations. We also supported participating seniors’ clubs to work with bilingual mentors to train older people to use the *Be Connected* website. Programs like these aimed at closing the digital gap through digital literacy training must continue, along with tailored, innovative programs to support seniors from multicultural communities.

While many seniors have benefitted from efforts to improve digital literacy through education, such programs are not enough on their own, as there are many seniors who will never become digitally literate for a range of reasons. Barriers include language (including not being literate in one’s own first language), and a decreasing capacity to master new skills with advancing age for many seniors, especially those experiencing dementia. In addition, many older people live on a minimal income and may not be able to afford a mobile phone or a phone plan. We support the provision to address this in the Victorian Government’s plan for seniors 2022-2026 i.e.:

Some people may never make the leap across the digital divide. We will ask government departments to develop options for alternatives to online access for services targeted to seniors. This will include key social services that currently only offer online access.⁶

While this is a welcome start, seniors also need to be able to connect with non-government services and organisations, which now requires a high level of digital connection and literacy.

ECCV’s multicultural networks have suggested an accessible ‘Community Connector’ who can connect people with the digital services and information they need in face-to-face sessions, and carry out online transactions and communications on their behalf. This Connector would be a trusted bilingual professional.

⁶ Victorian Government (2022) *Ageing well in Victoria: An action plan for strengthening wellbeing for senior Victorians 2022-2026*. Melbourne: Department of Families, Fairness & Housing.

Recommendations

- 6.1** \$3 million for ECCV to trial a bilingual 'Community Connectors' program for seniors from migrant and refugee backgrounds who are unlikely to become digitally literate. The program would support seniors by connecting them with the online services and organisations they need, in face-to-face sessions. Connectors could work with existing community support organisations.
- 6.2** \$100,000 in 2024-25 for ECCV to run a collaborative partnership with relevant sector and research bodies to improve the cultural appropriateness and engagement of programs that help seniors understand the benefits of technology and how digital skills can improve their health and wellbeing.

7 Promote gender equality and support migrant and refugee women to stay safe from family violence

Multicultural and ethno-specific providers play a critical role in providing culturally responsive care for victim-survivors of family violence. They are often the first point of contact for migrant and refugee women seeking help but, unfortunately, they are not sufficiently resourced to respond appropriately to disclosures, especially as those disclosures increase in complexity. ECCV stakeholders report that many women prefer to wait months for specialised assistance, rather than access a mainstream family violence service. This is why culturally responsive practice must be embedded across the family violence sector and improve referral and information pathways between multicultural organisations, specialist family violence services, and wrap-around housing, legal, financial and emotional supports.

In terms of prevention, it is well established that gender inequality is a major driver of family violence that needs to be addressed. This overlaps with racial discrimination and social exclusion for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Substantial funding is therefore needed for targeted re-training, in-language financial counselling, English language education, work readiness programs, financial assistance, and support with childcare.

Recommendations

- 7.1 \$2.5 million over three years to build the capacity of the multicultural sector to respond to family violence, including in-language community information sessions across Australia.
- 7.1 \$10 million over three years for targeted economic equity initiatives, including leadership, financial assistance and capacity-building programs.
- 7.2 Increased investment in culturally appropriate public housing for victim-survivors of family violence, regardless of visa status.

8 Improve inclusion, equity and advocacy for people with disability from refugee and migrant backgrounds

People from migrant and refugee backgrounds with disability very often experience multiple, intersecting barriers to a good quality of life and achieving their aspirations. ECCV promotes their rights and needs through our advocacy and policy work, which includes collaboration, consultation and research to inform government policy, as well as programs to improve inclusion and equity.

ECCV coordinates a Statewide Disability Network and delivers self-advocacy training to empower people with disability from migrant and refugee communities. ECCV also publishes a monthly Multicultural Disability Bulletin and manages an online Multicultural Disability Hub.⁷

ECCV is therefore well-positioned to deliver on outcomes that benefit people with disability from migrant and refugee backgrounds. These would contribute to meeting both the policy priorities outlined in *Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031*, and the recommendations and associated actions in the *Working Together to Deliver the NDIS* report.

We urge the Department of Social Services to increase their focus on the issues, experiences and cultural preferences and needs of people with disability from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Dedicated investment is required to create a policy environment, continue to promote self-advocacy, and improve community awareness of the challenges and issues faced by people with disability from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

Funding should also be directed to raise awareness in mainstream disability service providers of the support needs of people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and to recruit more staff from multicultural backgrounds (in line with Recommendation 15 of the NDIS Review: “Attract, retain and train a workforce that is responsive to participant needs and delivers quality supports”⁸). Action is required to fill current shortages of qualified support workers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

ECCV is well placed to lead the way in developing and supporting the implementation of innovative means of recruitment of such workers in Victoria (that could eventually be implemented nationally), promoting the value of disability work in multicultural communities, and linking qualified workers from diverse backgrounds to workforce vacancies. Filling these shortages would help ensure that NDIS participants have access to the support workers they require, and break down the barriers for people from multicultural backgrounds in finding sustainable employment.

⁷ See <https://eccv.org.au/multicultural-disability-hub/>.

⁸ Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2023). *Working together to deliver the NDIS - Independent Review into the National Disability Insurance Scheme: Final Report*. <https://www.ndisreview.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/working-together-ndis-review-final-report.pdf>.

The high level of abuse experienced by people with a disability, as highlighted by the Disability Royal Commission, also needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency, while noting again that those from migrant and refugee backgrounds are more likely to be isolated and vulnerable to such abuse.

Royal Commission hearings have highlighted the need for more research and understanding of how people with disability respond to family violence. People with disability who have experienced family violence often bounce between disability and family violence services, with neither service being able to offer the workforce, skillset, or knowledge to provide the breadth of response that is required. In other circumstances, existing frameworks and models are applied and assumed to work, despite lacking the necessary intersectional competencies. For example, people with disability often experience abuse in care relationships.

Further research is needed to support a better understanding of the kind of responses and services that are required in these situations, but an immediate priority must be enhanced coordination between the disability and family violence sectors to support better access.

Recommendations

- 8.1** Fund ECCV to promote an innovative recruitment strategy to match people with disability from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds with workforce shortages in the NDIS and disability sectors.
- 8.2** Allocate funding from the proposed new NDIS Navigator program to ethno-specific community organisations to employ bicultural outreach workers who would support people with disability from migrant and refugee backgrounds to navigate the services they need, including mental health supports as required.
- 8.3** \$5 million in 2024-25 to improve service coordination between disability and family violence services.

9 Help secure the rights of migrant workers

An increasing body of evidence has in recent years highlighted large-scale exploitative employment practices, such as wage theft, unacceptable working conditions, bullying and harassment, and in extreme cases, slavery-like practices, affecting visa holders living in Australia.⁹ Such practices especially affect holders of temporary visas, whose migration status and the nature of the work they do makes them particularly vulnerable to mistreatment.¹⁰

The COVID-19 pandemic, in which a majority of temporary migrants reported that they had suffered a critical loss of income from loss of work and/or diminished family support, and that many could not meet their basic living needs, highlighted the precarious circumstances that cause many migrant workers to accept dangerous or exploitative workplace conditions. These events have emphasised the need for robust action to combat the abuse and exploitation of workers on temporary visas.

A widespread survey of migrant workers that formed the basis for the *Wage Theft in Silence* report, published in 2018, found that despite widespread underpayment of wages, fewer than one in 10 underpaid workers tried to seek redress. Of those surveyed, more than 40% indicated that they “did not know what to do” to recover wages. Other primary reasons survey respondents gave for not attempting to recover lost wages included fear of consequences for their migration status, that it was “too much work”, and a belief that it would be pointless. This indicates the need for greater support for migrant workers to help overcome these barriers.

Another major issue of concern is the increased reporting of “sham contracting,” where employers misrepresent employment as independent contracting, requiring workers to register as a business, making them ineligible for entitlements such as annual leave, sick leave and superannuation. Due to their lower levels of familiarity with Australian employment law, this issue particularly affects temporary visa holders from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Protecting migrant workers from exploitation must therefore include education so that they understand their rights at work, what steps they can take to avoid becoming victims of exploitative practices, and how they can seek redress if they do experience exploitation. Migrant communities need access to tailored, culturally safe education and legal assistance.

The Migrant Workers Centre in Victoria provides a vital service through its advocacy, casework support and education to migrant workers. In 2023, the Grattan Institute released a report¹¹

⁹ See for example Australian Government (March 2019), Report of the Migrant Workers’ Taskforce, p.16 – “The Taskforce acknowledges the very grave matter of criminal labour exploitation in Australia, including human trafficking, slavery and slavery-like practices.”

¹⁰ See Berg, L. & Farbenblum, B. (2017), Wage Theft in Australia Findings of the National Temporary Migrant Work Survey; Hemingway, C. (2016), Not Just Work: Ending the exploitation of refugee and migrant workers (WEstjustice Employment Law Project Final Report); and Australian Senate Education and Employment References Committee (2016), A National Disgrace: The Exploitation of Temporary Work Visa Holders.

¹¹ See Coates, B., Wiltshire, T. and Reysenbach, T. (2023). Short-changed: How to stop the exploitation of migrant workers in Australia. Grattan Institute (p 88)

recommending the expansion of Migrant Worker Centre programs around the country, based on the Victorian model.

Recommendation

- 9.1** Provide funding consistent with recommendation 24 of the Grattan Institute's report over a period of at least four years to allow the Victorian Migrant Workers Centre to continue providing casework support for temporary visa holders affected by workplace exploitation, and education to temporary migrants about their employment rights.

10 Ensure multicultural communities are preparing for the impacts of Artificial Intelligence

For many years, technology has changed the face of the employment market, making many traditional “blue collar” jobs redundant. The rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI), particularly Large Language Models such as ChatGPT, threatens to increasingly do the same to many roles in the “knowledge economy”. Roles that until recently seemed purely the reserve of human endeavour, such as research, analysis, and writing, may soon be performed more efficiently by machines powered by AI. At the same time, adoption of AI is likely to create many opportunities and a variety of new vocations.

This will lead to large-scale changes to the Australian economy. There will be an increasing need for workers to keep updating their skills as technological advances increasingly change the skills in demand by industry and employers. A strong, flexible and accessible vocational education and training sector will consequently become more important than ever.

As artificial intelligence (AI) continues to advance, there is a growing concern about its potential impact on multicultural communities with existing barriers. While AI has the potential to bring about positive transformations across various sectors, there is a risk that certain communities may be left behind in the process.

Multicultural communities often face unique challenges such as language barriers, limited access to technology, and cultural nuances that may not be adequately addressed by AI systems. If not carefully implemented, AI technologies could exacerbate existing inequalities, perpetuating a digital divide and hindering the inclusion of these communities in the benefits of technological advancements.

It is crucial for policymakers, technologists, and stakeholders to work collaboratively to ensure that AI development takes into account the diverse needs of multicultural communities, actively mitigating the risk of leaving them behind in the rapidly evolving landscape of technological progress. This involves prioritising accessibility, cultural sensitivity, and equitable distribution of resources to bridge the gaps and ensure that the potential benefits of AI are shared by all members of society.

Multicultural communities must be supported to take advantage of the opportunities that AI will offer. The Victorian Government is contributing funding through its startup agency LaunchVic to Boab AI, for Australia’s first accelerator program to scale-up artificial intelligence companies. It is important that a proportionate share of such funding from the Federal Government reaches migrant and refugee-owned startups.

As there has so far been little strategic planning for the effects that AI will have on society, and on the employment market in particular, scoping and research will be required to formulate an initial response.

Recommendation

- 10.1** \$4 million over 4 years for ECCV to partner with a Research Institute and industry group with AI expertise, to research the impacts of AI on multicultural communities and to develop and deliver an awareness raising campaign about the impacts of increasing adoption of Artificial Intelligence.



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