

FINAL TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Support for Older Victorians from Migrant and Refugee Backgrounds

Melbourne—Friday, 18 February 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

WITNESS *(via videoconference)*

Ms Nicola Young, Acting Deputy Secretary, Fairer Victoria, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon. I declare open the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into Support for Older Victorians from Migrant and Refugee Backgrounds.

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting. I pay my respects to their elders past and present and the Aboriginal elders of other communities who may be here today.

I welcome Nicola Young, Acting Deputy Secretary, Fairer Victoria, from the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. I also acknowledge my colleagues participating today: Christine Couzens, the Member for Geelong; Neil Angus, the Member for Forest Hill; and Meng Heang Tak, the Member for Clarinda.

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I now invite you to proceed with a brief opening statement to the committee, which will be followed by questions from the members. Thank you.

Ms YOUNG: Thank you, committee Chair. Good afternoon, and thank you for this opportunity to provide information for the inquiry into the supports for older Victorians from culturally diverse backgrounds. I also would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands on which we are meeting and pay my respects to their elders past and present. I am coming to you from Wurundjeri country, and I pay my respects to their elders.

I am here to talk to you and answer questions about programs funded by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, particularly through the Fairer Victoria division, which includes Multicultural Affairs and Senior Victorians as well as Carers, Veterans, Equality, the Office for Women and Prevention of Family Violence. I am going to talk to you today about programs that are led by DFFH to support, celebrate and recognise older Victorians from culturally diverse backgrounds and also some of the initiatives that we are delivering to respond to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. I recognise that you might have questions pertaining to activity from other Victorian government departments, and where possible I will endeavour to answer those questions, but where they are outside of my remit or I feel that I cannot speak authoritatively I will seek to take a question on notice.

I will just do a little bit of an overview, particularly focusing on a bit of a portfolio overview and focusing on the COVID-19 context. As the committee would be aware, the COVID-19 pandemic has seen Victoria's multicultural communities, as with all Victorians, facing complex and unprecedented challenges. Older Victorians from multicultural communities have faced additional challenges, and through the multicultural affairs portfolio the department has delivered dedicated support for multicultural communities as they have responded to and recovered from the ongoing effects of the pandemic.

One of the major initiatives supporting multicultural communities was the establishment in August 2020 by the Victorian Government of the CALD Communities Taskforce, which was established to address the additional impacts CALD communities were experiencing during the pandemic. That Taskforce includes senior membership from most Victorian government departments as well as the Victorian Multicultural Commission, really to ensure that its work was informed by the needs and experiences of communities on the ground.

Since its establishment the Taskforce has been a key conduit for support and in-language communications between the department and community organisations and groups for older Victorians from multicultural backgrounds. The Taskforce has also provided crucial advice and guidance to government, which has allowed

the department to provide better practical, targeted and culturally appropriate support. And it has really been central in the department's efforts to address access and communication barriers and keep timely and accurate information flowing during the pandemic.

Some of the initiatives that we have provided during the pandemic to support multicultural seniors include, for example, the Multicultural Seniors Support Program that is being delivered through the Multicultural Affairs portfolio. This was a 2021–22 state budget commitment which allocated \$8 million over four years. This program opened on 21 October, and it provides grants of \$2,000 per organisation to more than 900 multicultural seniors groups each year over four years for direct support to their members and communities. Funding is targeted to multicultural seniors groups, and their primary focus is about supporting seniors from CALD and religiously diverse backgrounds. I would be happy to share further detail on the types of activities which these groups provide with the grant funding.

This support program—the Multicultural Seniors Support Program—really builds on lessons learned from the 2020–21 coronavirus support for multicultural seniors grant program (Coronavirus Support for Multicultural Seniors Program). This program also provided grants of up to \$2,000 per seniors group to really directly support members during the pandemic. Grants were used to support critical activities that were really targeted to keeping members safe, healthy and connected during extended periods of lockdown—for instance, the translation and distribution of accurate health information and information about changing restrictions; printing and postage of hard-copy resources, because we know a lot of seniors groups prefer to engage not online; financial assistance for the purchase of PPE, hand sanitiser and sewing machines to make re-usable masks, as well as running costs for groups like utilities and admin costs; minor office equipment, like laptops, printers and mobile phones; volunteer support, enabling our volunteers to provide care packages and pick up medicines and scripts for seniors who are unable to leave home; and also social matching initiatives to really try and decrease isolation and provide regular culturally appropriate check-ins for isolated members. As we are all aware, the COVID-19 restrictions really changed the way Victorians interacted, and many older Victorians were required to make a rapid digital shift to remain connected with community and culture, so the Coronavirus Support for Multicultural Seniors Program also focused on internet accessibility, digital literacy and access to computers as well as one of the key components of the program.

More recently other supports provided related to the pandemic are focusing on and supporting the Department of Health's roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccination program. In October 2021, the Government announced the \$21.6 million partnering with priority communities vaccination initiative, which comprises a range of initiatives to target and support a range of priority communities, including older migrants and refugees, to support these groups to access vaccination services. Initiatives to support vaccination have really sought to support older people to receive information in their own language and from organisations with trusted relationships and reach into these communities. This included funding for a local community access grants initiative, which is a \$2 million grants program, and that was about supporting community organisations and neighbourhood houses to deliver activities such as tackling vaccine misinformation and hesitancy and improving the ability of priority cohorts to access and use the technology they needed.

Funding for this program is also being used with a range of supports; for instance, safe transport to and from vaccination services as well as access to language services and respite care. Other key elements of the package include targeted support for older migrants and refugees, including funding the extension of the Department of Health's program for refugee monitoring and education. That is supporting five organisations to deliver tailored, culturally sensitive COVID-19 vaccination services for people seeking asylum and other at-risk temporary migrants. We also have the COVID-19 vaccinations women's health engagement program, which is about addressing vaccine literacy, hesitancy and service navigation for CALD women, including older women across Victoria.

One of the big issues around the pandemic has been around communication. We know that communication barriers have been a particular challenge for older Victorians from CALD communities, and that is why a significant investment has been made to create accessible resources during the pandemic so as many people as possible can have access to clear and accurate in-language information in a format that they can engage with. Since August 2020, the Government has allocated \$8.5 million to developing tailored and accessible communications for multicultural communities. For example, in 2021 the multicultural media sector received \$3 million to support more than 100 small multicultural media organisations, with funding for operating costs, equipment or training. It is really about ensuring that these crucial communication channels remain open.

We also know that many older CALD community members receive their news and information via the multicultural media sector and that audio is a key preference for this group. The Victorian Government established a partnership with the National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters' Council, and that was about operating a regular multilingual new service. That service was established in September 2020 and it now delivers communication in 19 languages, broadcasting across 15 community radio stations, four regional radio stations and online channels, and content is distributed to community radio stations and online outlets, reaching approximately 350,000 people per week. This is a really important service and talks about providing advice and information about changes to restrictions, updates on vaccination advice and supports that are available to communities. There have also been special bulletins, which is really about trying to communicate some of those more in-depth and complex topics, such as 'How do I attain proof of my vaccination and vaccine safety?'. We have also thought about the format of how we provide information, so visual content such as posters and animations have also been developed and dedicated resources on issues such as 'How do I use a QR code?' and 'How do I check in?'. We have worked on those resources with community and faith leaders to create those videos and share that information.

We also commissioned some research which found that older Victorians from multicultural backgrounds are big users of WhatsApp, so a WhatsApp group of community leaders was created across the state in 2020, and that has been really critical to helping disseminate coronavirus and health-related information through community leaders, who then distribute it to their communities in a timely manner. That group has been really active through the pandemic and is still active, and it has really helped build that connection with community.

Picking up the theme of video and audio content, the Office for Senior Victorians has worked with the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria and local community leaders to create a series of video and audio recordings and written materials in language. These videos and materials complement existing resources to really target the needs of senior Victorians during the pandemic. I think we have six videos that have been finalised and are available on the ECCV website and on Seniors Online.

More broadly, through the Seniors Portfolio we have really recognised the importance of providing opportunities and supports to keep older Victorians connected in our community despite the pandemic. So we have the longstanding Victorian seniors card program, which makes it easier and more affordable for seniors to get out and about in the community or keep active and stay connected, and that is about offering a range of discount services and public transport concessions. Tailored information for seniors from emerging communities on how to apply for the card has been created and distributed within those communities. Every year we also have the Victorian Seniors Festival, and that provides opportunities for seniors to participate in new and diverse activities. In 2021 the festival featured a range of online and local events, including performances from culturally diverse entertainers and musicians.

In order to support that, in both 2020 and 2021 additional funding of \$400,000 per year was provided to really pivot the festival to an online and radio format, so that seniors that were isolating at home and residents of aged-care facilities could participate in festival entertainment, including in a range of multicultural performances. A real highlight of the festival is the Victorian Senior of the Year Awards. The 2021 Awards celebrated the community contributions of older Victorians, including seniors from diverse backgrounds, and the Promotion of Multiculturalism Award recognises an individual for their significant contribution to promoting the benefits of cultural diversity in their local community or in their broader community. So thank you for this opportunity to provide these opening comments. I will now hand back to you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Nicola, for that comprehensive submission. I have got Neil's hand up. Thank you, Neil, and then to Chris.

Mr ANGUS: Thank you very much, Chair. And thank you, Nicola, for both your written submission and of course your evidence today. You went through quite a range of different programs, which are most interesting. I was wondering if you could provide the committee with a list of the total spend and all the different programs and so on that you have cited today and other ones that might be available that you might have spent, please.

Ms YOUNG: Thank you, committee member, for that question. I have a lot of information in front of me, but unfortunately I have not aggregated up the investment. So if you do not mind, I would like to take that on notice, and I am absolutely happy to provide that information.

Mr ANGUS: That would be great, thanks. Just further to that then, in terms of the grant funding process, can you just explain a bit more to me, please, and to the committee how that works and who makes the decisions on where the money goes and that sort of thing for this wide range of multicultural grants.

Ms YOUNG: Yes, happy to do so. Fairer Victoria was in DPC and MOGED over into the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. At this point in time still, as part of the machinery-of-government change, we are using the DPC grants management framework, which governs our grants processes. So under that framework we run a process where under each program we develop up guidance and program guidelines, and they articulate the eligibility of who is eligible and what a grant would be provided for. We receive the briefing approval from the minister to then put out the grant program, and then we advertise the grant program.

Often for the Multicultural Affairs portfolio we are aware that there are barriers for groups to access that program—language barriers. It might be volunteer-run organisations, and certainly with our seniors groups they are run by volunteers who may or may not have differing levels of digital literacy. When we open a grant program we will often provide workshops and a way for the department to be contacted to answer questions and to support organisations to put in their applications. So we will have a grant process—have that open. When it closes then we run an assessment process and assess against eligibility criteria, and that is run by the department. With Multicultural Affairs grants in particular we also include the Victorian Multicultural Commission. We assess all applications against the eligibility criteria and rate and score and then develop recommendations for those. Then we brief the Minister, and the Minister determines the grant recipients.

Mr ANGUS: Okay, thanks. It was interesting: one of your programs had \$2,000 for 900 groups, I think you said, so it was like that had already been predetermined. I just was not sure. Is it still on merit—

Ms YOUNG: Yes, absolutely.

Mr ANGUS: or do you just give it to everyone on the list or what happens?

Ms YOUNG: We provide direct funding offers for those organisations that have been funded previously, and they still need to provide guidance and provide advice that they still exist and that they are still working as an organisation. Then we get that paperwork back and then we provide that grant. But for new organisations we put them through the whole process to ensure that they are eligible and that they meet the criteria.

Mr ANGUS: Okay. Thank you. Just one final question from me in relation to the September 2022 multicultural news initiative that you referred to—and you said that that goes out in 19 languages, on 15 channels and so on—I must have missed how much that was in total in the budget, and who determines the content? Is it all just material from the government or is it actually external news, or who makes those decisions?

Ms YOUNG: In terms of communications, the figure I quoted overall: since August 2020 we have provided \$8.5 million for a full amount of comms activity. In terms of the amount that has been provided to the National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters' Council, I do not have the exact amount in front of me, but I can take that on notice if you would like.

Mr ANGUS: Yes, please.

Ms YOUNG: In terms of the content that is provided, it is the Victorian government coronavirus content, so it is the same content that is approved through the channels that we have—the channels for the official information that goes up on the coronavirus website or in other official Victorian government channels. So it is Victorian government information that has been through those channels.

Mr ANGUS: Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: I move on to Chris.

Ms COUZENS: Thanks, Nicola, for that comprehensive presentation. We appreciate your time today and we thank you for your work too. It has been a pretty challenging couple of years and obviously required a lot of work on your part, so thank you. What is your experience regarding communications with older multicultural communities in regional and rural Victoria compared to metro Melbourne? If you have identified differences, what are they and how do you think we can deal with those going forward?

Ms YOUNG: I would not say that we have necessarily identified differences. I think the barriers around communication that affect older multicultural Victorians in metropolitan regions are pretty similar to those in regional areas. So there are language barriers and digital literacy barriers, and they might not access news through mainstream media and would not necessarily access information through the formats that certainly government information might be provided in. I think in terms of what we then do about it one of the things that we found has been really helpful is working really closely with community leaders. Certainly in regional areas one of the initiatives that we did early on in the pandemic through the Priority Response for Multicultural Communities grants program was to fund nine ethnic councils to do work in rural and regional areas to support multicultural communities in those areas.

In terms of what we then do about it, I think it is about maintaining those really close local engagements, working with those communities right across the state and working with community leaders right across the state, utilising, as I said, WhatsApp and other formats and channels other than mainstream to reach communities. It is also about having a wide range of in-language collateral, if you like, and using alternative formats such as those audio-visual explainers, videos and audio.

Ms COUZENS: Several stakeholders have already highlighted the inadequacy of data collection. Do you have any thoughts on how the systematic collection of data could be improved?

Ms YOUNG: Yes. I think data collection is something that, you know, we acknowledge is not systematic and is not centralised at this point in time. Certainly there are a range of statewide data collections; for instance, there is the Victorian Population Health Survey and other statewide data collections such as that. And I think there is probably an opportunity to look within those broad existing surveys and collections to make sure that we are collecting that intersectional data, so not just multicultural but age and the intersection, thinking about disability and thinking about LGBTIQ+, enabling us to really benefit and understand at that diversity-within-diversity level using some of those bigger, broader, already existing data collections. We run a lot of programs and we evaluate those programs at different times, and I think there is probably an opportunity to think about how we can bring together the learnings from those evaluations to help us understand how we can better target and tailor services, for instance, for this cohort and for others.

Ms COUZENS: And just in terms of the COVID pandemic, how did you actually target particularly older multicultural people in the community? How did you actually target them, or did you just work through those different organisations?

Ms YOUNG: As I mentioned in the opening statement, one was through that Coronavirus Support for Multicultural Seniors program, and that was really about getting quite local. When you are reaching 900 organisations you are getting well into community. Another program under the CALD Communities Taskforce was the Priority Response to Multicultural Communities program. That was about supporting local community organisations to provide culturally appropriate relief and support for community, and again it was through getting to that very local level. And lastly, we also funded local partnerships, initially with six LGAs, and it has now expanded to 12. These are partnerships between local councils and local community organisations, also enabling the employment of bicultural workers. Through these bicultural workers they were able to work at that really local community level to identify needs and provide supports such as coordinating emergency relief, providing health information, addressing vaccine hesitancy and supporting access to vaccination. So really again it is about those local partnerships with community organisations, thinking about using them where we can and thinking more about those bicultural workers as well to create that connection between your more mainstream services and community.

Ms COUZENS: Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Heang, did you have a question?

Mr TAK: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Nicola. Perhaps my question is a continuation from Christine's questions in terms of reaching out to the multicultural seniors community. Nicola, would you consider, apart from what apps have been created, multicultural radio—for example, 3ZZZ or SBS—because I know that SBS alone would have access to 68 different languages, the established and the emerging ones, so I would think that these are big channels in terms of reaching out.

Ms YOUNG: Yes, so beyond our National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters Council—just can I clarify the question, whether we should be going beyond that partnership?

Mr TAK: Yes, that is right. Because it is all about receiving and being informed in the multicultural community, and I thought that SBS radio—and not only limited to SBS or 3ZZZ; there are other mediums that can pass information to newly emerging and also the established communities. So my question would be: would the department consider those mediums as a direct communication?

Ms YOUNG: Yes. Absolutely. I have not talked about it today, but a couple of other initiatives during the pandemic were about broadening those communication channels. So early on in the pandemic support was provided to multicultural media organisations through the multicultural media program, which was really about supporting operational costs and ensuring that those organisations could continue to provide news and support to communities through the pandemic, particularly at a time when the operations were impacted. The Government has also funded the multicultural communities communication program. We call it MCOP, and I am sorry the name has slipped my memory—Multicultural Communities Outreach Program, thank you. That program is about providing small grants to not just media but also community organisations and community leaders and people and supporting them to develop content, enabling them, skilling them up and supporting them with, ‘How do I post things on TikTok?’. It might be providing small amounts to enable them to purchase equipment et cetera. So we are really getting beyond those government platforms and really going into community and asking community to provide that kind of messaging. So we are absolutely open to broadening our channels and going through those channels that are trusted and that people listen to and will engage with.

The CHAIR: Thank you, and Neil had his hand up again. Thank you, Neil.

Mr ANGUS: Yes. Thanks very much, Chair. Given the last couple of extraordinarily difficult years, Nicola, what lessons has the Victorian government learned from COVID, from the pandemic, in terms of engaging with culturally diverse older people, and how are those lessons going to be applied in the future?

Ms YOUNG: Thank you. It is a really excellent question and one that we have been thinking about a lot. And similar to what I have talked about today, really we have learned that we need to be absolutely responsive to the language needs of CALD communities. That is the first thing if we are going to effectively engage. We have also learned that CALD communities might not access news through mainstream media, and that is why we have had to diversify and go to ethnic media and go to trusted, in-person sources and leaders. And we have also learned that people are not only not using mainstream media but they might be getting information direct from country of origin, and that can be a source of misinformation, and it is important for us to think about how we can counter that.

We have also learned that particularly for older CALD Victorians, they might have limited or no digital literacy, so we really need to ensure that our health messaging is delivered in a range of formats, and that includes audio, as I have discussed.

One of the other key messages is that we need to work really closely and in partnership with community and with community leaders. For instance, that is why grants were provided to ethnic councils across Victoria: to support CALD seniors clubs, including in rural and regional areas, and really, moving forward we need to maintain that engagement. We need to work closely with community leaders. Community leaders are the ones who are maintaining that critical network on the ground. We need to work locally as well—thinking about those local partnerships and thinking about those local community orgs as well.

Those are some of the lessons that we have learned, and that is what we are really thinking about in our program design going forward.

Mr ANGUS: Right. Thank you. And one final question from me: just in relation to elder abuse, how does the Victorian government plan on implementing the *Elder Abuse Community Action Plan for Victoria* that was developed some time ago?

Ms YOUNG: Yes. Apologies. That Action Plan was launched in 2018 and included clarifying the relationship between family violence and elder abuse and really raising community awareness, and that we need to look at increasing ways to help older people disclose elder abuse without fear as well as that we need to provide education and training. Of those recommendations, some had been or are in the process of being

addressed at the point that that report was actioned. For instance, elder abuse is now recognised as a form of family violence. We have also had the release of the Multi-agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework—the MARAM—and that is about ensuring services are effectively identifying, assessing and managing family violence risk. And that is for services right across the service spectrum.

There has also been awareness raising. There have been community resources and professional development resources developed, and the government is also towards the final stages of completing a trial of an integrated model of care for responding to suspected elder abuse. As part of that model, there has been the establishment of the elder abuse prevention networks as well as some supports for older people to obtain independent advice regarding financial and other arrangements as well—for instance, through Financial Counselling Victoria or State Trustees.

Mr ANGUS: Great. Thank you. Does the government keep statistics around that?

Ms YOUNG: Around elder abuse?

Mr ANGUS: Yes, around the incidence of it.

Ms YOUNG: My understanding is that that data is kept through Victoria Police, through the crime stats. But I do not have that. It is not kept through DFFH.

Mr ANGUS: That is if it is reported.

Ms YOUNG: That is right.

Mr ANGUS: Okay. Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

Ms YOUNG: No worries.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I think we have come to the point where we need to conclude. Can I thank Nicola on behalf of the committee. Thank you so much for being here and for your comprehensive submission and your evidence today. I echo the sentiments of my colleague Christine Couzens: it has been a pretty challenging last two years, so thank you to you and your team for all the work that you have been doing. We truly appreciate it.

Ms YOUNG: Thank you, committee Chair. Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Have a good day.

Committee adjourned.