

Communities and agencies working together: the Multicultural Emergency Management Partnership

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The Multicultural Emergency Management Partnership model recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia and indigenous peoples around the world have always lived and coped with crises that we can learn from. In Australia, it is recognised that many emergency management and resilience approaches have not always best served the diversity of the cultures, languages and customs in our communities. As a result, communities can experience negative consequences.

It is well documented that multicultural communities remain disproportionately affected during emergencies and disasters. For example, in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic, people born overseas were twice as likely to die from the disease. In addition, people born in non-English speaking countries had even higher death rates.¹

Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows that 50% of people in Australia were born overseas or had a parent born overseas. Australian Bureau of Statistics data related to cultural diversity shows that more than 5.5 million people spoke a language other than English at home. Such diversity within the country calls for effective diversity and inclusive approaches.

Cooperation and trust between communities and emergency management authorities is essential before, during and after emergencies. However, it can be extremely difficult to build trust during an emergency event, especially for communities that have had negative experiences of authority, including people who experienced this in their countries of origin or for those who are not (yet) fluent in English. Strengthening connections and trust between communities and emergency services

organisations is an ongoing process. This includes multicultural communities and the emergency management sector before, during and after emergencies to reduce the inequities faced by multicultural communities.²

The Victorian Multicultural Emergency Management Partnership (MEMP) is an award-winning initiative that bridges the gap between multicultural communities and the emergency management sector. MEMP was founded by the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) and the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) in 2020 to support communities during the pandemic. The MEMP brings together migrant and refugee community leaders with representatives of relevant emergency management organisations in Victoria.

Thuch Ajak, a South Sudanese community leader and MEMP Co-Chair said, 'What happens in emergencies is that multicultural communities look to their community leaders, religious ministers, or others who take responsibility in their communities.

'These are what we call "community connectors" and they are the first point of contact for the people belonging to the community.



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‘So having the community leaders at the table together with emergency services agencies makes it easier as they build the capacity of the community leaders to navigate the services.

‘This is why the MEMP is unique, because it is driven by the community and it's the community that opens up and identifies where the gaps are’, he said.

Better engagement between multicultural communities and the emergency management sector helps facilitate a greater understanding of each other's strengths, needs and priorities while also building relationships based on trust and respect.

As with all communities, people in multicultural communities have many skills and capacities that can be drawn on to better manage stressors and to cope with emergencies. The strengths of community members and leaders are often born of pre-arrival experiences of war and hardship and can include a capacity to cope under stress and adapt to change, strong leadership and community networks, the ability to mobilise their communities to take action, strong values around community responsibility and cross-cultural skills. However, a lack of awareness of local risks and hazards can be compounded by socio-economic disadvantage, language barriers, poor quality housing, pre-arrival experiences and cultural factors. These vulnerabilities are often magnified for people who arrived as refugees, those who are on temporary visas, people who are undocumented migrants or who arrived in the last 10 years.³

In many cases, community leaders and connectors are a key asset and driver of preparedness, response and recovery in migrant and refugee communities. Research by Wallace, Farmer and McCosker (2019)⁴ shows that community connectors enable the flow of information, resources and relationships across cultural, social and organisational boundaries and the role of multicultural connectors in keeping communities safe was clearly demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rita Seumanutafa-Palala, MEMP Co-Chair said, ‘There are so many insights and community-specific experiences that community leaders bring to MEMP.

‘When these experiences are shared and reciprocated with the emergency management sector, the result is an improved and nuanced way of working together; for and with multicultural communities.

‘I learnt so much about emergency management and preparedness through my COVID-19 response work.

‘Developing and implementing culturally appropriate community initiatives in order to help my Pacific Island communities get through the pandemic really opened my eyes to the sheer hopelessness and vulnerabilities that my communities face during a crisis.

‘My hope is that my community is given a chance to be prepared and better aware of why emergency preparedness is key to getting through a crisis as safely as possible.

‘My involvement in the MEMP is my opportunity to advocate for this’, she said.

The MEMP is an independent entity made up of members (see Table 1) that fosters sustainable and collaborative relationships between multicultural communities and the emergency management sector. It embraces diversity, builds inclusion in emergency management and supports better and equitable emergency management outcomes for multicultural communities. The MEMP's partnership model provides a framework for collaboration between the emergency management sector and multicultural leaders and connectors. With a vision for ‘safer, connected and resilient communities’, the model's objectives are to:

- provide greater cultural safety and cultural responsiveness for all who participate in and with emergency management organisations increase mutual understanding and trust between multicultural communities and emergency management organisations
- strengthen community resilience by enabling communities to prepare for, cope with and recover from the impacts of emergencies.

Many aspects of the MEMP have been designed to have community, not organisations, at the centre. Monthly online gatherings are run as open discussions rather than meetings.

The MEMP has strong support and interaction with multicultural communities and the emergency management sector across Victoria. Former Victorian Emergency Management Commissioner, Andrew Crisp AM APM, has supported the MEMP since its establishment and said, ‘The MEMP has facilitated 2-way knowledge sharing to increase the sector's capability and capacity to effectively engage with the diverse communities in Victoria and to improve outcomes from emergencies.

‘It is assisting the emergency management sector to better understand the strengths of community networks that can be drawn on and to improve community understanding of how to better prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies.

‘To put it simply, it's about emergency services and our communities genuinely listening and learning together about how to keep us safe’, he said.

Working together as peers, MEMP members focus on:

- building relationships and multiple channels of communication
- strengthening and equipping community leaders with knowledge about local emergency management processes and tools

Table 1: MEMP membership 2024.

Leaders and connectors representing multicultural communities and organisations	Representatives from emergency management organisations
Al-Emaan Muslim Women’s Group	Ambulance Victoria
Chinese Community Council of Australia (Vic)	Australian Red Cross
Ethic Communities Council of Albury/Wodonga	Country Fire Authority
Ethnic Council of Shepparton	Emergency Management Victoria
Hazara Community of Bendigo Association	Emergency Recovery Victoria
Kenyan community leader	Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria
Malayalee community leader	Fire Rescue Victoria
Multicultural community leader Geelong region	Life Saving Victoria
Pasefika community leader	Municipal Association of Victoria
Regional Victorians of Colour	Victoria Department of Health
Spectrum Multicultural Resource Centre	Victoria Police
United African Farm	Victorian Council of Churches Emergency Ministry
92 graduates of emergency management masterclasses	Victorian State Emergency Service

- engaging community leaders in local emergency management planning for relevant and tailored local approaches to emergencies
- developing simple, accurate and relevant information to disseminate in culturally safe and community-specific ways
- seeking opportunities and developing strategic alliances that build cultural safety and inclusion in emergency management organisations.

In early 2024, MEMP members gathered for a workshop and dinner to plan for the coming year. Priorities included:

- building stronger connections, relationships and trust at all levels
- building capacity for community leaders
- cultural safety/cultural education
- sharing community stories and experiences
- ‘invisible’ communities and emergency communications
- connecting with similar partnerships across Australia.

Ruth Harley, MEMP Co-Chair, said, ‘The MEMP underscores a statewide commitment to understanding and addressing the diverse needs of multicultural communities during emergencies.

‘Through a co-design approach, where the community and emergency management sector collaborate to deliver safety messages, we aim to develop accessible and culturally responsive resources and approaches.

‘This will increase mutual understanding and will also build trust between communities and the emergency management sector, reinforcing our shared responsibility to prepare for, cope with and recover from emergencies’, she said.

Endnotes

1. Jolyon Attwooll (6 July 2022) ‘Shocking’: Migrants more than twice as likely to die of COVID-19. NewsG website www1.racgp.org.au/news/gp/clinical/shocking-migrants-more-than-twice-as-likely-to-die.
2. Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria, Neighbourhood Collective Australia and Regional Victorians of Colour (2023) ‘Multicultural Communities Experience of the 2022 Victorian Floods 2023’. <https://eccv.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Multicultural-Communities-Experience-of-the-2022-Victorian-Floods.pdf>
3. ECCV and VCOSS (2022) Valuing strengths, building resilience Improving emergency management outcomes for multicultural communities in Victoria. Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria website. <https://eccv.org.au/valuing-strengths-building-resilience-joint-vccoss-eccv-report/>
4. Wallace C, Farmer J and McCusker A (2019) ‘Boundary spanning practices of community connectors for engaging ‘hardly reached’ people in health services’, *Social Science & Medicine*, 232, July 2019:366–373. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2019.05.034>