

Support for Older Victorians from Migrant and Refugee Backgrounds

Response to the Victorian Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee | November 2021

Introduction

AMES Australia (AMES) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Victorian Legislative Assembly's Inquiry into Support for Older Victorians from Migrant and Refugee Backgrounds. AMES is an autonomous adult education institute accountable to the Victorian Minister for Training and Skills. The organisation provides a comprehensive range of initial settlement support, English language and literacy tuition, vocational training and employment services to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and Western Sydney.

AMES work, guided by our vision of 'full participation for all in a cohesive and diverse society', is focused on maximising the economic and social participation of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers and the benefits of migration to Australia. A majority of AMES staff are of culturally and linguistically diverse background. In this context, AMES response will draw upon experience working with older Victorians across a variety of service areas: education, employment, social participation, and settlement.

Our response touches on the challenges and inequities experienced by older migrants and refugees at both a structural and operational scale, before imparting some key observations that we believe can guide the Committee's focus toward strategies that lead to safer, healthier and more cohesive communities.

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1. Challenges for Older Victorians from Migrant and Refugee Background

While older Victorians should be considered an asset, their status in the policy/service ecosystem does not reflect this, as has been revealed during the Commonwealth Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety (2018-present). For those from migrant or refugee backgrounds, support challenges can be compounded by cultural and linguistic difference and complicated life histories.

1.1 Language and literacy

Understandably, for many Victorians of migrant and refugee background, language and literacy issues limit the extent to which they can participate in the broader society and work. AMES highlights this particular issue as our research and experience shows language and literacy are the key to unlocking greater social and economic participation and addressing other challenges, for all migrants and refugees, including for older Victorians.

Older migrants and refugees may not all aspire to or achieve English fluency, however AMES experience with our client communities is that where service providers can acknowledge difference, adapt and understand how to communicate in simple English, this

is often sufficient. Translation services are (conditionally) accessible for older migrants and refugees when accessing services, but are not funded to the extent required, can be unavailable at times for speakers of less common languages, and do not support older Victorians out in the community e.g. while shopping.

1.2 Complex life trajectories

While most Australian-born Victorians have had the opportunity to take on adult-life responsibilities in Australia as a natural progression from their younger years – many migrants and refugees have had their life course disrupted and have had to rebuild in Victoria in middle and old age. This life trajectory often results in social isolation, that is most pronounced in older aged people who may have never worked in Australia, and indeed never gained some of the core skills enabling participation in society. Illustrating this challenge; we know most Australians find a first job in their teenage years, while many migrants and refugees must make this transition to work in Australia in their more mature years. So while older migrants and refugees are as diverse as any other cohort in the State, it is this experience of (often forced) migration that creates common, observable challenges.

1.3 Elder abuse

The issue of elder abuse is commonly understood as the manipulation of older people, particularly financially. Without high-level English language skills, many older Victorians are more vulnerable to elder abuse. Necessary/core skills for older Victorians therefore includes some awareness of elder abuse. A basic level of financial literacy in English may be enough to prevent many cases of financial elder abuse. Education providers should recognise the valid needs of older Victorians to acquire core skills that mitigate the likelihood of exploitation. Improved translation services and access to financial literacy materials in-language would also be of benefit. In addition, awareness campaigns that reach and inform older migrants and refugees of their rights to protection from physical and mental abuse are needed.

1.4 Digital inequalities

Digital skills have become a pre-requisite for most social and community services. This applies equally to older adults, who must engage with digital health, social, tax and employment services. As institutions (including those under the auspices of the Victorian Government) pivot to online delivery, it is critical to ensure digital inclusion of older migrants and refugees: through access to digital literacy training; devices; affordable internet, and; access to reliable, stable connections. While these are intractable, complex challenges, the Victorian Government could play a role in delivering targeted digital skills education, not tied to employment services – as well as by improving the quality and frequency of materials distributed online in first languages.

1.5 Economic exclusion

Older migrants and refugees are not always retirees: AMES has worked with many Victorians who are financially insecure and must continue working past retirement age. Others still who may be considered 'older' (e.g. over 60) are not at retirement age, yet may lack work experience in Australia. This opens up a wider and challenge - that of employer recruitment bias – which is compounded in instances where employers may discriminate on the basis of age as well as racial/cultural background. The Victorian Government should continue to facilitate discussion and education to address the range of employer biases that persist – looking to best practice, local-scale employer engagement strategies as examples of how this can enable older Victorians to participate in economic life.

1.6 Gendered dimensions to the challenges

Violence against women has no age limit, and indeed AMES staff frequently encounter older migrant and refugee women who face verbal abuse, neglect, disrespect and financial exploitation. Some important differences that may accompany the gendered experiences of older migrants/refugees: the increased incidence of sexual violence in culturally and linguistically diverse communities (many sexual violence surveys exclude women over the age of 49 so their plight can be ignored); cultural interpretations around personal care that can isolate women in particular; the varying role of older women in a family unit, community or household.

On this final point, it is important to note that not all older migrant and refugee women are victims. There are many examples of older women of refugee background, many of whom experience the same gendered disadvantage as other migrant women – who have also taken on leadership roles in families and communities. This may come about because younger leadership figures have remained overseas or died in conflict, necessitating that leadership roles be taken on by grandparents/older community members. In other circumstances, older people (including women) are inherently part of the community leadership – which can contrast noticeably with the dependency model implied by a Western welfare system, including the structure of the Victorian services ecosystem.

2. Supporting safe, healthy and cohesive communities

Older people's perspective, wisdom, cultural memory and presence is essential to a vibrant, equitable community. Relatedly, the safety, health and participation of older people in society is a key contributor to overall social cohesion in Victoria. The following observations respond to the challenges above, and are not exhaustive but may point the Committee toward focus areas for further investigation, with the aim of improving support for older migrants and refugees and ultimately building a more cohesive Victoria:

2.1 Culturally competent providers can address many key challenges

Cultural competency on the part of service provider personnel can address both linguistic and cultural differences outlined above. Competency in provider organisations can come from either employing staff with lived migrant/refugee experience or through high quality professional development. This can be particularly important in services such as aged care and home care services, especially as many people commonly revert to their first language as they grow older. There is particular need for more highly trained carers from diverse backgrounds who can communicate with and understand older people's psychological and cultural needs.

An important and cost-effective tool guiding improved cultural competency across support services in Victoria may be a consultative committee of diverse older people, as AMES is currently recommending at an international level in contributions to the UNHCR Global Compact on Refugees.

2.2 Activities for community groups offer social and health benefit

AMES experience informs our view that group activities offer the best opportunity for improved social and mental/physical health outcomes, and are critical to the success of some thriving older communities members we are work with. Commonly, such groups are formed on a cultural/language basis and activities range from conversation groups over coffee to group yoga. In one particularly notable example, a Horn of Africa community group for older people has reinvigorated engagement with traditional art, storytelling and culture. These important aspects of culture can then be passed on to youth, giving meaning to people's lives at all ages.

2.3 Learning from different cultures

Following this, we hope the Committee will consider how it can learn from the successful experiences of organised, thriving older migrant and refugee communities in Victoria. As an organisation, AMES applies a strengths-based approach to our service delivery, and we also advocate for this approach at the structural scale – asking the Government to consider whether the lessons from communities in which older people are safe, happy, and empowered are being acknowledged.

Importantly, we hope the Committee will consider the challenges present here alongside the example of migrant and refugee communities in which older people are leaders and role models, integral in the lives of people of all ages. This may include applying a strengths-based rather than a deficit approach to improving the adequacy of services for older migrants and refugees living in Victoria.