

AMSSA's submission to the Inquiry into the Victorian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

August 2020

About AMSSA

The Australian Muslim Social Services Agency (AMSSA) is a not for profit community organization located in North Melbourne. AMSSA's vision is to provide community members with a supportive and welcoming environment to connect and empower Muslim Australians.

To give you a brief background AMSSA or The Australian Muslim Social Services Agency (AMSSA), we are a not for profit community organization located in North Melbourne. AMSSA's vision is to provide community members with a supportive and welcoming environment to connect and empower Muslim Australians. For over 20 years, AMSSA has been working to advocate and support people from migrant backgrounds by delivering services and programs. AMSSA also works to promote social cohesion and harmony within the communities located in Melbourne's inner suburbs.

AMSSA Youth Connect (AYC) is an Inclusive sub group of AMSSA made up of young people and it offers youth safe spaces and platforms to explore ideas, concepts and creative endeavors to help navigate the sometimes-complex issues they face in the ever-changing environment that we live in.

AMSSA's COVID-19 Response

During the recent months of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Victoria, AMSSA has worked very hard in making sure community members and residents living in the nine towers were supported through emergency relief programs and played a major role in advocating for community members through government engagement programs. The hard lockdowns imposed on the public housing towers intensified issues that already existed within the community before the COVID19 pandemic.

About 3000 residents and visitors were restricted to their homes during the hard lockdown of the nine public housing towers located in North Melbourne, Flemington, and Kensington.

Due to the immediate shut down of the public housing estates, residents have voiced their concerns regarding their health and safety to members of the community.

The AMSSA Centre was able to open its doors for donations of culturally appropriate foods, medication and other essential supplies. Along with the help of other organisations including Trades Hall, Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV), Human Appeal, The Venny, and many more, we were able to deliver over 5000 generic food and essential packages to residents over the 5-day lockdown period. We received a vast amount of donations from community members, businesses, and other organisations and we are deeply grateful with all of the support. There was an overwhelming amount of donations received by the community. Over 200 volunteers were involved in the Emergency Relief Program and helped with the sorting, packing and delivering of the packages.

Some residents need special dietary requirements due to health or religious reasons and because of this, tenants were able to make special orders by contacting the special order hotline which allowed AMSSA volunteers to deliver custom packages of food, medication and other essential supplies. Over 3000 special orders were prepared and delivered to families since the lockdown of the nine towers. We have also supported over 50 families from New Zealand who are experiencing extreme hardship with limited or no access to financial support.

The Emergency Relief Program at AMSSA continues to provide emergency food and other essential items to individuals that are still self-isolating due COVID-19. We provide special order services across metropolitan Melbourne and have supported over 2000 families through our special orders services.

With the help of volunteers and community members, AMSSA was able to provide residents with emergency essential items as well as support through different communication channels. Surveys and feedback forms, zoom meetings with residents and regular social media updates are some of the ways we have connected with residents to ensure the needs of the community are met. And with that we were able to sit in on Emergency Management Meetings with the DHHS, Victoria Police and other supporting bodies to play a role in

advocating for the residents by voicing their concerns. Through these meeting we were also able to resolve issues raised by the tenants, in particular the provision of hand sanitizers, specific medication, and the use of shared spaces such as the laundry during the lockdown period.

The impacts of the hard lockdowns are expected to have an immediate, short and long term effect on community members and residents of the nine towers. The emergency relief program has provided residents with assistance and support with direct needs. Due to the many residents coming from a migrant background as well as experiencing traumatic life events, the short and long term effects might have a stronger impact on the mental health of individual residents.

Moving Forward, we plan on providing support to both residents that have endured the hard lockdown and other members of the community through a recovery phase. With the support of DHHS and other organisations, we will be implementing systems to ensure the residents are supported with their mental wellbeing.

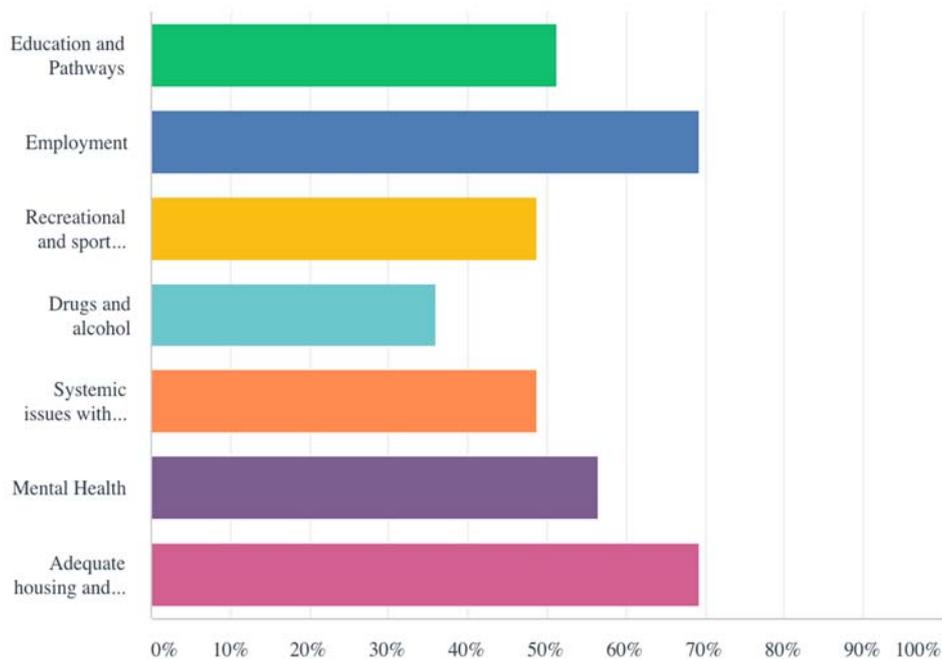
Key Issues

As an organisation that has been engaging with the community for a very long time, we recognise some reoccurring themes, that have previously existed, and therefore are being exacerbated by Covid-19. The key themes we have recognised are a lack of;

- Employment opportunities
- Education and pathways that lead to employment opportunities
- Adequate housing and overcrowding
- Drugs and alcohol Support
- Mental Health Education and Support
- Acknowledgement of systematic issues with police
- Recreational sports and programs

Identifying these key issues allowed us to conduct both a qualitative and quantitative form of research. We conducted an online survey with 253 participants, 45% male and 55% female, Ages ranging from 18 to 64 years old. We noted that around 47% of the participants were aged between 18 and 24 and that 63% of the participants had lived there for more than 15 years. This data suggests that many of the young adults have been residents for majority of their lives.

FIGURE 1: COVID-19 ISSUES EXPERIENCED BEFORE COVID-19



In Figure 1, the numbers demonstrate that all the issues have impacted almost all the participants in this research, Adequate housing and employment being the most prominent. Through interviews and conversations with residents and personal anecdotes submitted by the participants, there has been a lot of concern in regards overcrowding. This is an issue that existed before Covid-19 but became more noticeable afterwards. When one of the participants was asked if Covid-19 intensified their experience in overcrowding, they responded “Yes since we have to be around each other ALL the time now - it’s hard to work and study with so many people and no space for yourself”. This is an experience that is not uncommon, One of the participants who was a mother stated that “Not being able to work because the kids are home doing remote learning. Kids not able to practice their sport

activities. Living in three bedrooms with 6 people is really hard specially with the kids studies". Many mothers are struggling to cope and meet every child's needs and young people struggle to focus on school and work. Employment is another area of high concern; this is also an issue that may be a repercussion on the lack of education and pathways.

Although Mental health is also recognised as an issue, the details of how it is addressed needs to be further explored. Many of the residents come from a cultural background where mental health is not viewed to be 'real'. Therefore, it is important to thoroughly and strategically engage the community to better understand what mental health is and enable easy and positive accessing such supports i.e. Employing mental health workers from the community to better educate the members as they understand the cultural backgrounds of the people accessing the services on a more personal level. Drugs and alcohol is another taboo issue that many families face alone without much professional supports. There is a stigma that members of the community are afraid of, if they access such treatment.

Over policing is a recognised issue in those living in these residential areas. As seen in the graph (Figure 1), almost 50% of the participants feel like the negative experiences that they have had with police are systemic. A power imbalance that has been there for a long period of time. One young person stated "Over policing is such a problem. Being pulled over and searched without reason just for existing", another participant said "I've had issues with the police and law enforcement officers as I feel I'm always targeted". Although it is commonly recognised that this is a disadvantaged community, statutory organisations such as Victoria Police definitely need to become aware of this issue and work on ways to create more positive experiences with the community to counteract the trauma's inflicted.

Lastly, the young people in the community reported the need for sports and recreational programs. "There aren't any programs targeting the youth (primary- secondary). This essentially and can deter negative behaviours and instil a sense belonging in the community. Recreational and sport programs should be targeted to support their physical and mental health. I believe through these programs many children can find another outlet to spend their time and energy steering them away from possibly negative behaviour", stated one of

the young participants living in the towers. This is a statement that exceptionally describes the perspectives of many of the residents, both parents and children.

Overall, these are the key themes we have uncovered through our research on the residents and community members. All the issues are recognised to have already existed before Covid-19 and only had gotten worse after the pandemic. Unfortunately, this is a community that has been neglected and disadvantaged for a long period of time. Hopefully this piece will support other organisations in recognising these issues, in order to achieve a more positive outcome for the future.