

**Submission
No 33**

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

Organisation: Municipal Association of Victoria

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**Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the
Needs of Older People From Migrant and
Refugee Backgrounds**

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While this paper aims to broadly reflect the views of local government in Victoria, it does not purport to reflect the exact views of individual councils.

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2. Introduction

The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) is the legislated peak body for local government in Victoria representing the state's 79 councils. The MAV is a membership association, accountable to its constituent members through State Council and an elected Board. The MAV was formed in 1879, with the Municipal Association Act 1907 officially recognising the MAV as the voice of local government in Victoria. We are a driving and influential force behind a strong and strategically positioned local government sector. Key roles of the MAV are to build the capacity of councils, facilitate effective networks and provide policy and strategic advice as well as representing and advocating local government interests and promoting the role of local government.

We establish networks of council working groups and committees to inform our policy work. We produce submissions and reports on behalf of the local government sector, and publish a range of information and resources to build the capacity of councils and support their delivery of services to local communities. We also work closely with other levels of government to establish productive partnership agreements where local government has a shared service delivery responsibility.

Councils in Victoria have a long and important history of supporting their older residents, including people from migrant (culturally diverse) and refugee backgrounds through age-specific facilities, programs, events, activities and information and the wide range of other services and programs, facilities and infrastructure accessible to residents of all ages including libraries, neighbourhood houses, community centres, parks and open space, walking trails and sport and leisure facilities.

Many metropolitan and rural councils are providers of home care and social support services which enable older residents to remain living at home for as long as possible. These council services have a long history and are highly valued by the community.

Councils are often the first port of call for older residents seeking support and information to connect them to services, groups and activities with many councils providing information in a range of community languages.

Sound strategic planning undertaken by councils guides their decision making and priority setting with Municipal Health and Well Being Plans inclusive of all ages including older people. The particular needs of people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are considered within these strategic planning processes.

Older people from migrant and refugee backgrounds make up a significant proportion of the Victorian community with the proportions varying considerably across local government areas. Councils respond to their needs within the resources available. Councils with high numbers of older people from CALD backgrounds are often better placed with dedicated staff focussing on their needs.

The MAV works with the State Government and the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria, engaging with them on common issues around multicultural communities.

3. What is Happening at the Local Level?

For decades, Victorian councils have played an important role in celebrating and supporting communities and in fostering social cohesion and inclusion. Councils are very engaged with their older residents including those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The MAV has worked with councils over many years to build capacity to support cultural diversity across all council functions and advocated on behalf of the sector on a range of issues impacting older people to the State and Commonwealth governments. The MAV has supported the Victorian Local Government Multicultural Issues Network (VLGMIN), a network for Victorian council staff interested in multicultural services and policy development over many years. Members of VLGMIN have been consulted in the preparation of this submission.

The sector recognises the value of other local non-council services and supports available to older people of migrant and refugee background and the importance of local networks of agencies.

The support provided by councils to older people from migrant and refugee backgrounds can include:

- Dedicated policy and program staff to work with community;
- Translation and distribution of information in community languages;
- Provision of facilities for use by multicultural seniors' clubs and groups;
- Support in accessing aged care services;
- Information sharing and connections across seniors' groups;
- Providing digital training and education for older people including the lending of digital devices; and
- Inclusion of older CALD groups and residents in council events and activities;

Those councils providing home care services are involved across assessment, service provision and a range of support services to older people including those from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

The services and supports provided by councils can only be provided within their resource capacity and not all needs or issues facing older people from migrant and refugee backgrounds can be met.

The following case studies present examples recent council initiatives developed to support older people from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

Case Study 1 – Staying Connected On-line

The **Wyndham City Council** funded 34 local groups through Connected Communities funding to assist them with staying connected on-line during COVID lockdowns. Working with the Wyndham Council Neighbourhood Hubs team, priority preference for funding was given to community groups, organisations or activity providers that regularly meet online to build social connectedness, particularly with groups most at risk of loneliness and social isolation. Of the thirty-four groups funded seven were cultural seniors groups with 293 members including Oromo, Eritrean, Pasifika and Maori groups. Feedback to council from one group states ‘senior migrants have experienced pressures on their health and increased loneliness. With the Zoom Pro account, we plan to provide opportunities to meet and connect online 3 times per week with organised activities focussing on socialisation, health, entertainment and welfare for senior migrants.’

Case Study 2 - Capacity Building CALD Senior Groups

The **City of Port Phillip** is only 21 square kilometres, one of the smallest but most densely populated municipalities in Victoria. Port Phillip has a diverse community and a population of nearly 120,000 people. Council’s **Capacity Building CALD Senior Groups** program is focused on the 23 registered multicultural senior groups active in the City. The average age of members of the multicultural groups estimated to be between 75 to 85+ years and membership numbers ranging from a dozen to more than two hundred members. During COVID-19 council funded the Cultural Seniors Meals Program program designed to provide an appropriate support system to the most vulnerable seniors and give them priority in getting immediate assistance. In providing a regular meal to group members, Council staff could conduct a weekly welfare check, update residents on COVID-19 information in their own language and provide information and referrals if required.

Case Study 3 - COVID-19 Aged Care Industry Support Grant

Port Phillip Council supported the adaption, continuation and recovery of multicultural seniors’ clubs through COVID-19 with Aged Care Industry Support Grant. The grant supported seniors clubs through culturally appropriate social support, gentle exercise, and mindfulness using online channels, information and referral to support services. It also aimed to build the capacity of community leaders enabling clubs to adapt to COVID and continue in the long term as well as enhancing the digital literacy of the most vulnerable group members. Bicultural staff of Russian and Greek background were redeployed to provide culturally appropriate support in connecting the seniors socially as well as perform welfare checks. Council collaborated with five Russian senior groups in running regular online sessions in lieu of the social activities which they would normally hold in community centres. The online social engagement was a great success for the Russian seniors who participated in various activities which included information sessions and updates related to COVID-19, gentle exercises, musical performances, poetry reading, visual arts educational presentations and cultural celebrations such as Hanukkah and Purim. The weekly sessions organised by various groups assembled an average of 30-35 older participants.

Case Study 4 - Community Meals Subsidy Program

The **City of Melbourne** offered the 2021 Community Meals Subsidy Program. Central and Latin American, Chinese, Egyptian, Eritrean, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Lithuanian, Maltese, Romanian, Somali, Syrian, Turkish, Vietnamese and other multicultural groups were targeted by the program to address loneliness and social isolation and strengthen access to affordable meals, recreation activities and other community services for older people. The program had a focus on improved health, wellbeing, social connections and a celebration of cultural diversity, encouraging community organisations to welcome new participants through inclusive practices and policies in a safe and welcoming environment. A high proportion (71%) of program participants spoke a language other than English including Arabic, Bengali, Cantonese, Czech, Eritrean, French, Greek, Harari, Hindi, Italian, Japanese, Laotian, Lithuanian, Macedonian, Malay, Maltese, Mandarin, Oromo, Portuguese, Romanian, Serbo-Croatian, Somali, Spanish, Thai, Tigre, Tigrinya, Turkish, Urdu, Vietnamese. Program feedback was overwhelmingly positive with reported benefits including emotional support to each other through group activities which provided an opportunity to mix with people from the same cultural and language groups through the sharing of recipes and cooking. Food was the mechanism to bring the community together, creating community connection and engagement with other residents in their local area.

Case Study 5 - Hydrotherapy for Burmese Seniors Program

Maroondah City Council has 25,601 overseas born and 18,727 non-English speakers across the population of approximately 120,000 residents. Council offered the *Hydrotherapy for Burmese Seniors* program over 2020 and 2021 with the Migrant Information Centre for members of the Falam Chin, Karen and Hakha Chin cultural groups. The program was designed to promote physical activity among Burmese seniors with approximately 30-40 people participating. delivered through a grant Council received from the Australian Multicultural Community Services. The aim of the program was to promote physical activity among CALD seniors enabling seniors to connect with one another and therefore playing an important COVID recovery role as many CALD seniors were socially isolated due to the COVID lockdown restrictions. The program concluded April 2021 and has received much positive feedback and requests to continue the program.

4. Key Issues

The local government sector believes there are a range of issues around support for older migrants and refugees that should be considered by the Parliamentary Inquiry. The issues range across a need for improved state and federal government support to people in this cohort; a need for improved translation and information services; improved local networks and partnerships; more funding for the sector to build local capacity to support older CALD communities; and a need to focus on older refugee (recent arrival) communities.

The sector recognises a need for greater state and federal government support to the local government sector, community groups and organisations with a more consistent, less 'siloed' approach from government in supporting older people from CALD backgrounds.

4.1 Support to Older CALD Groups

The sector has identified a need for improved state government funding to establish groups and maintain the operation of groups that support older people in culturally significant ways. CALD groups create important social value to the community and to participants. CALD groups are often a very important part of a person's social network, social and personal support, entertainment as well as an important avenue for providing information in language.

Government funding support needs to have:

- easy to understand and complete application processes;
- ability for applications to be lodged both by digital and non-digital means;
- support to assist applicants through the process;
- funding for group establishment and ongoing operation; and
- funding to be for longer than a 12 month period;

Recent data collection at the City of Port Phillip identified that there are significant numbers of CALD seniors who are still lacking access to and capacity for online engagement with an ongoing need for assistance to access and apply for funding to sustain their activities. The research identified a need to build a strong volunteer base and to address succession planning that will sustain a groups' existence.

Recent changes to Federal Government Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP) funding is seeing sector support resources shrinking impacting the operational support available to senior citizens groups and centres, many of which support CALD seniors groups. Many councils have relied on this funding to keep groups and centres functioning and with the funding changes, councils will be challenged in continuing to financially support the centres.

4.2 Support for Recent Migrants and Refugees

Recent older migrants, refugees and holders of short-term visas can arrive in Australia bringing with them a background of trauma, family separation, hardship and loss. Improved health and wellbeing service supports for this group have been identified as needed as the existing system appears to not provide the assistance these older people require. Local government, with the

financial assistance of state or federal government funding could better connect these older people into their new local communities.

Older people also enter the country to assist with the responsibilities for the daily care of grandchildren, finding themselves in a caring role in a 'foreign' country with few connections and little understanding of local programs and activities which could assist them and their families. More needs to be done by government to better connect them into the communities they are living in and find the supports they need to settle and undertake their grandparenting with confidence.

4.3 Resource Capacity of Councils

The support provided by councils to CALD groups and individuals is dependent on the resources available of that council. In recent years councils have been limited in their capacity to increase their spending due to the capping of rates by the state government. However, demand for services has continued to grow including those for migrant and refugee communities.

Increasing the availability of state government funding to local government to expand services and supports to older people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds would contribute to better communities in which to grow older for people of all backgrounds.

4.4 Digital Training and Support

Councils have been providing training opportunities for older people to learn digital skills over many years and this has been heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic. There has been access to some government financial support for this but there remains a need for continuation of this training beyond COVID normal. The provision of digital devices for loan through council programs and libraries needs to be supported by government with ongoing funding required to assist councils in providing this training to older people and particularly those from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

4.5 Improved Information Provision

Access to information is a critical issue for older people and councils are acknowledged as a first point of contact for older people seeking information on care support and community activities and opportunities. Information needs to be available in community languages and in innovative formats that assist people who are not literate in their own languages. Local government needs to have affordable access to translation services and funds to enable simplified information in visual other formats to be produced to ensure people from migrant and refugee backgrounds have access to the same information as those with English as their first language

4.6 Accessible and comprehensible care navigation systems

All older people need to be able to readily access care services to support them to live at home for as long as possible. The navigation of My Aged Care is difficult even for those with English as a first language. There is a need for better support to be available to older people from migrant and refugee backgrounds to assist them in accessing the services they need and for them to be aware that the services are available.

If successful in navigating the system, people from migrant and refugee backgrounds can find themselves with little knowledge of how to activate their entry into the services they are entitled to receive. This could be achieved through building better partnerships with culturally specific community organisations and clubs to provide the support required.

4.7 Community Connections

Councils report that the Community Connector concept funded by the government during COVID worked well in providing support to older people in need including those from CALD backgrounds. The opportunity to build on the achievements of this program need to be considered by the government post COVID.

4.8 Addressing elder abuse

The issue of elder abuse has been highlighted during the COVID pandemic impacting older people from all cultural backgrounds. The issue is compounded for people from CALD backgrounds as easy access to information in community languages is problematic. Improving access to educational materials and available supports for distribution to community through local councils would assist in addressing the issue.

4.9 Support to Enter the COVID Normal Community

As we move to COVID normal there is a need for better access to support older people from migrant and refugee backgrounds so they can re-enter community life with confidence they have the right proof of vaccination and identity. Councils are aware of the issues faced by people who do not have access to digital technology and may not fully understand their responsibilities whilst in the community. Providing advice through CALD community groups could assist in addressing this problem.

5. Conclusion

Local government in Victoria plays a valued and important role in supporting older people in their communities including those from migrant and refugee backgrounds but there is more that can be done to support this community. Much of this support is funded directly by councils which can limit the extent of council support to their communities. There is an opportunity for the establishment of stronger partnerships with the sector to build better local supports and opportunities for people of migrant and refugee backgrounds.

6. Recommendations

- That the Parliamentary Committee acknowledge local government's role in supporting older residents from migrant and refugee backgrounds and advocates to the state government to provide funding to support the employment of Multi-Cultural

Support Officers in municipalities with high proportions of older people from migrant and refugee backgrounds

- That the Parliamentary Committee make representations to state government for adequate program funding to be accessible to local CALD seniors groups to assist with start-up and ongoing operations
- That the Parliamentary Committee advocates for local government to have access to free translation and interpreter services, with further funding to support councils in outreach and engagement activities with CALD communities using innovative communication mechanisms that support older people from migrant and refugee backgrounds where low literacy levels have been identified.
- There is a need for strong advocacy from the Parliamentary Committee and state government to the Federal Government on retention of SSD funding support for senior citizens centres, or in lieu of this, funding to local government to maintain the operation of centres.
- That the Parliamentary Committee recommends to state government that funding be provided to local government to provide support for digital training and access to digital resources for older people from CALD backgrounds.
- That Parliamentary Inquiry recommend that the Victorian Government allocate resources to support older people from CALD backgrounds to successfully navigate My Aged Care
- That the Parliamentary Inquiry recommend that the Victorian Government consider funding councils to directly support older people from CALD backgrounds and specifically recent migrants and refugees, with culturally and linguistically appropriate information, establishing new and connections to existing groups, programs and events as well as culturally specific health and recreation programs
- That the Parliamentary Inquiry recommend that the State Government consider extending the Community Connector program.