

The Victorian Arabic Social Services' submission to the Victorian Government's Inquiry into support for older Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds

About the Victorian Arabic Social Services (VASS)

Victorian Arabic Social Services (VASS) is a state-wide key service provider, founded in 1986, with specialist expertise and knowledge in working with multicultural communities, particularly Arabic Speaking Background (ASB) communities. The work undertaken by VASS is underpinned by community development principles which aim to develop the citizenship status of disadvantaged members of targeted communities. VASS provides a range of services, from youth services, family services, gambling support services and aged care and disability services. VASS's aged care services include CHSP and Home Care Packages. The majority of VASS's staff and volunteers are multi-lingual and bicultural, representing the communities we serve.

VASS commends the Victorian Government for holding this Inquiry, and welcomes the opportunity to make a submission. VASS would be willing to provide further evidence if requested.

Response to Terms of Reference:

(a) adequacy of services for older Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds;

On the whole, services provided to older Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds, including people of ASB, are not fully meeting their needs. In VASS's experience, mainstream service providers are generally not culturally and linguistically appropriate, and therefore often provide inadequate services, or do not try to reach these communities altogether, as they are seen as more difficult or costly to engage with. Those providers that do make an effort to work with older migrants and refugees often see them as a homogeneous group, and so do not meet their unique needs.

In Victoria there are many ethno-specific service providers (like VASS), who can provide appropriate support, particularly through the use of bilingual and bicultural staff. This also enables community members to build trust in that organisation, which is otherwise a major barrier to services for people of migrant and refugee backgrounds. However, these organisations are often under-resourced and do much work that is unfunded. In VASS's experience, this has only increased with the CoVid19 pandemic.

At a broader level, the types of services available for older Victorians of migrant and refugee backgrounds is inadequate, as there is not enough consideration of financial disadvantage and mental health – two major issues for this cohort, discussed below.

(b) unique challenges faced by this cohort, including, but not limited to, social isolation, civic participation, digital literacy, elder abuse and access to culturally appropriate aged care and home care services; and

The points made in section a) apply just as much to the aged care sector (home, community and residential) specifically, and present a major barrier to the positive ageing and overall wellbeing of older Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

Financial disadvantage is an issue that significantly impacts this group, with the majority of VASS's older clients experiencing it. This is backed up by research by VCOSS (2018) that shows that people in Victoria born in non-English speaking countries disproportionately experience financial disadvantage. While there are some provisions for financial hardship for older people at a state level, and in aged care services, these do not go far enough. In VASS's experience, financial hardship in older migrants and refugees can lead to physical and mental health issues through delayed health appointments, inadequate nutrition, stress, anxiety and depression. For example, VASS has had clients who have forgone heating during the winter months, because they could not afford it. Homelessness is also a major issue for this cohort, even with dedicated programs and priority access, many still wait years for adequate long-term housing.

Older Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds have often experienced trauma, either in their countries of origin, throughout their migration journey or in their country of settlement. Research, such as that done by the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (Foundation House) (2021), shows that such trauma can have an impact on the experience of ageing, including increasing the likelihood of physical and mental health issues. This necessitates a distinct set of supports, including mental health services and trauma-informed delivery.

Social isolation has long been an issue for older Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds, including people of ASB. For this group, this is exacerbated by financial disadvantage, loss of family and friends through the refugee and migration experiences, physical and mental health issues and a lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate avenues for socialising. This has only worsened during the CoVid19 pandemic. Relatedly, digital literacy and access to technology is low. This is due to financial constraints, actual literacy (in both English or their own language) and other factors. This has led to reduced informal social support during CoVid, and has also made it harder to access services. Further, it has made it harder for existing service providers as well, particularly smaller ethno-specifics. VASS, for example, has delivered services over the phone, not via online telehealth. This is challenging when much of our work involves supporting older people of ASB to access other services (such as My Aged Care) that are primarily online.

VASS has found that older Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds also face unique challenges in relation to their experience of elder abuse, in part due to the vulnerabilities outlined above such as English language skills and social isolation. For people of ASB, lack of knowledge about their rights and how to seek help, cultural stigma and shame about seeking support, and cultural norms regarding family roles (with adult children caring for elderly parents) also impact experiences of elder abuse and the support that is sought for it. Lack of knowledge, cultural norms and the role of stigma also impact engagement with services more broadly for this group.

(c) ideas to advance the physical and mental health and wellbeing of Victoria's multicultural seniors including global best practices

As noted above, older Victorians of migrant and refugee backgrounds often face severe financial disadvantage. Among VASS's clientele, many have not accrued superannuation or other assets, and are reliant solely on the Aged Pension, if eligible. The rate of the Aged Pension should be raised, particularly for migrants and refugees. This will improve their physical and mental health through reduced stress as well as flow on effects of being able to afford heating, housing, nutritious food and more.

Recommendation 1: that the Victorian Government advocate to the Federal Government that the rate of the Aged Pension be increased, particularly for migrants and refugees.

Ethno-specific services are in a unique position of trust and expertise in working with our respective communities, but do much unfunded work. Further, at VASS there are many activities our older clients are asking us to facilitate (such as excursions to different social and cultural activities), which they are currently missing out on as they cannot afford it themselves and VASS does not have the funds (excursions being beyond our funds given through CHSP for Social Groups). These, and other like activities would alleviate social isolation and improve mental wellbeing. Ethno-specifics can also be very useful in providing expertise and a 'warm contact' to mainstream agencies, as is the case with the Access and Support program. To increase the benefits flowing from this work, this should be expanded in scope, and there should be more impetus put on mainstream agencies to seek out this expertise.

Recommendation 2: increase funding for ethno-specifics to work with older people of migrant backgrounds, particularly in areas relating to trauma, mental health, financial disadvantage and elder abuse.

Recommendation 3: create more incentives for mainstream services to collaborate with ethno-specific services in relation to older people of migrant and refugee backgrounds, ensuring all parties are adequately resourced.

References:

Victorian Council of Social Service, 2019, Celebrating and Supporting Cultural Diversity, <https://vcoss.org.au/analysis/2018/09/celebrating-and-supporting-cultural-diversity/>

The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, Inc., 2021, Australian Refugee Health Practice Guide: Older People, <https://refugeehealthguide.org.au/older-people/>