

**Submission
No 32**

**INQUIRY INTO SUPPORT FOR OLDER VICTORIANS FROM MIGRANT
AND REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS**

Organisation: United Spanish Latin American Welfare Centre

Date Received: 30 November 2021



UNITED-SPANISH LATIN AMERICAN WELFARE CENTRE INC

SUBMISSION

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO SUPPORT OF OLDER VICTORIANS FROM MIGRANT AND REFUGEE COMMUNITIES

30 Nov 2021

Melbourne, Victoria.

FRAMEWORK OF COMMUNITY CONSULTATION:

Once the knowledge of the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry was known, United – Spanish Latin American Welfare Centre Inc entered into discussions with community organizations and individuals. It was decided that apart from its years of community support experiences in general and aged-care support in particular, that at this point it was necessary for UNITED to consult the community directly, document this process and present it to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Support of Older Victorians from Migrant and Refugee Communities.

The Consultation Process:

Feedback and input was obtained from UNITED's Spanish-speaking Social Support Groups (SSG), community elders, professionals from all aspects of community support, community leaders, and other interested contributors. A series of 6 consultation sessions were held.

Total Number of participants in Consultation: 50

Acknowledgements to UNITED's Committee of Management (CoM):

Cecilia Hernandez (President)

Alicia Noia (Treasurer)

Lillian Campos (Secretary)

John Barriga (Executive Member)

Viktor Lidstrom (Executive Member)

Acknowledgements to the following individuals representing community organisations who have contributed to the development of this submission:

Rafaela Lopez OAM (UNITED's Community Advisor)

Trini Abascal (Latin Stories Australia)

Karina Ojeda (Mosaik Experiences)

Valeska Zuniga Chondo (Wyndham Comm Educ Centre)

Patricia Velazquez (Salvadorean community representative)

Margarita Ros (President - Spanish Club of Victoria)

Yasna Tejo (President- Chilean Club of Victoria Inc)

Rosita Flores (Salvadorean community representative)

UNITED SSG participants (total of 30)

About UNITED:

UNITED is well placed to understand the needs of the Spanish speaking community due to our strong working relationships with clients, carers and families, support workers and relevant stakeholders, including Ethnic Communities Council of Vic, Spanish-speaking (SS) community leaders, SS social groups, clubs, SS agencies such as Ventana Hispana Community Services, SS faith groups, etc. We have a strong social media presence and UNITED's CoM members regularly network with SS community leaders, agencies, and SS media.

The current programs offered by United are provided for the benefit of older members of the Spanish and Latin American Communities of Victoria, who are over 65 years old, and most with the status of pensioners (approx. over 90 % of clients are pensioners), and who for the most part possess either no English or have very little English knowledge. It is also well documented that a great proportion of frail aged people experiencing dementia tend to revert-back to their first language as the condition progresses (we have more than of 20 clients with dementia and/or Alzheimer's at present).

Many of UNITED's clients have experienced disadvantage as a result of being from minority backgrounds, including persistent cultural and language barriers to accessing services, limited access to preventative and early intervention services throughout their lives, complicated migration experiences and settlement issues that were not resolved, limited access to education and/or career opportunities in the host country (a great majority having worked in menial and low skilled work), all resulting in decreased well-being and decreased life opportunities.

UNITED's current main beneficiaries include the ageing population of Spanish speaking individuals that arrived in the 1960s until the early 1990s. Many of these individuals have experienced complicated experiences of migration and settlement, some leaving oppressive political regimes and/or escaping civil war, hence presenting with histories of trauma and dislocation, which on many occasions, manifests in mental health issues not only for our beneficiaries but also for their children (who are now the carers of such individuals). We have found that our support services, in an ancillary manner, also assist such carers in their very demanding caring roles.

About the Spanish Speaking Community of Victoria:

The Spanish-speaking communities of Victoria include migrants and refugees from Spain and Spanish-speaking Latin American countries. These communities arrived in Australia from the early 1960s to the early 1990s and the main groups during that period were from Spain, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Colombia, Peru, and El Salvador. There have been more recent arrivals from Spanish-speaking countries, with the majority having arrived in the past decade, and for the most, originally as International Students.

According to the 2016 Australian Census, there were a total of 35,494 Spanish-speaking Victorians, the vast majority living in Melbourne's Western and South/Eastern suburbs as well as Geelong. The 2016 Census also documents the fast ageing of the Spanish-speaking communities, in fact these communities are ageing at a faster rate than the median Victorian. For example, whilst the median age for Victorians is 37 years old (y.o) for the larger groups of Spanish-speakers, who arrived during the 1960s and 1990s, the ages are considerably older as documented and described by the 2016 Census:

Uruguayan-born: Reflects a "mature to ageing profile" – the median age was: 56

Spain-born: Reflects a “mature to ageing profile – the median age was: 54 y.o.

Chile-born: Reflect a “mature to ageing profile – the median age was: 50 y.o

Argentina-born: - Reflects a “mature to ageing profile” – the median age was: 48 y.o.

El Salvador-born: - Reflects a “mature age profile” – the median age was: 46 y.o.

The ageing of the Spanish-speaking communities is reflected by their growing demand for aged care support services, which United has been experiencing in the past 10 years, and the demand continues.

UNITED commissioned Rafaela Lopez (OAM) to undertake a research project into The Residential and Aged Care Support Needs of Spanish-speaking Older Victorians. The soon to be published report documents the experiences and needs of older Victorians from Spanish-speaking backgrounds, and their expressed needs in terms of aged care services.

The report’s major findings indicate that Older Spanish-speaking Victorians exhibit:

- Lack of comprehensive knowledge of all aspects of MyAgedCare.
- Under-utilization of aged care support services.
- Low levels of English language fluency of a significant number of Spanish-speaking Victorians over the age of 65.
- Experiences of social isolation and depression when living alone.
- Loss of the ability to speak English when affected by conditions such as Dementia and Alzheimer’s or simply the ageing process.
- High levels of social isolation when residing in a mainstream and/or multicultural residential facilities.
- An urgent and growing need for a dedicated Spanish-speaking Residential Facility.
 - Low levels of knowledge and access to digital technology

UNITED’S SUBMISSION:

Adequacy of services for Older Victorians from Migrant and Refugee backgrounds:

The need for a dedicated culturally and linguistically appropriate Residential Aged Care Facility (RACF):

- Spanish speaking seniors in mainstream RACFs tend to experience poor health outcomes, poor mental health (depression, anxiety, suicidality, etc.), social isolation, poor prognosis of any physical and psychological conditions, etc.
- Spanish speaking nurses and personal care workers (who participated in this consultation) who have worked in mainstream RACFs have witnessed the “**suffering**” (own words) and extreme isolation experienced by Spanish speaking seniors in such settings, having no-one that speaks their language meant they became “invisible”
- Many seniors have a deep fear of going into a nursing home due to above issues

- Workforce issues within RACFs (lack of workers) means little to no time is given to address residents' emotional and social needs
- Need for bilingual staff in RACFs/workplace shortages
- Research conducted by anthropologist Rafaela Lopez in residential facilities highlights these gaps in service provision
- Suggestion to have a Spanish speaking "wing" at an established RACFs to cater for the Spanish speaking communities
- Ideal solution – the establishment of a Residential Facility catering for Spanish-speaking older people, similar to the existing Residential Gardens For Spanish-speaking Frail Aged, which has been operating at Rooty Hill, New South Wales, very successfully for more than two decades.

Aged care and community services, including recreational and educational institutions are not accessible:

- Seniors from the Spanish speaking community tend to underutilize mainstream services due to lack of knowledge of service systems, and due to language barriers
- Services such as Carer Gateway, Carers Victoria, University of the Third Age, and other similar services are under-utilised by this community
- The burden of being a carer of CALD background is further exacerbated due to lack of knowledge of service systems
- Importance of creating a Spanish speaking Carer Support Group, possibly follow a Peer Support Model, where carers can support and learn from each other.
- Limited use of interpreters across systems – Increasing difficult to access when needed
- Lack of affordable and accessible transport
- Lack of place-based or local services
- Need for bi-lingual workers at all levels of society/or if not available, need to increase use of interpreters

Importance of culturally and linguistically appropriate services, support groups/meeting spaces/etc:

- Assumption by policymakers/decision makers that the Spanish speaking community has been here long enough, and they have "settled", therefore don't need linguistically appropriate services/translated materials. This is far from the truth, as many seniors have lost or are in the process of losing any English skills they may have picked up over the years. In terms of settlement experiences, many seniors concentrated on working and not on developing their English skills, over time, this distanced them further from resources and services.
- The gradual erosion of language with advanced age is widely known, particularly for people with Dementia and Alzheimer's
- Given the above, the importance of providing services and social supports that are culturally and linguistically appropriate and relevant to the needs of seniors from migrant and refugee backgrounds was noted.
- UNITED Social Support Groups (SSG) have brought many benefits for participants (increased connection, enhanced health and wellbeing, increased civic participation, etc.)
- The SSG group provided participants with a sense of connection and having "something that is ours" ("**algo nuestro**", in Spanish), that is separate from their identities as a family person, or grandmother, etc, but where they can explore their own interests and inner resources.
- The UNITED SSG groups have become a source of weekly support and emotional "sustenance" for people, one participant noted that she was able to be her own self again ("**volvi a ser yo**").

- Another participant noted that the SSG weekly session provided her with a “breath of life every week” (“**un respiro de vida para mi**”). This highlights the power of culturally relevant services to provide seniors with enhanced connection to their culture and identity.
- Spanish speaking social groups like the one coordinated by Hogar Español (Spanish Club) become a source of support and “**informal therapy**” for people, who look forward to their weekly catch up. As one participant of such group noted, the group becomes a “**sacred place**” (own words) of support and connection: “**Este grupo es mi vida- this group is my life**”.
- Participants expressed they need “**care, respect and love**” from their family and from service providers, highlighting importance of emotional connection for seniors

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

Mental Health Issues:

- The issue of social isolation is hugely significant amongst the Spanish speaking community of seniors. This issue has been problematic even before the COVID 19 pandemic
- The mental health repercussions of isolation are well documented and are witnessed daily by UNITED workers.
- Negative impact of COVID on mental health of seniors, who faced increasing isolation and increased mental health issues
- Importance of providing mental health/psychological support and info/resources to seniors in their own language
- Ideally such education and information sessions to happen within SSG groups (and explore possibility of extending this to other Spanish speaking groups)
- Many Spanish speaking community members have lived through experiences of torture and trauma in their countries of origin and the long-term impacts of these experiences in their mental health. The effects of trauma resurfacing whilst in old age have implications for practice and these include that: “**People’s ghosts return**” to haunt people and make service delivery complex.
- Importance of upskilling and training bi-lingual aged care workers in trauma informed approaches to care

Importance of language-specific services and translation services:

- The Telephone Spanish language Interpreting Services provided by TIS (Telephone Interpreting Service) has become, in the past few years, increasingly difficult to access by Spanish-speaking older migrants and refugees at a time when their needs for language services has increased.
- Importance of accessing support in one own’s language. Seniors expressed that it is not the same to hear “I care about you” in English versus hearing it in Spanish
- The above highlights the power of language in constructing and giving meaning to one’s identity and sense of well being

- Importance of English classes for seniors who have not had access to such opportunity before due to work/family commitments

Civic Participation:

- Historically, the settlement experience of Spanish speaking migrants and refugees was complex, people didn't fully participate in civic life and under-utilized mainstream community support services, this pattern continues now as they age.
- Due to COVID restrictions for past two years, Seniors from our community expressed feeling **"stuck"** at home, feeling isolated and alone, feeling like they **"don't want to go out"** due to fears of COVID, etc.
- Seniors Clubs are gradually disappearing within the Spanish speaking community. As people age, they no longer have the energy or motivation to sustain such clubs, meaning many seniors are left without opportunities for civic participation with serious implications for their health and well being
- Spanish speaking radio must be adequately funded and supported by Government, as it is a regularly accessed source of information and news for the Spanish speaking communities, particularly for seniors
- UNITED has a number of older volunteers within our Community Visitors Scheme but greater resourcing of this program would enable us to attract more seniors into these roles, thus increase their civic participation
- Upon arriving in Australia, many Spanish speaking women devoted themselves to home-life and caring duties over children and had limited civic participation over the years, such pattern of disengagement continued over time. A number of these women are also illiterate, meaning access to information is limited, and find themselves widowed now and there is a clear **"invisibility of Spanish speaking women"** from civic life. These women subsequently grapple with mental health issues and isolation, including long-standing undiagnosed depression and anxiety disorders.

Systemic Barriers to Aged Care:

- Lack of knowledge of aged care system and of mainstream services in general, as well as underutilization of such services and systems
- The My Aged Care system is complex to navigate and there is a lack of culturally sensitive assessors within the system, particularly for the Spanish speaking community, which although the community shares one common language, the cultural differences and nuances vary between each country.
- Increasing digitalization of services and systems (ie: having to use *mygov*, or access Services Australia via online mediums, etc) coupled with seniors' lack of digital literacy means Spanish speaking seniors have limited access to essential care and services.
- Participants from SSG expressed needing one-on-one support to navigate such online systems yet did not want to burden their children or families. COVID further exacerbated this digital divide.
- There is need for dedicated bi-lingual workers to facilitate access to services, including assistance with registering through My Aged Care (system navigation).
- Importance of disseminating information about My Aged Care and other services in Spanish media (radio, print)
- The Australian Bureau of Statistics did not adequately promote the Census with sufficient time and support, and given it was an online initiative, many seniors did not complete it. Many seniors do not have access to a computer, or if they do, they do not have adequate digital

literacy skills. Couple these challenges with a lack of English proficiency, this meant that many seniors did not complete the Census.

- Although UNITED assisted some individual clients with completing the Census, it is feared that the statistics of the 2021 will not be an accurate quantitative or qualitative reflection of Spanish speaking community needs, and in particular of the seniors needs within the community.

Cultural Ideals and Attitudes meant that services were not accessed:

- Many Spanish speaking seniors want to retain their independence as much as possible so tend to under-utilize their allocated home care package
- Many Spanish speaking seniors have a long-standing mentality of frugality and don't necessarily understand the benefits of accessing services (such as physiotherapy or allied health in general), saving the home care package for a rainy day.

Home Care Packages (HCP) Program:

- HCP funds are insufficient to adequately address the needs of the person
- HCP Guidelines dictate what can be covered by a HCP, and many items that would contribute to the individual's health and well being are excluded, such as vitamins, dietary supplements, etc.
- HCP wait list is very long - individuals' circumstances change whilst they wait for a package, resulting in many care and services only being available when it is too late
- One participant suggested home care packages should cover funeral costs, which is at present an excluded item.
- Aged Care Assessors lack cultural awareness around CALD needs, the assessment does not adequately capture people's needs/circumstances.
- CALD communities tend to be guarded about their personal affairs/distrust of figures of authority. This is particularly true for the Spanish speaking seniors' community who present with histories of torture, trauma, experiences of civil war and conflict, and experiences of political oppression etc. This can make it difficult for mainstream home care providers to adequately engage with seniors.

Need to increase support Seniors Groups, as a way to advance social diversity and cohesion:

- Spanish speaking senior groups need capacity building, ie: lack of knowledge of incorporation process, lack of knowledge of governance processes, etc.
- Limited funding for seniors' groups
- Lack of access to funding opportunities if leaders are not aware of funding streams
- Lack of accessible community facilities for seniors to meet due to COVID
- Many Spanish speaking groups are dissolving as the group members age and no longer have the energy or motivation to keep such groups operating.
- Importance of engaging with new or younger community leaders to continue the important function that such groups have in enhancing social cohesion and diversity.
- Seniors group leaders need funding support to enhance their digital capability. Should this be placed under "Digital Literacy" (See below)

Digital Literacy:

- Spanish speaking seniors tend to have limited digital literacy skills
- Seniors group leaders need funding support to enhance their digital capability
- This lack of digital literacy creates a digital divide and further increases social inequities in terms of access to services and civic participation
- Many seniors are apprehensive or hesitant about up taking technology, but once they do, they experience firsthand the benefits it can bring them. Feedback from UNITED SSG participants of the Virtual SSG groups said that the virtual groups were a “lifeline- un salvavida” and “saved me- me salvaron” during COVID.
- Need for increased resources to increase digital literacy, hands on support to get people connected online.

Ideas to advance the physical and mental health and well being of Victoria’s multicultural seniors including global best practices

Support intergenerational projects to promote wellbeing:

- Explore possibility of creating intergenerational projects that promote connection and wellbeing ie: between newly arrived international students and seniors, or between young children and seniors (ie: idea of a pen pal initiative between students from Victorian School of Languages and isolated seniors)
- One community member noted the importance of intergenerational approaches to celebrate and highlight the richness, resilience and wisdom of seniors, describing seniors as “time capsules of wisdom”.
- Importance of creating a paradigm shift around ageism and eliminating ageism in all its forms. The need to stop using ageist language and stop seeing people in terms of age, but more in terms of what skills/knowledge/wisdom they can bring
- The need for a “mind shift to start valuing what seniors can bring to the table”.

Promote arts-based projects to promote wellbeing:

- Importance of taking a wholistic approach to health and well being through support for arts-based projects that positively impact the health and wellbeing of seniors
- Importance of sensory, arts-based, music-based activities which connect and transport seniors to their culture and histories, with positive outcomes for their physical and psychological health
- A person’s health and wellbeing cannot be separate from their culture or their cultural identity, the two are inextricably linked. Connecting with culture has a positive effect on a persons’ sense of belonging and identity, with favourable outcomes for physical and mental health. Mosaik Experiences (social enterprise involved in bringing cultural experiences to aged care recipients) have measured the positive impact of these types of initiatives.

Written by: Barbara Leon



&

Rafaela Lopez

