

# **FINAL TRANSCRIPT**

## **LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE**

### **Inquiry into support for older Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds**

Ballarat—Thursday, 31 March 2022

#### **MEMBERS**

Ms Natalie Suleyman—Chair

Mr Brad Battin—Deputy Chair

Mr Neil Angus

Ms Christine Couzens

Ms Emma Kealy

Ms Michaela Settle

Mr Meng Heang Tak

#### **WITNESSES**

Ms Teresa Azzopardi, Social Support Manager, and

Ms Sherley Hart, community member, Ballarat Regional Multicultural Council.



**The CHAIR:** Good morning. Welcome to the public hearing for the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into support for older Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we are meeting, and I pay my respects to their Elders both past and present and the Aboriginal Elders of other communities who may be here today.

I welcome Teresa Azzopardi, the Team Leader for Social Support for Ballarat Regional Multicultural Council, and also Sherley Hart, a Community Member of the same organisation. My name is Natalie Suleyman. I am the Member for St Albans and the Chair of this Committee. To my right is my colleague Meng Heang Tak MP, the Member for Clarinda. At this point all mobile phones should be switched to silent.

All evidence taken today is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you say the same things outside, including on social media, these comments may not be protected by this privilege.

All evidence today is being recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check over, and then the transcript will be made public on the Committee's website.

I now invite you to make your statement, which will be followed by questions from me and my colleague. Thank you so much.

**Ms AZZOPARDI:** Thank you, Natalie. I am Teresa Azzopardi. I am the BRMC Social Support manager. I lead a team of four staff and numerous trained volunteers in our social support work with multicultural seniors. I also participate in sector network education and practice development. I have an apology from Ann Foley, our Ballarat Regional Multicultural Council EO. Thank you for this valuable opportunity to present you today.

Today I am supported by Sherley Hart. Sherley has been a long-time member of BRMC as well as the City of Ballarat Intercultural Advisory Committee and is a great champion of diverse communities. Sherley was the president of the Filipino association, FAABI, for 15 years until she stepped down last year to allow younger members of the association to have opportunities. Sherley is highly respected in the Filipino community and by BRMC, and we are grateful for her important and valued contribution today. Thank you, Sherley.

Ballarat Regional Multicultural Council is the peak multicultural agency in the Central Highlands-Grampians region. There are 24 cultural associations or groups plus numerous individual and associate members affiliated with BRMC. Our mission is to work in partnership with other community organisations, cultural and faith associations and members to actively promote multiculturalism, cultural diversity and wellbeing and alleviate the hardship of all migrant communities throughout the region. BRMC provide a range of services to people of all ages, including migration and settlement services, cultural competency and anti-racism training, multicultural parenting, playgroup and homework clubs, community employment connector services, refugee and asylum seeker support, the Stepping Stones to Small Business program through our multicultural women's business centre, numerous COVID-related services and support across the region.

BRMC social support programs are funded by the federal and state governments under the Commonwealth Home Support Program and the Home and Community Care Program for younger people. We design and deliver culturally responsive services, including multicultural lunches, bus trips, tai chi classes, a carers hub and a home visiting program. We also support multicultural seniors to navigate government systems.

Some of the challenges and barriers that we have identified: BRMC social support provides services to over 160 seniors who come from 30 different cultural backgrounds. We have extensive experience working with this cohort and have a deep understanding of the individual needs and the barriers and challenges they face.

Language: multicultural seniors face additional barriers such as limited spoken English and literacy and communication capacity. Ageing exacerbates language barriers, with increased reliance on first language. This adds to the frustration and lack of capability to navigate complex government systems such as My Aged Care. Language barriers and digital systems literally exclude multicultural seniors, leaving them vulnerable and without crucial aged care services.

Transport: without adequate transport, multicultural seniors suffer increased isolation and have difficulty attending social outings and medical appointments, shopping and visiting deceased loved ones at cemeteries.

Our region has limited public transport options, especially for people living outside the central areas. Digital payment systems are an additional barrier and a discouragement to multicultural seniors. Approximately 15% of our seniors we support live in rural and remote areas on the outskirts of Ballarat and face additional challenges as public transport is limited to non-existent. The costs of alternative transport, such as a taxi service, are grossly unaffordable. These practical barriers can amount to exclusion of access to the crucial physical and social support services that sustain mental and physical wellbeing, particularly in regional and rural areas. Without more accessible transport and multilingual services multicultural seniors will not be heard, understood and supported. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Teresa.

**Ms AZZOPARDI:** Do you want to add anything at this point, Sherley?

**Ms HART:** I think everything you have said is just what we are aiming to achieve in the future. There is a problem always, especially for the seniors, how to navigate directly to the services, because with a lot of seniors, even in our own community, sometimes we just do help them with what they need. Every day is really in isolation for them and very difficult. At times too, for us, we are not always there, so we have to look for someone that can do it. But we are very lucky that at least we have a few there that have already retired, so they can access the services. We have a few of our members that we always look after by taking them shopping and to their appointments with their doctors. We also take them if we have outings, so we can always look after them, because they would like to go out because they are very lonely, especially if they live alone by themselves. So what Teresa is expressing is what we are aiming for. If we can achieve great things for them, that will be good.

**The CHAIR:** Lovely. Thank you. That is great. We might just go to the questions now. Just following up, Sherley, on what you said, do you think groups need more funding, more communication, more support from local councils or governments?

**Ms HART:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Can you just add to that?

**Ms HART:** All of those.

**The CHAIR:** All of those.

**Ms HART:** Yes, because for a start, especially with the transport as well, we do not have any public transport to use. I just have the car. So it may be available to use the car so we can pick up someone, but really we have to look for that, the transport system. Not only that, sometimes connecting to the services, you know, like the doctors—there are a lot of things that we are aiming to help with, assist with.

**The CHAIR:** Do you think that many elderly, in particular migrant elderly with diverse backgrounds—do you think many people, let us say in your community, understand the services that are there? Do they know about the services?

**Ms HART:** Just a few, because of a lack of knowledge of those people, especially now using the technology—even myself. I am not very good, but at least I can understand. I can still go out and communicate, but there are others that sometimes lack enthusiasm to learn, because they need encouragement to inspire them. You know, that is number one. So in our own community, the Filipino community, we are very grateful to the BRMC, because they are helping us. We get funding from them, and they are giving us opportunities to help our seniors. So we have that funding. So we use that, you know, for their needs. Like, we take them for outings. Now we are looking forward. Last year we had this information session on technology for them, just to learn the basics, how to use the technology. Just the basics, but we will do that again sometime this year. So that is something that they are looking forward to learning.

And then also going out—sometimes they need to go out, so we take them. Like, a couple of weeks ago we went on an outing. We went to a winery just to take them out. So they really enjoyed it. We are also aiming to do other sessions again this year, maybe just some physical fitness, to go out just to have some activities so that we can help them just with their mental activity, you know.

**The CHAIR:** It is important.

**Ms HART:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Did you want to add something?

**Ms AZZOPARDI:** No—perhaps just around navigation of My Aged Care systems and other government systems. So we see that as a big gap. We see that this particular cohort and generation are not IT literate. A phone service such as My Aged Care does not work. They need that face-to-face support, and they come to trusted organisations and people like ourselves to navigate the system for them.

There is a gap in terms of having a centralised centre for us where seniors can come for access ad hoc. So I would advocate that we have—based on Diversitat’s model in Geelong, the healthy living centre that they have—something like that, where we can create a drop-in centre type service where people can come as needed to have that navigation support as they need it. Their circumstances change frequently, so it is an ongoing need. And we currently do that, but we do not have an adequate space to do that, so we are having to meet at outside venues or in their home and things like that.

We did do a pilot of a similar model that we titled ‘Heart Space’, at Sacred Heart, when Ballarat Welcome Centre was at a different site in Sacred Heart, Victoria Street, but we did not have enough time, and we were forced to relocate again.

**The CHAIR:** Heang, did you have any questions?

**Mr TAK:** Yes. I have. Many questions have already been answered. Thank you, Teresa and Sherley. Was it Filipino New Year just a couple of weeks ago—or Independence Day?

**Ms HART:** Yes. The 30th anniversary.

**Mr TAK:** The anniversary, yes. And it is good to hear that there are new emerging younger generations that have taken up—what do we call it?—the responsibility or the opportunity to also continue the organisation. Especially sometimes with the multicultural communities, they are very eager to maintain them but it is very hard to bring up the younger ones. For that reason, from your experience in terms of collaboration and partnership, what do you see that is important and how can we advance that further in terms of local government, state government and community organisations?

**Ms AZZOPARDI:** In terms of that I sort of bring it back to having a centre, an aged care umbrella-type service, where multicultural seniors can access ad hoc services through a drop-in centre type situation. That would strengthen communication and collaboration I think between the governments and organisational providers. As I said earlier, My Aged Care is not adequate for that, but I think if we had a centralised specific space for that, then that would be a great opportunity to bring different generations together in a safe, multicultural space.

We are currently working with the City of Ballarat on their ageing well strategy. They need our specific multicultural perspective, and the City of Ballarat has welcomed our involvement. They are also coming to speak at one of our seniors programs, a health and wellbeing day, where they will be asking clients directly about what they think they need in our local community to make it a more age-friendly city.

We have made recommendations around things like trying to be innovative around transport, like having maybe a volunteer on a bus on particular days of the week at a particular time that seniors are aware of. They could assist seniors getting on and off the bus, assist them with bus schedules, maps and routes and things like that, and with the Myki system help them top up their Myki and understand how that process works. So that is one of the ideas that we are putting to the City of Ballarat.

We are also exploring options of funding with Public Transport Victoria around getting two 12-seater buses and having the ability to use those as a flexible transport service to not only our cultural seniors but more broadly throughout the multicultural community.

**Ms HART:** We just did things through the City of Ballarat Intercultural Advisory Committee; we are part of that. So they are working through that. For the City of Ballarat, they are promoting multiculturalism all around

Ballarat to make it bigger and make it prosper. Now, through the Ballarat Regional Multicultural Council they are aiming to take every cultural group here in Ballarat and to make them one, to be connected to one another. With us and with all other organisations like ours, we belong under one umbrella—the BRMC—so we are one. But in a sense it would be nice if we could have some services through the City of Ballarat so the BRMC can access those services through them, through the help of the government. It is just, you know, good collaboration through that. Then we can be united and we can be supported through the services and programs. And then we can entice everyone, especially those with non-English speaking backgrounds, because they struggle, really. Sometimes they struggle with limited language—English, you know. They cannot express themselves, and that is the difficulty they see with services like this, you know. Sometimes there is a weakness there, you know. If we can improve that, you know—in what way?

**Mr TAK:** Perhaps if I can lead to the next question, it would be: because of the language difficulties in understanding the services that are available, have you seen that lead to elder abuse from other contributors?

**Ms HART:** Yes, some harassment as well, because if they have limited knowledge, sometimes they can be tricked—you know, cheated. There are some out there, yes, especially when they are holding the whole unit through that, you know. There are just so many victims of abuse.

**Mr TAK:** Financial abuse sometimes happens within the family, and sometimes it could be the care provider.

**Ms HART:** Yes.

**Mr TAK:** Do you want to talk a bit more about that?

**Ms AZZOPARDI:** So we work with Seniors Rights Victoria around elder abuse and make sure that all our staff are trained to identify elder abuse. It certainly goes on, and it is very concerning. We certainly do what we can to support individuals when we identify it, and I think bringing it back to having a centre which would also be a safe place where people who are victims of that type of thing could come and feel comfortable and build a rapport with people who can advise and help them—so yes, I think it is extremely important and crucial.

**Mr TAK:** Thank you for your participation.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much. Thank you. I think that concludes the questions.

**Ms AZZOPARDI:** No worries. Am I able to just raise three points just to summarise what we really want to say?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, you can.

**Ms AZZOPARDI:** Thank you. So there are three crucial points that I would like to raise. Just coming back to transport, it is crucial, essential, to clients living in regional and remote areas. Seniors' independence with transport can cease at any moment when the circumstances of their health or weather conditions change, particularly with Ballarat winters and ice on the road and things like that. Limited or no transport leads to further isolation, contributing to a decline in physical and mental health.

This generation's cohort of multicultural seniors require face-to-face ongoing and well-coordinated support to navigate aged care services. They are not IT literate, and communication via telephone is not adequate. Face-to-face support is critical to ensure multicultural seniors are not discriminated against and have the ability to access services they need to live independently and live their best lives. Without this level of support seniors will be excluded from services; their everyday needs will not be met.

Capital investment by the government is needed to secure a fit-for-purpose centralised centre that is culturally appropriate to create a safe space where we can provide navigation of aged care systems as well as social and physical activities meeting the holistic needs of multicultural seniors. Why is capital investment by government in a multicultural health centre for CALD seniors essential now? Because we are operating in an unprecedented environment with technological—I cannot get my words out today.

**Mr TAK:** It is early in the morning.

**Ms AZZOPARDI:** It is not even Friday—and business model changes across the aged care sector that are excluding multicultural people, an increasing cohort in ageing communities. We respectfully point out a best practice site, which is Diversitat Healthy Living Centre in Norlane, a dedicated facility for cultural seniors. Thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I will take this opportunity on behalf of the Committee to thank you very much for your valuable contribution today. Thank you, Teresa and Sherley, for being here and making the time. These are very important matters that you have raised. The next steps for us will be that in the coming months we will deliberate all the evidence that has been submitted and put forward a very strong report to government with recommendations that the inquiry has concluded on. So I do take this opportunity again to thank you so much. It has been really helpful.

**Witnesses withdrew.**