

20 April 2020

The Hon. Daniel Andrews, MP
Premier of Victoria
Chair, Crisis Council of Cabinet

CC: James Merlino: Minister for the Coordination of Education and Training – COVID-19
Tim Pallas: Minister for the Coordination of Treasury and Finance – COVID-19
Jacinta Allan: Minister for the Coordination of Transport – COVID-19
Jenny Mikakos: Minister for the Coordination of Health and Human Services – COVID-19
Jill Hennessy: Minister for the Coordination of Justice and Community Safety – COVID-19
Martin Pakula: Minister for the Coordination of Jobs, Precincts and Regions – COVID 19
Lisa Neville: Minister for the Coordination of Environment, Land, Water & Planning – COVID-19
Ros Spence: Minister for Multicultural Affairs

Open Letter from the Victorian Multicultural CEO Network – COVID-19

Dear Premier Andrews,

The undersigned ethnic and multicultural organisations thank the Victorian Government for its leadership and collaboration with other governments across Australia to prioritise the health and wellbeing of our communities during this unprecedented public health emergency.

Your decisive measures have seen a slowing in the transmission of the COVID-19 disease, have addressed a broad range of emergency needs for vulnerable people and have invested in options to support employers and employees to stay in business, remain employed and/or transition to new priority areas of employment. We acknowledge the hard work and difficult decisions that have been taken in a short period of time and we seek to both support and strengthen them.

As leaders of organisations that directly represent and service more than 2.2 million Victorians of culturally and linguistically diverse background, including 1.6 million Victorians who speak a language other than English at home, we believe our skills, capability and community connections can and should be better utilised, to positively inform appropriately tailored responses that address the impacts of COVID-19 on multicultural communities.

We strongly recommend the following actions from the Victorian Government to ensure the needs of culturally diverse Victorians are at the forefront of our response and recovery from COVID-19.

1. Deem SBS as an official emergency broadcaster and other ethnic media as essential services

Access to trusted in-language information on the coronavirus has been problematic for culturally diverse communities. Issues have ranged from delays in translated material being made available, to the closure of trusted mediums for information dissemination such as ethnic radio broadcasters, to conflicting sources of available in-language information through social media and from overseas. Australia is fortunate to have a public multiplatform media company dedicated to multicultural and multilingual communities, yet unlike fellow public broadcaster ABC, SBS does not have emergency

broadcaster status. The Victorian Government should work with the Commonwealth Government to ensure that SBS is deemed and resourced alongside the ABC to communicate with culturally diverse communities during an emergency. This would allow for real time, trusted information to reach CALD communities in over 60+ community languages from which they can respond and navigate fast paced and changing emergency situations.

2. Establish a CALD Taskforce in Victoria to support community planning and service implementation as part of the State's response and recovery from COVID-19

Harnessing the capability and leadership of ethno-specific and multicultural service providers in partnership with the Victorian Multicultural Commission, should be viewed as a priority by the Victorian Government as part of a coordinated approach to COVID-19 for CALD communities. Our organisations directly service more than 300,000 people each year in areas ranging from children, youth, creative arts, family violence, disability, aged care, education, training, employment and humanitarian settlement. This capability, along with our cultural expertise and trusted relationships with CALD communities means that we can connect with and inform government about hard to reach groups, identify and inform on points of stress within communities and collaborate with both government departments and mainstream service providers to ensure that responses to the pandemic are tailored, targeted and have an appropriate impact for those in need. Representatives from the Multicultural CEO Network would be pleased to work with the VMC as part of a CALD Taskforce to meet the current, emerging and future needs of culturally & linguistically diverse communities across Victoria as a result of the pandemic.

3. Provide funding certainty for all ethno-specific and multicultural organisations to ensure resources remain in place to support CALD communities through the pandemic

The Multicultural CEO Network urges the State Government to renew funding for organisations whose contracts are due to expire in the next six months, ensuring critical investment in organisational capability is maintained during and after the coronavirus crisis. This decision will allow our organisations to plan effective business continuity to meet the health, economic and civic needs of culturally diverse communities in Victoria in the immediate period. The delayed State budget and new and increasing costs and demands on servicing clients, families and carers as a result of COVID-19, means that a minimum 12 month extension on funding for all existing State Government contracts due to expire should be approved. This will support continuity of service, allow for service adjustment and for seamless transition to new social priorities as they arise for CALD communities. Maintaining existing capability will also allow the State Government to better consider options for increasing and enhancing funding for multicultural communities as part of our recovery from COVID-19 over the medium to long term.

4. Ensure consistency across all government departments with regards to funding flexibility in current contracts

The Multicultural CEO Network welcomes recent communication from various government departments acknowledging the service disruption and impact of COVID-19 on business continuity, as well as expressing their commitment to being flexible in these circumstances. To avoid disadvantaging contracted community service organisations that are unable to fully meet their current service agreements, we strongly recommend the State Government ensures similar flexibility frameworks and principles are applied by all state government departments. Similarly we

ask the Premier to use his leading role on the National Cabinet to encourage a similarly consistent approach is taken by the Commonwealth. Our organisations are prepared to work with all government departments collaboratively to re-purpose current deliverables to support immediate COVID-19 priorities wherever feasible.

5. Multicultural events and festivals funding to be paid out for organisations that have expended money in preparing for events which were cancelled as a result of COVID-19

Multicultural events and festivals grant funding made through the Victorian Multicultural Commission to organisations and ethnic community associations in the current financial year, should be paid out in full, where organisations have already expended money to prepare for events and festivals. It is unreasonable to expect that organisations that have already spent a large proportion of limited funding from allocated budgets, should now look for ways to re-purpose this funding. This is not realistic given the nature of festivals and events delivery and the containment measures that remain in place for COVID-19.

6. Financial packages to better support vulnerable groups within CALD communities, including women and children, young people, seniors, people with disability, new and emerging communities and those without welfare rights

The Multicultural CEO Network welcomes additional state funding announced to support women and children at risk of family violence, as well as additional investments in community mental health in response to COVID-19. These are absolute priorities at a time when the most vulnerable in our community are at further risk of negative outcomes because of isolation. We are however concerned by the lack of dedicated funding for ethno-specific and multicultural organisations to meet the needs of migrant communities. This includes a lack of funding for specialist service providers such as InTouch – Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence and Foundation House to be able to respond to the significant increase in demand for their services.

Our network of organisations are keen to be included in community based responses for priority cohorts from CALD communities, that face a range of additional barriers and exclusions as a consequence of COVID-19. This includes seniors, people with disability, new and emerging communities as well as people on temporary migrant visas. These groups are disproportionately impacted by the loss of employment, face heightened risks of food insecurity, are burdened by keeping children engaged in remote learning with limited home resources, and cannot get the language and technology support they need to effectively navigate an already stressed health and welfare system. We want these issues considered and addressed through forward planning with our organisations (via a CALD Taskforce) as part of a coordinated response.

7. Prioritise addressing the threats to social cohesion as a result of a rise in racism

The rise in reported incidents of racism as a consequence of COVID-19, namely against Asian-Australians, is alarming. We take pride in Victoria being a world leader in multiculturalism and to this end, we expect a continuing strong commitment from all our political leaders on the issue of social cohesion. We are proud to be part of a State that has in place legislative provisions to protect multiculturalism, to protect people from racial and religious vilification, as well as public policies to support anti-racism and those communities disproportionately impacted by this issue. The threats to our proud legacy of social cohesion and inclusion are amplified at present and we expect the State

Government to continue to resource the VMC, Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, Victorian Equal Opportunity & Human Rights Commission and other community based organisations to continue working with our wider society to counter the damaging effects of racism and discrimination as propagated through misinformation and the narratives of fear & xenophobia.

Signed Multicultural CEO Network:

ACTION ON DISABILITY IN ETHNIC COMMUNITIES
ALBURY-WODONGA ETHNIC COMMUNITIES' COUNCIL
ARABIC WELFARE
AUSTRALIAN CROATIAN COMMUNITY SERVICES
AUSTRALIAN MULTICULTURAL COMMUNITY SERVICES
AUSTRALIAN VIETNAMESE WOMENS ASSOCIATION
BALLARAT REGIONAL MULTICULTURAL COUNCIL
CENTRE FOR MULTICULTURAL YOUTH
CO.AS.IT
DIVERSITAT
ETHNIC COMMUNITIES' COUNCIL OF VICTORIA
ETHNIC COUNCIL OF SHEPPARTON & DISTRICTS
FRONDITHA CARE
GIPPSLAND MULTICULTURAL SERVICES
INDIAN CARE
INTOUCH – MULTICULTURAL CENTRE AGAINST FAMILY VIOLENCE
ISLAMIC COUNCIL OF VICTORIA
JEWISH CARE
JEWISH COMMUNITY COUNCIL OF VICTORIA
LODDON CAMPASPE MULTICULTURAL SERVICES
MALTESE COMMUNITY COUNCIL OF VICTORIA
MICARE
MULTICULTURAL ARTS VICTORIA
PRONIA
RUSSIAN ETHNIC REPRESENTATIVE COUNCIL OF VICTORIA
SETTLEMENT SERVICES INTERNATIONAL
SOUTHERN MIGRANT & REFUGEE CENTRE
SPECTRUM
SUNRAYSIA MALLEE ETHNIC COMMUNITIES' COUNCIL
VICSEG NEW FUTURES