

Media Release

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LOST IN TRANSLATION: COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS HIGHLIGHT URGENT NEED TO REFORM MULTICULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS

A new submission from NSW's social services peak body has revealed the impact of poor communication with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities during the pandemic.

In response to the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into crisis communication with CALD communities during COVID, NCOSS in partnership with the Muslim Women Australia, lodged a submission which sought input from 11 different multicultural community organisations.

NCOSS CEO, Joanna Quilty, said that the NSW Government's handling of communication to CALD communities during the depths of the pandemic left a lot to be desired.

"NSW has more than one in three of its population born overseas, and more than one in four households where a non-English language is spoken at home," Ms Quilty said.

"When a crisis hits, we cannot simply ignore our CALD communities by communicating in ways that many people don't understand.

"It is critically important that we develop crisis communication materials and channels that reach, and resonate with, our culturally diverse communities.

"We spoke with a number of highly-respected multicultural organisations while drafting our submission for this Inquiry, and they expressed frustration that a heavy-handed compliance approach was adopted, rather than working constructively with community leaders to explain and promote the rules.

"People who have fled from repressive regimes in other countries may be wary of government information, and those who have newly arrived in Australia may have poor literacy in English.

"This raises a number of challenges when communicating with these groups – but the resounding message is that crisis communications to our CALD communities should be central to disaster recovery, not an afterthought."

Ms Quilty said that as the State will face more frequent extreme weather events and health crises, it is crucial that the NSW Government pays close attention to the submissions to this inquiry so there isn't a repeat of this issue.

Nemat Kharboutli, Manager Linking Hearts Service at Muslim Women Australia said the most effective crisis communications is multi-tiered, where multicultural services and community groups provide specialist messaging which complements broad-based national campaigns.

The NCOSS and Muslim Women Australia submission revealed that the best way to communicate with people from a broad array of language groups is through community leaders who are known and trusted, such as doctors, priests or sheikhs, and ethno-specific organisations.

The NCOSS and Muslim Women Australia submission put forward a number of recommendations to the NSW Government, including but not limited to:

- Ensure immediate and effective representation of NGOs and multicultural community groups at local, regional and state-wide emergency management committees.
- Undertake further research to understand concerns, misconceptions and motivations of priority groups from CALD communities in relation to health and environmental crises.
- Ensure that public health information, including translated materials, becomes immediately available during a crisis in audio, video and written formats.
- Crisis communication should aim to create a sense of calm, ensuring consistency where possible across Federal and State jurisdictions. Crisis communication should not be 'othering' and use polarising rhetoric which triggers discrimination of CALD communities.

The NCOSS and Muslim Women Australia submission sought input from 11 multicultural organisations, including: Accessible Diversity Services Initiative, Nepean Multicultural Access and the Western Sydney MRC.

To read a copy of the NCOSS and Muslim Women Australia submission, visit www.ncoss.org.au

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