

© National Seniors Australia and Australian Unity 2021

National Seniors Australia (National Seniors) and Australian Unity own copyright in this work. Apart from any use permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, the work may be reproduced in whole or in part for study or training purposes, subject to the inclusion of an acknowledgement of the source. Reproduction for commercial use or sale requires written permission from National Seniors and Australian Unity. Unless project participants have given express permission for extracts of their interview transcripts to be cited, the data collected during the project remains confidential in recognition of privacy laws. While all care has been taken in preparing this publication, National Seniors and Australian Unity expressly disclaim any liability for any damage from the use of the material contained in this publication and will not be responsible for any loss, howsoever arising, from use or reliance on this material.

National Seniors ABN: 81 101 126 587 Australian Unity Limited ABN: 23 087 648 888

ISBN: 978-0-6450109-6-1

Authorship notes

National Seniors Australia and Australian Unity are this report's joint corporate authors. The program described within the report was the brainchild of Elleni Bereded-Samuel AM, Australian Unity's Executive Manager, Diversity and Capability Development. The program was implemented in conjunction with Professor John McCallum, CEO of National Seniors Australia, together with the Community Liaison Officers and Team Leaders who formed the program's grassroots core, plus associated staff at both organisations.

The report was produced collaboratively through a series of recorded discussions with past and present personnel directly involved in the program. Those who contributed to the discussions were senior leaders Elleni Bereded-Samuel AM and Professor John McCallum, Team Leaders Norma Serrano and Annette Fenton, and Community Liaison Officers Cecilia Gomez-Benitez, Aisha Mahboob, Jing Sosa, Lian Ching and Chanthly Lim-Chum. All shared their experiences and insights, edited a draft report that was based on these, and approved the report's final version. National Seniors' Commercial Services Manager Jake McGill provided feedback and information on the customer support aspects and numbers. National Seniors Research Officer Lindy Orthia facilitated the recorded discussions and wrote the report drafts from discussion transcripts and the other information participants provided.

Suggested citation: National Seniors Australia and Australian Unity (2021) *All Australians Care: Assertive COVID-19 Outreach in New and Emerging CALD Communities*. Canberra and Melbourne: National Seniors Australia and Australian Unity.

Contents

Acknowledgements.....	1
Executive Summary.....	3
A unique COVID-19 support program for diverse Australian seniors.....	3
Hundreds of people helped with COVID information, and much more	3
Introduction and program overview.....	5
New and Emerging CALD communities and COVID-19	5
The need for a community liaison outreach program	6
Program implementation	7
Community liaison by community members	7
Team locations and timeline	8
Organisations and management	9
This report’s purpose	9
Key personnel	11
Aims, scope and the evolving nature of the work.....	15
The core project of COVID assistance	15
The need to address other issues	16
More than providing information	17
Outcomes and value of the program.....	19
Immediate benefits	19
Long-term benefits.....	20
Achievements in numbers.....	22
Community Liaison Officers front and centre	25
A vocation not a job	25
Community networks and trust	25
Linguistically appropriate outreach	28
Culturally appropriate outreach.....	29
Communication preferences	30
Values and beliefs.....	31
Norms and taboos	31

Shared experience.....	32
Other qualities of CLOs and Team Leaders	33
Supporting and resourcing Community Liaison Officers	35
Mentoring and support from the top	35
Technological support.....	36
Information support.....	37
Communications material	37
Training.....	38
Teamwork.....	39
Challenges resolved, challenges remaining	41
Where to with assertive outreach?.....	42

Acknowledgements

The Assertive COVID-19 Outreach into New and Emerging CALD Communities project has worked across 6 different New and Emerging CALD communities and has sought the engagement of community members in many different ways. In particular, the involvement of the Australian Unity CALD Alliance Advisory Group, in supporting the project as mentors as it evolved, has been critical to its success. Almost 2000 community seniors were supported by the Community Liaison Officers during this difficult time. Finally, to all community leaders, we thank you for enthusiastically embracing the opportunity to support the most vulnerable seniors in the community.

A number of people have been critical to the development of this project. First, we gratefully acknowledge the enthusiastic support of the Department of Health for providing the funding. In particular, we acknowledge the input and guidance of Robert Day, Assistant Secretary, Dementia, Diversity and Design Branch, who recognised a need for ways to better assist CALD seniors in accessing COVID-19 support.

Australian Unity has been a critical partner to host organisation National Seniors Australia, providing in-kind support as well as expert advice to the project. We particularly acknowledge the support of Kevin McCoy, CEO Australian Unity Independent and Assisted Living, in so enthusiastically embracing the opportunity for Australian Unity and National Seniors Australia to lead this project and contribute to improving access to COVID-19 support for CALD communities during COVID restrictions and lockdowns. We also acknowledge the ongoing in-kind support of Australian Unity General Manager Home and Disability Services Ramona Kleipas, and Home Care Service Manager Tania Woodward.

Executive Summary

A unique COVID-19 support program for diverse Australian seniors

During the 2020-21 COVID-19 crisis, National Seniors Australia and Australian Unity joined forces to respond to the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. Information strategies such as English or other language Call Centres are known to be ineffective for new CALD communities. The response provided was an assertive outreach program that targeted older members of New and Emerging CALD communities, including the Victorian Filipino, Spanish speaking, Afghan and Chin (Burma) communities, and in New South Wales the Cambodian and Arabic speaking communities. The program was funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health as part of a more general 'COVID Wellness Call' initiative.

New and Emerging CALD communities face unique issues to accessing support including language barriers, cultural differences, disrupted formal education, trauma related to war and ethnic persecution, and dwelling in under-serviced regions of Australia. These factors hinder community members' understanding of Australian systems, so they often do not know which government services they can access for assistance or find it difficult to apply. As a result, community members – especially the elderly – rely heavily on support from family and community leaders. However, COVID-19 further fragmented those interpersonal support networks already damaged in migration, increasing CALD seniors' isolation and magnifying their other vulnerabilities.

This program responded to that crisis of need. A pilot program targeting the Filipino community was trialled from mid-2020 to the end of 2020. It expanded to a full program in five other CALD communities in late 2020-early 2021. It ended mid-2021 when funding was withdrawn.

Hundreds of people helped with COVID information, and much more

There were two primary targets for the work. It provided information about COVID-19, including help to understand social distancing, quarantining, contact tracing, vaccinations and more. It also provided emotional support addressing seniors' isolation and loneliness.

While engaging with community members about COVID-19, it became clear that many needed other kinds of urgent assistance as well. The program helped senior community members access aged care services through My Aged Care, disability support through the NDIS, income support through Centrelink, and external support to address other needs including lack of housing, lack of food, elder abuse, domestic violence, financial issues, scams, and serious medical problems.

Assertive outreach was shown to be an effective method for providing reliable information and support to New and Emerging CALD Communities. This was made possible by the selection of an experienced, culturally competent liaison officer for each community. All liaison officers were native speakers in their community's language or languages and were recognised, trusted community leaders with years of voluntary service to their community. Training and underlying management and systems of support were also fundamental to the success of the initiative.

Despite its modest budget and short, six-month timeframe, the program built direct, interpersonal support relationships with almost 2000 vulnerable members of New and Emerging CALD communities. Most were seniors identified as needing assistance via a range of channels including through conversation at community events, or referred by family, friends, and community groups. The community liaison officers contacted each person in an initial well-being check phone call, with follow-up communications providing ongoing well-being checks and other assistance. As part of that work, over 1500 individual community members were assisted with referrals to external support services to address urgent needs.

This report documents the ideas and methods that supported these New and Emerging Australian communities through six months of the confusion and threat of the COVID outbreak. As COVID continues to be a threat to the community the issues addressed here will continue to need specialised attention.

Introduction and program overview

New and Emerging CALD communities and COVID-19

The CALD Assertive COVID-19 Outreach Program for New and Emerging Communities was established during the COVID crisis to assist older Australians who are part of New and Emerging culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities.

While well-established CALD communities tend to have recognised community support organisations already in place, New and Emerging communities often do not. New and Emerging CALD communities can also face unique issues to accessing support such as poor knowledge of government services and more generally poor understanding of the Australian systems for managing health, education, social welfare, legal matters, immigration, business and more. They also face language barriers and cultural differences, and sometimes have low levels of formal education, all of which can add to isolation. Recent trauma related to war, ethnic persecution or other factors is also common in New and Emerging CALD communities, especially among Australians from refugee backgrounds. This can affect community members' trust in authorities such as governments and police. They may receive poorer healthcare than other Australians because of this mistrust, communication difficulties, culturally inappropriate service provision, and low expectations of what they are entitled to, and often because they may live in underserved outer suburbs. The general challenges of building a new life add to the level of stress community members experience.

Older members of New and Emerging CALD communities may be especially vulnerable. For example, if they do not have experience in using communications technologies or lack access to devices, if they do not have access to language services, or if they have disabilities or illnesses that inhibit communication or mobility, their isolation and levels of need can be profound. Even if they live with family members, families may have other priorities such as paid work and caring for children, so seniors may still feel isolated. The trend to move everything online further disadvantages them in accessing assistance.

The 2020-2021 COVID-19 crisis has affected many Australians adversely. It has created new difficulties for some while exacerbating existing social problems. Australians across the country have experienced new ways of living with COVID restrictions and lockdowns affecting geographic movement and social connectivity.

For many older Australians the experience of isolation under COVID has been acute and distressing. For older members of New and Emerging CALD communities this is compounded by reduced contact with other community members and few alternative options for support and social interaction. New laws and conventions under COVID have been distressing for many seniors, but especially for senior Australians from CALD backgrounds when they have entailed engaging with officials or sharing their contact details. The COVID crisis has revealed just how isolated and vulnerable some Australians are.

The need for a community liaison outreach program

In mid-2020, the unfolding COVID-19 situation led advocacy and research non-profit National Seniors Australia to seek funding from the Commonwealth Government Department of Health to support older Australians through the crisis. It was clear from our previous joint research that call centre information would not get through to New and Emerging non-English speaking communities, who would neither be able to call in or receive calls providing them with up-to-date and reliable information. Therefore, part of that funding was used to support the program described in this report. The program was developed by National Seniors in partnership with the Australian Unity CALD Alliance Advisory Group. The CALD Assertive Outreach program was established specifically to provide COVID information, support, and assistance to seniors in New and Emerging CALD communities.

The Australian Unity CALD Alliance Advisory Group is a network of active community leaders from New and Emerging communities in Melbourne. It is led by Elleni Bereded-Samuel AM, who has a refugee background, is a widely respected CALD community advocate and an Australian Unity Executive. The Alliance exists to advise on community engagement, to identify needs so that organisations like Australian Unity may respond to them, and to be a conduit between community members and government on any issues requiring action. The Alliance partners with researchers who do not have grassroots community connections, on research that will benefit communities.

Because National Seniors is a mainstream organisation without robust connections to New and Emerging CALD communities, it was essential for it to partner with the AU CALD Alliance Advisory Group for this program. The two organisations had previously partnered to produce a report entitled *Dealing with Diversity: Aged Care Services for New and Emerging Communities* (2018). Though produced before COVID, the report and the large CALD network focus group that informed it had already highlighted issues of isolation among senior members of CALD communities. They also highlighted the fact that many CALD seniors are disadvantaged by a lack of knowledge of aged care services and by the language and cultural barriers that hinder access to such services, but that they are hungry for such information and assistance.

The AU CALD Alliance members' experience has shown that mainstream approaches to communicating with seniors often do not work for seniors who are part of CALD communities. COVID communications are no exception. A language barrier for those with limited English is one reason, but translated written information is also often ineffective. This is especially the case if translations are created using automated online translation engines, as has been the case for some Australian Government COVID materials. In a rapidly changing information landscape such as that presented by COVID, the need to continually create new materials is another barrier to producing quality translated resources, and

indeed this challenge has left many Government COVID webpages in community languages seriously out of date at the time of writing. In addition, technical information such as the medical and legal jargon associated with COVID can be difficult to translate into community languages, even for proficient native speakers. The back and forth of a conversation is often needed to explain such concepts effectively, not static leaflets or websites. Written resources also do not allow audiences to talk back and ask questions so can leave a lot of uncertainty. Nor are they useful for people who are illiterate in their own language.

On the other hand, call centres and hotlines set up for members of the public to phone for assistance simply do not work for CALD communities because CALD seniors are highly unlikely to call them. There are several reasons for this, including mistrust when not knowing who is at the other end, general wariness when the person who answers the phone doesn't speak the community language, and in some cases inability to use a phone without assistance. For people who do not know much about Australian government systems and mainstream services, the purpose and scope of call centres and hotlines can be unclear and even intimidating to use. CALD seniors therefore tend to rely on other members of their communities for information and support. Setting up hotlines and waiting for CALD seniors to call is a waste of precious resources.

Given this situation, it had long been evident to the Australian Unity CALD Alliance Advisory Group that outreach-style community liaison programs are needed to reach senior members of New and Emerging CALD communities. The Alliance used the model effectively in previous work including a campaign to increase CALD seniors' use of the Victorian Government Seniors Card. National Seniors' corporate wisdom echoed this conclusion in a more general sense. It had found through experience that personal phone calls were the best way to provide support to National Seniors members, even if they were not from a CALD background or from newly arrived groups.

It was clear that the same kind of outreach program would be needed to address the high levels of isolation, suffering and fear developing under COVID-19 within CALD communities. National Seniors organised a meeting between the Australian Unity CALD Alliance Advisory Group, Australian Unity Independent and Assisted Living CEO, Kevin McCoy, and the Department of Health Secretary Robert Day to discuss the issues. Funding for a pilot followed and this program was the result.

Program implementation

Community liaison by community members

The funding National Seniors secured supported the employment of two teams of Community Liaison Officers, or CLOs. CLOs engaged in outreach with specific CALD communities, through which they could provide culturally and linguistically appropriate

assistance and information. The CLO support was available to seniors and to community members concerned about seniors, such as family members in caring roles.

Key to the program's success was the fact that all CLOs were selected from members of the target communities themselves so possessed the knowledge and skills needed to work within communities. More than this, they were chosen because they were very experienced, well-respected, volunteer community leaders who had spent years or even decades building up networks and relationships of trust within their communities.

Also crucial to success was the outreach model of the program. CLOs did not wait behind a phone for community members to call. As liaison officers they reached out to the community, drawing on well-established community networks to contact the seniors who were most isolated and most in need. Such assertive outreach into disadvantaged communities requires 'community licence'. To be effective the outreach team had to be leaders in these communities and speakers of the language, but they also required the support of top community leaders to do their work. It was only by being present, by actively listening, and by building up trust through repeated contact and meaningful conversation that CLOs were able to find out what community members needed so they could provide relevant assistance.

Team locations and timeline

The program was initially based in Melbourne, working with New and Emerging communities associated with the Australian Unity CALD Alliance Advisory Group. The model was tested during a pilot period of about five months in the latter half of 2020, during which one CLO, Norma Serrano, was employed to engage with the Melbourne Filipino community. This community was chosen for the pilot because many community members speak English or are familiar with it, and they are also familiar with the Australian media.

Later in 2020, after the success of the pilot, Nationals Seniors applied to secure further funding from the Department for an expanded version of the program. CLO Norma Serrano was promoted to Team Leader from December 2020. Her new role was to take charge of an expanded Victorian hub which employed four CLOs to serve the Afghan, Filipino, Spanish speaking and regional Victorian CALD communities. The hub expanded further in February 2021 with a fifth CLO recruited to serve the Burmese Chin community. These communities were chosen to cover a range of groups and needs, so the selection reflects the diversity within diversity. There was a desire to continue the good work with the Filipino community rather than stop it after a few months and it is a community with wide interactions with other groups. The Spanish speaking community is large, includes people from many nationalities, and has health, trust, and language issues. The Afghan community faces religious barriers as well as barriers of language and culture. The Burmese community is primarily comprised of newly arrived migrants struggling to adjust to living in a new land.

Around the same time, in January 2021, a second hub was established in Sydney. Two CLOs were employed there to engage with Cambodian and Arabic speaking communities. The Arabic speaking community was chosen because it is the largest New and Emerging CALD community in Western Sydney. It includes many different nationalities and some variants of the Arabic language. The Cambodian community is also large, and connection was built on client networks associated with respite services that Australian Unity already provided for seniors through a Multicultural Respite Network. Respite services had been suspended due to COVID, so the respite services manager was seconded to the role of Sydney Team Leader.

When funding was withdrawn, both Melbourne and Sydney teams had to cease their official operations in mid-2021.

Organisations and management

Through her work in building the AU CALD Alliance, the program was Elleni Bereded-Samuel's brainchild. She brought to the table extensive experience in community development, an insider perspective having migrated to Australia as a refugee herself many years ago, and in-kind support from Australian Unity for her paid time. Ms Bereded-Samuel oversaw program design and recruitment of team members. She also mentored Team Leaders and CLOs through the duration of the program.

National Seniors Australia hosted the program. CLOs and Team Leaders became National Seniors employees. They worked alongside other National Seniors staff funded to support seniors through COVID-19, though with the distinction of being outreach workers rather than call centre staff. National Seniors CEO Professor John McCallum provided advice and mentorship to team members whenever needed and ensured they had a sense of identity within the organisation. He worked closely with Ms Bereded-Samuel in a collaborative partnership driven by mutual concern for CALD community members' welfare.

This report's purpose

With the program's funding ending, this report was produced in part to communicate its achievements and outcomes to the Department of Health. Accordingly, key metrics of success are reported here along with details of the program's recipe for success.

The implications of the report go beyond a short-term project. The program addressed some urgent CALD community issues, but they were just the tip of the iceberg. Further work is urgently needed within non-mainstream Australian CALD communities. It is also the case that a great deal of money and time can be wasted on ineffective strategies. This report gives an indication of what some of the needs are and provides a roadmap for how to address them effectively.

The approach we describe is not only effective but also cost effective. It draws on what may be the greatest untapped resource in this country – the pool of passionate, talented,

networked, driven, CALD community volunteer leaders. These people, including most of the contributors to this report, have spent their lives in voluntary community service and know how to resolve issues and solve problems for their people. Paying them to do this work full time, with the backing of mainstream organisations and government funding, is a relatively simple pathway to success.

This report was written to inspire further programs run by communities for communities with community expertise determining the communication strategies. Programs such as these will necessarily need to be supported by the governments to whom CALD communities pay their taxes, so that all Australians may genuinely have an equal share in what this 'lucky' country has to offer.

Key personnel

The program was initiated and overseen by two senior people: the program's visionary Eleni Bereded-Samuel AM from Australian Unity, and the Chief Executive Officer of partner organisation National Seniors Australia, Professor John McCallum. Its grassroots face was provided by Community Liaison Officers (CLOs). Norma Serrano was the CLO employed for the pilot period and she became the Melbourne Team Leader after the pilot. Five other CLOs contributed their experiences to this report: Melbourne team members Cecilia Gomez-Benitez, Jing Sosa, Aisha Mahboob and Lian Ching, and Sydney team member Chanthy Lim-Chum. Sydney Team Leader Annette Fenton also contributed to the report. These key personnel were supported by other staff at National Seniors Australia and Australian Unity, notably Jake Magill who oversees National Seniors' COVID call centre and two other Sydney team CLOs, Mona Ataya and Anna Khatler.

Program Visionary: Eleni Bereded-Samuel

Eleni Bereded-Samuel AM is the Executive Manager, Diversity and Capability Development at mutual company Australian Unity, in its Independent and Assisted Living division. She provides leadership and subject matter expertise on diversity and inclusion related issues for our diverse community of senior Australians. She has extensive skills in creating strategies and programs to help people access and participate in society. She advocates for diversity initiatives and uses her deep networks to build collaboration with diverse stakeholders. She has served on many state and federal government boards including the Victorian Multicultural Commission, Australian Social Inclusion, the Royal Women's Hospital, Western Health Hospital and currently The Royal Children's Hospital, Breast Screen Victoria and the Wellways Board. The program described in this report was her brainchild and drew on her inclusive work initiating and managing the Australian Unity CALD Alliance Advisory



Host Organisation CEO: Professor John McCallum

Professor John McCallum is the Chief Executive Officer of non-profit National Seniors Australia. Prior to joining National Seniors, he was an academic who researched ageing and retirement. He completed his doctorate at Oxford University then worked at Australian universities in four states and territories and at the National Health and Medical Research Council. His extensive research on ageing includes multicultural publications such as the 1990 study *Ethnic Women in the Middle*, about daughters caring for older migrants in Australia, and the 2018 joint National Seniors/Australian Unity report *Dealing with Diversity: Aged Care Services for New and Emerging Communities*.





Melbourne Team Leader: Norma Serrano

Norma Serrano started as a Community Liaison Officer during this program's pilot period and was promoted to Team Leader after the pilot finished. She has been a volunteer in the Filipino Community for 30 years, since moving to Australia from the Philippines. This work included a period of service as Chair of the Filipino Community Council of Victoria. She previously worked in sales and as a manager for Filipino community aged care services.



Spanish Speaking CLO: Cecilia Gomez-Benitez

Cecilia Gomez-Benitez has been a volunteer for the Spanish speaking community for 21 years, since migrating from El Salvador. Her leadership positions include President of the Foundation Salvadorian Communities in Australia. She has worked in diverse community engagement roles, including as Electorate Officer for different State Members of Parliament, and in organisations against domestic violence, supporting asylum seekers and Seniors



Afghan CLO: Aisha Mahboob

Aisha Mahboob has been a volunteer with the Afghan community since 2002, after migrating to Australia in 1998 and spending four years finding her own way around the Australian system. She initially built networks through her work as a driving instructor for Afghani women before becoming a bicultural community worker at a community health service.



Regional Victoria and Filipino CLO: Jing Sosa

Leoncio 'Jing' Sosa is a long-standing volunteer within the Filipino community, serving in leadership roles on the Victorian and National Filipino Communities Councils. In the Philippines prior to migrating to Australia, he worked on grassroots social projects with farmers, fishers, factory workers and young people experiencing addiction, creating opportunities for change.

Chin (Burma) CLO: Lian Ching

Salai Biak Za 'Lian' Ching from the Victorian Chin community was a PhD student while working as a CLO. He previously worked as a researcher and SBS content producer. Since 2004 he has volunteered as a community tutor and program coordinator. He was the final CLO recruited for the Melbourne team.



Cambodian CLO: Chanthy Lim-Chum

Chanthy Lim-Chum is an aged care worker for Australian Unity. She has also worked in Australian Unity's respite service with Cambodian clients. Her links with the Sydney Cambodian community, Khmer language and excellent communication and engagement skills made her an ideal choice for CLO.



Sydney Team Leader: Annette Fenton

Annette Fenton has worked for Australian Unity for a decade in homecare services and coordinating a day care respite service for seniors in CALD communities. COVID restrictions led to the closure of the respite program, providing her with an opportunity to work on this program from January 2021.



Other personnel

Jake Magill is the Commercial Services Manager for National Seniors Australia. In addition to his other duties, he managed the National Seniors COVID call centre during this program, through which he provided technical assistance and training to the CALD Community Liaison Officers.

Mona Ataya (1 February – 15 April 2021) and **Anna Khatter** (10 May – 30 June 2021) worked as Community Liaison Officers for Arabic speaking communities as part of the Sydney team. Like other CLOs they already had established links with the communities they were liaising with. Ms Ataya had left the program at the time of writing this report and Ms Khatter had not been in the role for long, so they did not participate in preparing it, but their excellent work is acknowledged.

“It broke my heart to listen to some of my seniors, crying over the phone. Most of them don’t have any relative or social networks. It has been a very challenging time for them. During lockdowns, I organised some volunteers from the local charities and churches to supply them with essential needs. You have no idea how many vulnerable, lonely seniors are out there. They rely on their landline. They haven’t got access to transport for medical and other appointments such as vaccine and testing. I am concerned that post COVID there will be a lot of mental health issues.”

Cecilia Gomez-Benitez

Aims, scope and the evolving nature of the work

Government-funded programs are often established to address one specific issue, leaving other related issues unaddressed. Our program's primary aim was to address the urgent need for reliable information in the COVID pandemic. It achieved that as we outline below.

But the work also shone a light on reasons why CALD community projects often need to address multiple issues at once. Having opened channels for COVID communication, we were able to address numerous other urgent social and financial problems, contributing to communities' long-term equity and sustainability.

The core project of COVID assistance

The program's core project, for which it received funding, was addressing COVID-related needs. Most obviously this meant providing accurate, up to date information about COVID transmission, policies, and services in linguistically and culturally appropriate ways. CLOs assisted community members to stay safe and obey laws and rules. They helped community members access assistance, facilities, technologies, and credible information sources related to COVID. They helped them understand lockdowns, social distancing, quarantine rules, QR code contact tracing technology, why QR Codes are safer than pen and paper in terms of virus transmission, and how to respond to contact tracing alerts to report for COVID testing. They provided information about COVID vaccine risks and availability, and assisted community members to access vaccines, including helping with consent forms and bookings. They counteracted the impacts that misleading information sources were having on community members, for example social media feeds shared by relatives in Australia and overseas. They also provided a culturally safe outlet for community members to discuss their concerns gleaned from such sources. They sent community contacts COVID care packs containing small items such as masks and hand sanitiser to help them feel that they are being looked after. And they engaged with other community leaders to discuss ways to best support communities through the crisis. Quantitative measures of their success in these tasks are detailed in the next section of the report.

A core part of CLOs' work was simply to talk to those who were socially isolated. CLOs were initially tasked with contacting senior community members to make a well-being check. During such calls their primary job was to listen to community members to identify and support their needs. They facilitated this by starting with an open question, such

“We found that what we were doing really is very relevant to the people, to our community. We were able to empower them, provide them with knowledge, and give them the confidence to navigate particularly the health care services website for more information.”

Jing Sosa

“Australians from Chin background have encountered structural systematic barriers. With this community-specific outreach program, we were able to address the social issues in their own language in a culturally appropriate manner.”

Lian Ching

someone. They had this in common with other senior Australians who accessed the National Seniors English-language COVID call centre.

Once CLOs had spoken to individual community members regularly and built relationships of trust with them, their work deepened to asking questions about COVID’s physical, emotional, social, and spiritual effects on them, as well as answering community members’ questions about COVID. Community contacts often shared detailed information about their experiences, giving CLOs insights into what was happening in communities, especially during the long periods of COVID lockdown in Victoria. Such insights included what information sources people used to find out about COVID, what they thought about vaccines, and how these changed over time.

The conversations also gave CLOs the opportunity to talk with community members about the mechanisms they had used to cope with the first waves of COVID, to remind them of their own resilience. An important part of CLO work was keeping despair at bay by inspiring confidence within their contacts that they would be able to overcome the issues they faced.

Even aspects of COVID that other Australians might find mundane were sometimes a source of distress for senior members of New and Emerging CALD communities. For example, one of CLO Lian Ching’s contacts described being singled out by a supermarket manager when she could not check in using a QR Code. She was taken to another place to write down her name and contact details. Not fully understanding what was happening, she was afraid and humiliated by the experience, so stopped going to the shopping centre. Another family became afraid when police made a courtesy call while they were in quarantine. Past trauma made them fearful of the police, especially because they were not sure if they had done something wrong. Helping contacts manage such situations was also part of a CLO’s job.

The need to address other issues

Irrespective of this core project focus, it was clear that addressing COVID issues exclusively was not appropriate, for two main reasons. First, COVID-19 has had many impacts in addition to actual coronavirus infections and deaths, affecting emotional, social, cultural,

as ‘is there anything I can help you with?’ This enabled community members to open up about their issues rather than CLOs making assumptions about them. Talking with people as individuals rather than through mass media or group communications was key to community members feeling willing to engage with CLOs. Many valued the opportunity just to talk to

and economic spheres and more. Second, members of New and Emerging communities have many acute needs that must be addressed if they are to be able to respond to COVID's impacts effectively. For these reasons the program became a vehicle to find gaps that needed to be addressed, especially for the most vulnerable.

“COVID is important for this moment, yes, but when we talk to people there's always something else, not just one topic, that we just stick to. That's when we get to hear more about people, what their needs are.”

Chanthy Lim-Chum

In practice, this meant that when CLOs discussed COVID with their contacts, conversations would broaden to contacts' health and illnesses in general, and from there to aged care or disability support including government funding, My Aged Care and National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) provisions. Many contacts had never heard of My Aged Care and were unaware that they might be eligible for funded support services and/or income support such as Carer Allowance. Even if they had heard of it, the My Aged Care system is notoriously difficult to navigate, and impenetrable for many CALD community members. In addition, some CALD community members are hesitant to ask for more from the government than what they already receive, so will wait until there is an urgent need for aged care services before applying. Some community members already receiving care asked CLOs for assistance in reviewing and updating their services because their needs had changed but the level of care had not.

In such situations it was important for CLOs to be able to assist contacts further by encouraging them to apply for support through My Aged Care or Centrelink, helping them with paperwork, or referring them to other services for urgent help. The program assisted many people this way, relieving the suffering of unpaid carers and those being cared for.

Beyond these welfare entitlements, CLOs assisted community members to address other urgent needs. They included lack of housing, lack of food, elder abuse, domestic violence, financial issues, scams, and serious medical problems. Many seniors were unaware of the health services they could access for free such as an annual package of five physiotherapy or podiatry visits. CLOs also helped contacts manage mental health issues, which were often the product of these other problems or COVID-related isolation. Such help ranged from referring people to mental health support services through to encouraging them to volunteer in a charity op shop while unable to find paid work.

More than providing information

Community members frequently required assistance with paperwork: filling out forms, deciphering official correspondence, and making appointments in various domains of life, including visiting the dentist, requesting furniture assistance, applying for a birth certificate,

“There was a need for CLOs to address all the concerns in a very timely manner. They needed immediate answers. They thought we know everything – legal, medical, or counselling matters... Our work goes beyond our job description.”

Norma Serrano

getting a divorce, or seeking legal advice. Some had a Seniors Card but needed advice on how to use it. CLOs helped with all these things at one time or another, by writing instructions in their language, discussing it over the phone, assisting them to

find an interpreter, or referring them to an organisation that could work with them on their problem.

Being aware that they do not possess expertise in all areas, CLOs and Team Leaders cultivated a role as advocates to ensure clients found specialised support with the right person or the right agency. Nonetheless, because of the general lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate support for their communities, CLOs did often find themselves translating, interpreting, and assisting in other ways to ensure clients' needs were met.

These diverse issues give an indication of the level of need that exists for senior Australians who are part of New and Emerging CALD communities. This program was able to address some of it, and in doing so increased the stability and sustainability of the target communities. This in turn contributed to communities' ability to cope with the COVID crisis, and influenced the other groups within their multicultural neighbourhoods, benefiting the entire nation. But with the program coming to an end, there is still much more work yet to be done.

Outcomes and value of the program

Immediate benefits

Because of the dynamic and communal nature of the work, the program's outcomes and values were multiple, beyond providing information about COVID.

Empowering community members to access aged care services was a particularly satisfying outcome for CLOs. CLOs referred numerous contacts to My Aged Care and often also accompanied them at needs assessment appointments to ensure they were able to get what they needed, and sometimes to provide language interpretation and cultural safety support. This assistance resulted in some contacts having aged care services approved during the program's duration, with others assessed and awaiting approval at the time of writing. The program's successes led community contacts (clients) to recommend it to other community members, creating a snowball effect of people contacting CLOs for assistance. Program success and community trust are key elements that reinforce each other iteratively, producing a program that works.

General awareness of other kinds of services and supports available to older Australians was another outcome. The program changed community members' relationships with government and providers for the better. In this sense CLOs were useful to both sides by bridging communities and government.

The program raised community leaders' awareness of the work that bodies like National Seniors Australia, and Australian Unity through the Australian Unity CALD Alliance Advisory Group, are doing for the Australian community. This built further bridges between those bodies and CALD community organisations. The program also raised individual community members' awareness of such organisations. That awareness came with intangible but invaluable benefits for older community members: the feeling that they are not alone, that they are seen, that there are people and organisations who want to assist them.

Central to that sense of being recognised and not being alone was the founding principle of the program: that support be provided in community languages by people with extensive cultural awareness because they are part of the communities themselves. Language is the basis of communication so a person cannot express themselves or fully engage in social interactions if they are unable to speak their own language.

“Our Seniors were falling through the cracks. It was necessary for us to use the CALD Older People COVID-19 Support Line to meet their needs. My Spanish community has gained more knowledge of the government and non-government support services now.”

Cecilia Gomez-Benitez

“This program is so important because our seniors can express themselves freely using their native tongue. They are open and honest with how they feel about the government, politicians, and pandemic issues. The trust has been established already at the grass root level because we speak the same language and share the same culture.”

Norma Serrano

services that go beyond perfunctory referrals and information, and instead provide community members with a receptive ear and, to an extent, companionship. CLOs emphasise the importance of just listening to community members because being heard is very important to them.

Long-term benefits

In a long-term sense, another benefit of the program was community capacity building. As longstanding community volunteers and leaders, the CLOs were already engaged in capacity building activities. But participating in this program – and listening attentively to community members talk – gave them new insights into issues that community members were grappling with. During extended lockdown some seniors became extremely lonely and sad because of being alone. The program revealed the sheer level of suffering some elderly people endure but which is usually hidden, including suffering caused by acute isolation, domestic violence, or a lack of food. Some issues were caused by COVID or exacerbated by it, but others were ongoing problems. So, while the program’s short-term benefit was responding to the COVID crisis, it also tapped into long term issues that surfaced with the novel availability of culturally and linguistically appropriate crisis support.

The program also resourced CLOs to connect and reconnect with the most vulnerable community members, to support them through a major crisis and relieve their feelings of helplessness, loneliness, and isolation. While CLOs may have done some of this work unpaid in other circumstances, being paid to do it gave them greater capacity to focus on the work, build and maintain greater networks, and to be present for more people more often and for a greater length of time. Communities are defined by communication networks, so a program funded to boost communication within a community will inherently make that community stronger.


This is especially important for people legally restricted from leaving their homes and gathering with others. It is important for people used to seeing family members regularly, for whom that prolonged, regular contact is suddenly cut short. It is also important during frightening times when people need to be able to talk through concerns to preserve their mental and emotional well-being. The extent of isolation revealed by the program reinforced the necessity of support

Further, the program gave the CLOs renewed visibility within the community, with community members getting to know them better at both professional and personal levels through their ongoing communications and interactions. Team members' affiliation with Australian Unity and National Seniors Australia bolstered their credibility within communities and with other community leaders, helping to spotlight them as the people to call for assistance. The affiliation signalled that they meant business, so they gained more traction in communications. The non-profit nature of both organisations signalled to community members that the CLOs were there to help them not to take advantage.

The knowledge and experience team members gained in the role equipped them better to refer community members to appropriate services in the future and to seek help from different authorities when needed. Learning more about how other community organisations operate and more about the aged care sector were bonuses for team members who are moving elsewhere in their paid work with this program's end. The experience gave team members more confidence to work in mainstream organisations.

CLOs and Team Leaders were able to learn from each other about different CALD communities and on occasion to work with different communities. As well as enriching their knowledge of other cultures, which many team members enjoyed, this enhanced their cross-cultural competency and networks and diversified their capacity-building expertise. There is benefit in this for COVID communication because the kind of people employed to be CLOs do not operate solely within their own communities. Australia is one of the most multicultural societies in the world, and CALD community leaders interact with diverse people in their daily lives. Having experience in communicating COVID information with their own community and intensive cross-cultural experience enables them to cross many cultural boundaries and disseminate information widely.

The opportunity to serve their own communities was a prominent benefit for team members that inspired them to raise their level of commitment. This kind of paid job is – unfortunately – not common, and team members highly valued the chance to do it.



“It was great work. It was really appreciated by communities and by us. It was really needed at that time and it will always be needed, because unfortunately with CALD backgrounds if we don't have someone from their own background, from their own country, someone who can speak the language, it's very hard to convey the message. So this project was a bridge between government, service providers and the community.”

Aisha Mahboob

Achievements in numbers

In the preceding sections we have centred the program's qualitative outcomes such as community members feeling supported and empowered with information and services. Those outcomes are invaluable but also immeasurable. But some program achievements can be measured. Here are some numbers highlighting the program's reach. They include:

- the number of distinct CALD communities the program engaged with,
- the number of individual members of those communities, mostly seniors, who were directly contacted through this program by phone or email to provide support,
- the number of phone calls and emails made to individual community members, given community members were contacted more than once during the program,
- the number of individual community members referred to external service providers including My Aged Care, Centrelink, legal services, mental health services and so on
- the number of community meetings and presentations delivered by team members.

6

CALD communities engaged with in Victoria and New South Wales

1286

Community members directly contacted by Melbourne CLOs

637

Community members directly contacted by Sydney CLOs

10088

Phone calls and emails to community contacts by the Melbourne team

1233

Community members referred to services by the Melbourne team

489

Community meetings and presentations for the Melbourne team

2125

Phone calls and emails to community contacts by the Sydney team

340


Community members referred to services by the Sydney team

86

Community meetings and presentations for the Sydney team

“If we could save one person’s life, we’ve done a great job. So we are proud to say that thousands of lives we saved during this project, because people didn’t know what to do, didn’t have the support systems around them.”

Elleni Bereded-Samuel AM



“Who’s going to implement this project? That was a big challenge for me. I had to get the right people for the positions so that we could deliver what we said we would at the beginning of the project. People you can trust. People who, when given advice, take it and come back to you with other ideas and initiatives. We need someone with digital skills. We need someone who’s got good language skills. We need someone who’s got a good standing in the community. It was very hard to find a team like this, but without the great team that we had we wouldn’t have been able to do this work.”

Elleni Bereded-Samuel AM

Community Liaison Officers front and centre

Community Liaison Officers were the heart and soul of this program. Their specific skills, knowledge and experiences enabled the program to succeed. As the CLO profiles on previous pages show, all were recruited primarily because of their longstanding service as committed community volunteers and community leaders. The work they did was an extension of work they were already doing, and it takes a specific kind of person to do it.

In this section we outline the essential skills, knowledge and experience that effective CLOs possess, to guide future programs when recruiting staff. The CLOs in this program already possessed most of the tools they needed to get on with the job: the attitude, the networks, the trust, the language, the cultural embeddedness, the shared experience, and more.

A vocation not a job

A fundamental trait essential to the CLO role is the right attitude. This is best characterised as a burning drive to help the community. All CLOs who contributed to this report agree on the centrality of this. It must be accompanied by an inherent work ethic and commitment to the role. Flexibility to respond to urgent issues as they arise, no matter the time or day, is also crucial. Creativity is important for responding to each person and situation individually, rather than providing a formulaic response. These factors make the CLO role quite different from a standard community service job. CLOs work with communities, not for them. Communities have solutions to their problems and need support, not prefabricated plans.

Most CLOs saw the position as an opportunity to be paid well for work they were already doing and wanted to do more of. One difference the paid position made was providing a mandate for them to contact community members with regular well-being checks, rather than asking once or waiting for them to ask for help, which many seniors are reluctant to do. This funded mandate added clout and credibility to these leaders' inherent drive to help.

Community networks and trust

Anyone can liaise with a community, but to do so effectively – to create deep and abiding change – takes work and time. This is especially the case for building robust networks with

“I felt like this work was a mission. Although I was chosen by Norma and Elleni, for me it was a calling. I had to do this job seriously to help my people by providing hope and mental support during this time of the pandemic. This job was truly challenging but rewarding as I gave them relevant and updated information about COVID-19. At the same time, I was able to empower the most vulnerable seniors in my community.”

Jing Sosa

large numbers of community members. Because the CLOs in this program were already known and trusted community leaders with an established area of influence, it was in most cases straightforward for them to start contacting community members. For example, CLO Aisha Mahboob was already helping an Afghan women's organisation with an elderly group they had so knew lots of people over 65. CLOs' good communications with contacts further engendered trust, leading contacts to refer other community members to them for assistance. Word of mouth recommendations spread rapidly within communities so maintaining active networks of contacts was not a problem.

Trust itself is a notoriously difficult thing to build while being easy to lose. Factors CLOs associated with building trust with community members included patience, empathy, an open mind, and excellent listening skills. All these traits grease the wheels of open communication.

Consistency, reliability, accurate information, timely action to address needs, and regular communication about progress all matter so that community members can place confidence in a CLO to do right by them.

Honesty cultivates trust in two ways. Always telling the truth enhances reliability, while being open and honest about one's own experiences with mainstream Australian society opens doors for community members to discuss such issues.

Confidentiality is important. CLOs are part of the community, so know other people the contact knows and may be making wellbeing calls to other people in the contact's circle. Any verbal conversations and case notes must therefore omit sensitive information.

Culturally appropriate demonstrations of respect in speech and action also matter. Knowing what you are doing both culturally and professionally is vital to avoid alienating people who will otherwise be wary.

Remembering details of people's lives enhanced trust in CLOs, as did offering suggestions and options without imposing ideas on clients. A principle of CLO work was to treat clients the way the worker would also want to be treated.

Because trust is intangible and cannot be directly observed or measured, a way of gauging the level of trust was to pay attention to contacts' reactions and to the extent that they disclosed information.

“The word trust is an abstract concept. Albeit, I did not have direct access to measure my client's mind or their way of thinking, I felt positive and truly believed that they were open minded and eager to learn more about the COVID-19 vaccine and its related information in their own language. I knew that my seniors have developed self-confidence and filled with adequate knowledge to get through during this difficult time.”

Lian Ching

Once trust had been built, contacts would tell CLOs many intimate details of their lives, talking about families, finances, and sensitive topics such as incontinence. Such intimate discussions were a sign of the program's success at meeting people's need to be heard and finding out what further work needed to be done.

As community leaders themselves, CLOs were well placed to contact leaders of other community organisations to further build and strengthen community networks. Sometimes this was achieved through mass communication with leaders, for example, during the extended Victorian lockdown in 2020 Team Leader (then CLO) Norma Serrano worked with other staff to run a virtual workshop on COVID mental health issues. In 2021, CLO Aisha Mahboob sent out emails to many community leaders to tell them about her role and immediately started receiving emails and phone calls in return with lists of 10 or 15 contacts in need, provided by different community organisations. This clearly demonstrates one of the meanings of 'assertive outreach', which characterised the program.

On one occasion an existing community organisation seemed to feel threatened by this program because it had positioned itself as already supporting its members adequately. Knowledge of the community was key to navigating this challenge. Being able to differentiate between our program and theirs in a diplomatic matter enabled collaboration rather than competition going forward. Negotiations were helped by making it clear that this program aimed to support community organisations as well as individual community members. The targeted nature of this program reassured the organisation by showing it was not an attempt to take away their funding and replace their function in the community.

While CLOs were highly trusted because of their years of prior community service, outsiders also gained trust to an extent through meaningful working relationships. Sydney Team Leader Annette Fenton felt the relationships her team had with existing Australian Unity clients through the Multicultural Respite Network was a useful starting point for building up trust networks in this program. Similarly, National Seniors CEO John McCallum's previous work with the Australian Unity CALD Alliance Advisory Group, notably the 2018 *Dealing with Diversity* report co-published by both organisations, earned Alliance members' trust in him.

“How you present yourself is critical to how people will take your advice. Community engagement and community trust doesn't happen overnight. For the last 24 years I have been working with communities from different walks of life. In my view, and in my experience, the one size fits all approach doesn't work when it comes to community engagement. I build relationships with community leaders and people at the grassroots which allows me to learn about what the community needs, directly from the community.”

Elleni Bereded-Samuel AM

However, there is a difference between trust in a person to manage aspects of a program and trust in them to fulfill a community liaison role. Nothing can replace the expertise and intuition that comes from shared personal experiences, such as having a refugee background or being a member of a New and Emerging CALD community in Australia. Having this experience helps a team member understand what they are being asked to do in this kind of work. For this reason, it is recommended that all roles with hands-on CALD community contact, including CLO and Team Leader roles, be filled by people who come from a New and Emerging CALD community themselves. A person or people from New and Emerging CALD communities must lead at the top to ensure this kind of expert oversight is present for all aspects of the program. Middle level managers must also be able to understand the program so that communication is always clear, so if they are also from a CALD community, all the better.

Linguistically appropriate outreach

An essential skill for people in the CLO role is proficiency in the languages of the communities they are liaising with. The language barrier is a major challenge for reaching some New and Emerging CALD communities. If a CLO cannot communicate fluently with community members, they will not be able to provide adequate assistance, since community members need someone to listen to them as much as they need material supports. In this program, where community members spoke multiple languages, CLOs sometimes had to partner with another community member to reach every pocket of the community. For example, CLO Lian Ching, who is from the Burmese Chin community, partnered with someone from the Burmese Karen community because he did not speak the Karen language himself. Conversely, being able to speak the same language was a major program strength. It made the program strong because it reassured community contacts that CLOs were able to talk to them and answer their questions.

Language fluency is not only needed for conversing with community members but also for translating and interpreting official government materials. Yet language proficiency is not just knowledge of a language's formal grammar and vocabulary. It is a matter of being fluent in everyday ways of speaking and communicating. CLOs found that some of the government produced COVID materials written in languages other than English used technical, overly formal, or unnatural phrasing and terminology, making them effectively inaccessible and unengaging. Just as English language communication about COVID was undertaken in different styles and media to make the information accessible to different audiences, so too, materials that have been translated and interpreted from English need to account for the styles, preferences, and norms of the audiences of interest. The same is true for all other communication within a community, not just translated materials. In short, CLOs must be community members who intuitively select appropriate communication codes and norms when conversing with community contacts.

Team members identified several problems with government produced COVID communication materials. For example, Cambodian CLO Chanthy Lim-Chum initially tried to disseminate government-translated COVID information as part of her work, in the spirit of providing accurate information. But she stopped when community members complained. One of the problems was the level of inaccessible jargon the translation contained, which was so high she needed a dictionary to retranslate the material from English to understand it herself. Another was the tiny font size for Khmer language sections that made the text unreadable to most people, especially seniors with poor eyesight. It seems clear that the information was not produced by someone living in the Cambodian community. The same is likely true for many other community language materials. Program lead Elleni Bereded-Samuel noted government COVID wellbeing leaflets poorly translated into different languages which did not make sense. The COVID crisis exposed a challenge for the way government authorities engaged with Australians from CALD backgrounds with communications issues.

Linguistic appropriateness also extends to adapting communication in English so that it is appropriate for English speaking CALD community members. There are two sides to this. One is avoiding Australian colloquialisms and idioms that people who learned English outside Australia are unfamiliar with. This can also be helpful for people who recently started learning English. The other is presenting information in ways that capture the target audience's imagination. For example, CLO Jing Sosa used an adapted version of the viral mnemonic 'Protect your MEN and follow WOMEN' to communicate key COVID messages with his contacts in a way that was entertaining and memorable. As he explained it, M-E-N is for Mouth, Eyes and Nose, the three portals for the virus to enter your body, while W-O-M-E-N stands for Washing your hands, Observing physical distancing, Mask-wearing, Exercising to improve your immune system, and Never ignoring the deadly threat of this virus. Knowing your audience is fundamental to effective communication in any language.

Culturally appropriate outreach

Being able to design outreach strategies that are culturally appropriate is a key skill for the CLO role. Naturally, what is culturally appropriate differs from one culture to another so intimate knowledge and understanding of a culture is essential. This is one reason it is important that CLOs being to the communities they are liaising with.

Culturally appropriate means attending to the specifics of the community of interest. For example, Australian organisations wanting to engage with the African community may employ a Nigerian person to do the job, but this doesn't acknowledge the diversity of communities on the African continent. Nigeria was colonised by the British, has retained aspects of the British system, has English as its official language, and Nigerian migrants to Australia tend to be highly educated. A person with this background cannot easily relate to migrants from Ethiopia, which has never been colonised, is not part of the Western system,

does not have English as an official language, and whose migrants to Australia are mostly from a refugee background with the disruption to education that entails. For this reason, what is culturally appropriate must be defined by communities at the grassroots level not imposed through external assumptions.

Communication preferences

An obvious way cultural appropriateness manifested within the program was in the strategies CLOs employed to communicate with community members. For example, contacting members of the Spanish speaking community necessitated understanding daily routines and timetables. Senior Spanish speaking community members often wake up later than is common for other Australians, watch the Spanish news, have a late lunch and then an afternoon siesta, so Spanish CLO Cecilia Gomez-Benitez would only contact them in the late afternoon to make sure they answered the phone. Choosing the right day is a further challenge. For example, Cambodian community events that are useful for building up networks of contacts often take place on Saturdays and Sundays.

The impact of this situation was that CLOs would often find themselves working at night and on weekends. To be fully effective, the CLO role must be flexible in this way. Liaising with a community means adapting to community norms, because community members will not always be willing or able to access a 9 to 5, Monday to Friday service. At the same time, CLOs need to care for themselves when managing their schedule, to avoid burnout. Negotiating availability and time out with community members requires sensitivity, if CLOs are to retain the community trust that they acquired by being available in the first place.

Preferred communication mediums also differ from one community to another, as well as being shaped by clients' age, wealth and more. Intimate knowledge of such community preferences was needed to ensure communication was effective. CLOs found senior community members often do not have access to mobile phones and instead rely on landlines. Even if they have a mobile, some do not read text messages. Community members varied widely in whether they would engage with emails or had internet access, so email communication had to be used selectively. Some community members used social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Messenger, so that was an effective way to communicate with them but not with other people. Likewise, SBS radio programs in community languages were sometimes effective channels for reaching many people. For example, the Radio Dari program is popular with elderly members of the Afghan community. Where possible, face to face communication was often the medium of choice, whether through seniors' groups, shopping centres, community centres, social events in parks, pop-up stalls at the local temple, Harmony Day gatherings, or meetings at a community leader's home. Community leaders could not always pass on lists of vulnerable community members to contact, so CLOs had to actively go into the community and reach out to large numbers of people to collect the details of seniors in need.

This succeeded in part because encouraging interpersonal, word-of-mouth communication within families or peer groups was frequently the best way to gain traction. By the end of the program this reaped rewards in the form of inbound calls to CLOs' phone numbers from new community contacts seeking help. This affirmed the value of the program and the level of trust it had fostered within the community. But it was built on continual active outreach. In contrast, sitting back and waiting for community members to contact an advertised phone line did not work on its own, as CALD Alliance members had predicted based on experience in previous initiatives.

Values and beliefs

In addition to accessible communication, culturally appropriate outreach entails accounting for community members' values and beliefs. For example, in many cultures the idea that older people would be cared for by strangers paid by the government is an unattractive prospect. People may believe their children have a duty to care for them when they are old just as they cared for their children when they were young. Equally, spouses may be reluctant to seek outside care for their partner if there is a risk of them being forcibly separated. Some families simply want their loved one home, not away from them in residential aged care. Only a CLO from the same culture will be equipped to navigate such delicate conversations if they believe community members would benefit from accessing aged care services. CLOs can be a critical bridge between communities, government, and service providers to negotiate and advocate for appropriate care, both in terms of explaining the urgency of a situation to assessors and in ensuring family members' wishes are understood.

Helping communities navigate cultural changes due to COVID also requires an insider perspective. For example, in 2021 questions were asked within the Muslim community about whether COVID vaccines contain animal substances and are therefore haram. To address this concern, CLO Aisha Mahboob approached the Afghan Mosque Imam. She knew him personally because she had taught his wife and daughter to drive. Speaking in Pashto, she asked him to keep her up to date with all COVID-related correspondence he received from the Islamic Council of Victoria. She translated the English version of the Council's correspondence into Pashto and Dari and was then able to show community members the official word on COVID vaccines to dispel their fears and myths. This required slightly different approaches for the different ethnic groups within her community, whether Afghan, Pashto, Tajik or Hazara. Her networks, languages, cultural competency, religious affiliation, and community knowledge were all necessary ingredients in the success of this endeavour.

Norms and taboos

Not all COVID changes are about managing public health, some are about managing grief and comforting each other at a time when loved ones are sick and dying. One example of a COVID-related change concerns new ways of dealing with death. Cremations were rare in

the Philippines before COVID, so Filipino community members have found it difficult to deal with COVID-related cremation practices and funeral services attended by few people. Part of Filipino CLOs' work has been talking with people about this. Another example concerns interpersonal interactions with grieving people from another culture. Different cultures have different conventions and taboos around physical touch, necessitating caution when comforting people. While Spanish speaking and Filipino community members may touch a grieving person's head to confer a blessing, touching a person's head is inappropriate and disrespectful in Chin culture. CLOs who already know the intricacies of cultural norms are much better placed than outsiders to navigate sensitive situations such as these.

This principle was driven home by the experience of Melbourne Team Leader and former CLO Norma Serrano. Ms Serrano was a brilliant CLO for her own Filipino community, an experienced Australian Unity CALD Alliance Advisory Group member, a highly respected Team Leader and a cross-culturally aware professional. She worked on the Australian Unity Seniors' Card project with members of many CALD communities. Yet even she shared her experiences of making cultural faux pas when engaging with members of the other communities her team worked with in this program. She stressed it was important for all team members to learn more about other cultures they were in contact with, especially for Team Leaders. She herself undertook extensive research into the communities her team was working with to better enable her to perform her duties. Sydney Team Leader Annette Fenton likewise sought to immerse herself in communities of interest by attending community events with a CLO and being mindful of people's backgrounds such as having survived war in their homeland. But these actions can never replace the nuanced sensitivity that comes from belonging to a culture yourself.

Shared experience

One fundamental reason why CLOs must be members of target CALD communities is the simple fact of having experienced many of the same issues affecting community members. Being part of communities instils a deep understanding of community issues and problems. Going through the experience of migrating to Australia, adjusting to Australian systems,

learning the colloquial ways that Australians speak English, and knowing how hard it is not to know things, gives CALD CLOs unique insight into what community members are enduring. Some CLOs had little organisational support when they arrived in Australia so learned things the hard way. They subsequently found themselves helping other community members

“Once you develop your knowledge, once you get involved with the mainstream, once you learn lots of things, you still know, and you still remember the things that you didn't know. And then you will understand your people, your community and their needs.”

Aisha Mahboob

in a volunteer capacity. The threefold experience of struggling, overcoming struggles, and helping others to overcome their struggles uniquely equip long-term CALD community volunteers to work as CLOs.

Another factor related to culture was age. Not all CLOs in this program were seniors themselves, but those who are found that the shared experience of ageing enhanced mutual empathy with community contacts. Rapport and connection facilitate trust. For a CLO to be able to relate to their contacts because of common life journeys, and vice versa, is a core consideration when designing a CLO role and recruiting people to fill it.

Other qualities of CLOs and Team Leaders

Political independence is another important trait of effective CLOs and Team Leaders. While experience as a community leader is important, factional affiliations with specific organisations or sectors of the community would be counterproductive to the work. Other community leaders frequently provided platforms for CLOs to introduce themselves to community members at their activities and functions, so maintaining good relationships with them was vital. It was essential that CLO support be equally available to all members of target communities, irrespective of differences such as religious and political affiliations.

Interpersonal skills, people skills, customer service skills and communication skills are essential for both Team Leader and CLO roles because they are entirely focused on working with people who are frequently highly distressed. Team Leaders must also be resourceful, so that they can collate relevant resources and news for team members and do meaningful research about the cultures and communities that are part of the program. An open mind and problem-solving attitude are needed for Team Leaders to respond to CLOs' needs appropriately. While IT and computer skills and report writing skills can be learned, having them in advance can be of benefit or the willingness and ability to learn them is required. The ability to prioritise and triage different needs, including one's own needs as a CLO, is also valuable.

“We need this, we need this for sure. There are lots of permanent issues which need to be looked after. So we definitely need something like this, permanently. Not for six months, seven months, one year or two years. Forever. Because the CALD community need it.”

Aisha Mahboob

Supporting and resourcing Community Liaison Officers

While CLOs were the program's heart and soul, they cannot do this work alone. This program worked both because of their unique talents and because of the effort the host organisations and leadership put into resourcing them. This section describes the range of resources CLOs drew upon in their daily work and makes recommendations of some additional resources that would have been useful had the program continued.

Mentoring and support from the top

A major strength of the program was the kind of support provided at the senior level by Elleni Bereded-Samuel AM and Professor John McCallum. These two very high-level executives regularly interacted with the team, taking deep personal and professional interest in the program. This encouraged the sense of commitment CLOs and Team Leaders felt towards the program because they knew they were on the right path from an institutional perspective. They also had a direct line of communication to provide feedback on how the work was proceeding. The relationship was friendly, open, and egalitarian, so team members were not afraid to speak their minds despite the senior leaders' high-ranking positions. They felt heard by those in power and supported with suggestions of what to do next. They were not micromanaged by senior leadership, instead being mentored, resourced, praised and accompanied on the journey.

The relationship between CLOs and Team Leaders was also at its best when it echoed this dynamic. While Team Leaders were tasked with keeping CLOs on track, they were most valuable as mentors and resources for CLOs rather than taking a more directive approach to management. CLOs need autonomy and encouragement to function well. The ideal model is for CLOs to be able to discuss options with Team Leaders and draw on Team Leaders' experiences working within their own communities, but ultimately for CLOs to be free to make decisions according to their community's needs. Team Leaders also shouldered the burden of attending interagency meetings and other mainstream forums to provide information to external bodies about the project, and liaised with colleagues at middle management levels, freeing CLOs to focus on their communities.

Senior management must also play the crucial role of selecting the right people for the job. This in turn means that the senior manager should be embedded in CALD community networks so that they can identify appropriate community volunteers to become CLOs. In this program Elleni Bereded-Samuel AM curated the Melbourne team using her existing Australian Unity CALD Alliance Advisory Group and the Sydney team using her internal organisation network. The teams she created not only had relevant skills and experience, but also worked well together. This would not have been possible without Ms Bereded-Samuel's long-term experience with different CALD communities in general and Melbourne team members in particular.

To keep the program running the two senior executives spoke regularly about the work, more or less every day, discussing successes and challenges and seeking each other's advice. This respectful, genuinely collaborative partnership in which two organisations present the same face to other bodies is relatively unusual. It was possible in this instance because of pre-existing trust between Ms Bereded-Samuel and Professor McCallum, built up over many years previously working together, and the level of autonomy afforded to them by their organisations. Partnerships in which organisations are more competitive, guarded, or self-interested simply will not work as a foundation for a program like this one. The interest must be mutual, for the benefit of both organisations and the community.

Most team members had working relationships with Australian Unity or the Australian Unity CALD Alliance Advisory Group prior to this program. This provided useful grounding for them, especially because the program was developed in a short space of time and team members did not have the luxury of easing into a new organisation at their own pace.

Technological support

A technology crucial to the program's functioning was the computer-based record of calls made and received, a customer relationship management tool known as the Hubspot. The Hubspot was critical not only for keeping track of the amount of traction the program received, but as a repository of information about specific community contacts. CLOs used the Hubspot to track conversations they had had with people so that in subsequent calls they could instantly pick up where they left off, identify urgent issues, and remember personal details. This made for more natural, more personalised conversations with contacts, which contributed to relieving loneliness and isolation. CLOs could also set tasks and reminders for themselves so they could track what they had to do for clients each day.

It is recommended that any Hubspot-style system have the capacity to be easily adapted as new needs arise. For example, Sydney Team Leader Annette Fenton felt it would have been good to incorporate drop-down menus for entering new kinds of information about community contacts, but there was little time to make this change during the program's short duration.

Because of its importance to the work, it was necessary to provide CLOs and Team Leaders with Hubspot training. CLOs and Team Leaders were recruited for their community experience and competencies, not their computer expertise, so their computer literacy skills varied when they started the job. Another National Seniors staff member, Jake Magill, was responsible for maintaining the Hubspot and for training team members to use it. Some team members needed technical support with Hubspot for some time after commencing the job, so it is important that the person responsible for it is a patient and understanding trainer and that IT help is always available. Jake Magill was praised by teams for his support in this capacity, though some team members wished they had more time devoted to training in this.

Information support

Keeping up to date with the latest developments in the COVID situation was a struggle for team members because the situation was changing so rapidly, and they did not want to inadvertently pass on inaccurate advice. National Seniors Australia and Australian Unity provided support with this, having a direct line to the Department of Health that was quicker than waiting for webpages to be updated.

The resources of Australian Unity and National Seniors were also vital for providing current working knowledge of government initiatives and the aged care sector. Being part of mainstream organisations that possess extensive corporate knowledge of the services available to seniors was useful for CLOs and Team Leaders to be able to do their job. It helped them to know there was always someone who could provide information when needed. In this capacity they routinely relied upon other Australian Unity and National Seniors staff for referral information. The National Seniors COVID team shared resources with team members directly, produced a wiki with a list of common questions and useful links, and created templates to help team members communicate with clients.

Further to this, employing Team Leaders with experience in the aged care sector was a huge bonus for the program because of the information and assistance they were able to provide CLOs. The ability to ask a Team Leader questions and receive an immediate response to pass onto community contacts was valuable.

One resource that team members now wish had been available when they started is a handbook or 'yellow pages' reference of relevant information, organisations, services, businesses and departments that they could consult when referring contacts for external assistance with everything from legal matters to scams to mental health. It is recommended that any future iterations of the program create a resource like this for CLOs and Team Leaders. It could also include some guidelines for the CLO work for those starting out.

Communications material

This program did not rely heavily on flyers, brochures, and other written collateral for its functioning, but it did use them sometimes. If flyers or similar are to be a part of any future programs, they must be high quality. They must first address the translation problems noted in previous sections of this report. Layout is also important, for example the first flyer provided by National Seniors for the Sydney team's Cambodian outreach work had English language text on the front with essential information including CLO Chanthy Lim-Chum's phone number, but no indication of which language the text was written in on the back. Cambodian community members would not be able to tell if it was written in their language or that the phone number on the front was targeted at them. The CLO's name was also absent from the flyer and there was no explanation of the service they were offering. On the back, translated Department of Health information was reproduced unedited so still

included phone numbers unrelated to our program, making for confusing communication. The presence of that Departmental information also distracted from the main message of the flyer, which was to promote the CLO service. A design that was better planned in conjunction with CLOs would have been more useful.

As it was, the Sydney team used business cards instead of these flyers until they were able to edit and reprint them. Once they had created a new, more effective brochure, it became a popular item at local doctor's surgeries, with surgeries making further copies themselves when they ran out. Surgery staff were impressed as it was the first time an outside organisation had sent someone to work in the community in the community's language, so they were keen to support the program. It is recommended that CLOs play a significant role in the production of any such collateral so it can be tailored for purpose and audience.

Training

CLOs and Team Leaders had very different backgrounds, so providing them with regular training in different domains was in some cases necessary and in other cases highly valued by the team. Training was provided by National Seniors, Australian Unity, OPAN (Older Persons Advocacy Network) and other partner organisations. Training modules included training in Hubspot, digital literacy, and customer service including handling difficult customers in a way that protected the staff member and retained the customer. Teams were also trained in pertinent issues they may encounter including elder abuse and government aged care services. Team members also learned about the operations of National Seniors Australia and Australian Unity, which was useful for explaining their work to community contacts.

Some felt that a few days training to orient workers to the job would be useful at the start of the program. This would ideally include training in how to handle clients' initial questions, and the attitude required for the job. Team leaders may benefit from starting before CLOs. Sydney Team Leader Annette Fenton learned on the job at the same time as the CLOs in her team and found that challenging. In contrast, Melbourne Team Leader Norma Serrano pioneered the program as the only CLO employed during the pilot period. While pioneering the work from scratch was not easy, it put her in a strong position to lead her team when they commenced several months later.

As noted above, team members identified several advantages of working for mainstream organisations like National Seniors and Australian Unity. However, it is recommended for future programs that other staff in host organisations receive training in cross-cultural matters of relevance to New and Emerging CALD communities.

It would also be useful for other staff to receive orientation to the work of Community Liaison Officers, explaining how it differs from jobs that seem similar, such as staffing a

COVID support line. The outreach nature of this program meant it differed significantly from other COVID support work being done by National Seniors.

Misunderstandings about the differences led to mismatches in expectations which had to be resolved. For example, the same quota system that National Seniors used to evaluate the achievements of call centre staff was applied to CLOs, even though CLOs were working towards different outcomes because of CALD community members' different needs. It was important for call centre staff to reach many people through numerous phone calls per day. But for this program, the quality of connections mattered more than the quantity so that CLOs could identify and redress issues in meaningful ways, building on relationships of deep trust.

Teamwork

Strong teamwork was a core support for the work CLOs were doing on a day-to-day basis. The value of being able to consult other CLOs or Team Leaders when faced with a particular community issue, to find out how others handled it, cannot be overestimated. For this reason, the ideal scenario is for Team Leaders to be members of New and Emerging CALD communities themselves. Cultivating an attitude of sharing knowledge and skills with others, learning from each other and being open to each other, reaps rewards in the form of a return in knowledge and skills that improve even the most seasoned community worker. Diversity in the team was handy for these reasons too.

Team building activities helped sustain a productive team spirit. Despite the program coming to an end, the Melbourne team now feels closely bonded, "like families", because of their common commitment to serving their communities. Similarly, Sydney Team Leader Annette Fenton has said she is now "hooked" on attending Cambodian community events as she did many times with CLO Chanthy Lim-Chum during the program. These outcomes give an indication of how closely team members worked together. Conflict between team members is highly counter-productive to the work, so attention must be paid to crafting a harmonious team as well as attending to individuals' expertise.

COVID-19 presented challenges to many Australian workers and workplaces, including some in this program. Team members frequently worked from home, and while this was fine for most, some found it engendered feelings of isolation, being more used to physical workplaces working alongside colleagues. Weekly online team meetings and regular team contact through email and a Messenger chat room offset feelings of isolation and other risks of people working in physically distant places. The teams cultivated a positive atmosphere around communicating with each other so that no one felt they were unsupported. Assisting workers with strategies for self-care while working in isolation will be important for any future roles of this kind, as it is in other workplaces where people are working from home. Any technical connectivity issues must be resolved quickly to maintain team communication when it is heavily dependent on virtual platforms.

“I feel like I let them down because when they needed me most during lockdown, I felt guilty for not being able to help them. Now they use the community leaders to pass information, to reach out to community. I suppose that’s broader – to young and old. But how do you know the community leaders reached them? Have you heard about a group of 15 people, Cambodian, got fined \$1000 each? They’re ranging from 20 years old to 63. Is it just being ignorant? Not aware of the lockdown restrictions. With our project we were hands on, ringing them. We made sure that they’ve got the information. But now, how do we know they receive adequate information?”

Chanthy Lim-Chum

Challenges resolved, challenges remaining

The team faced numerous challenges during the program that they met and resolved. The core project of COVID communication itself was often challenging because of the changing situation and the presence of so much conflicting information coming from different sources. The additional tasks of assisting with other issues was challenging in part because of the sheer extent of unmet needs and the amount of help community members required.

Challenges included personally challenging aspects of the work such as connecting with seniors who were lonely, isolated, and sometimes sadly the victims of scams or violence and abuse. Team members also had to face the deaths of some community contacts they had been working with. While they were able to assist some contacts to access aged care services, it was particularly distressing for team members when clients died awaiting My Aged Care support. If people can't get the service they need, after all the painstaking outreach work and providing information with the appropriate language and cultural sensitivity, this has to be counted as a critical system failure.

At a more operational level, the good work CLOs were doing led to more referrals to them within communities, and this good reputation raised contacts' expectations that CLOs would be able to address their issues. It also meant heavy reliance on CLOs at all times of day and all days of the week. As noted above, CLOs and Team Leaders found it necessary to put limits on their work to avoid burnout, and to manage expectations to avoid disappointment. CLOs also had their own families and private lives to attend to, so boundaries mattered.

This program was put together very quickly, with limited time to pilot test it and limited time for the program proper to run. The time frame meant that long term objectives were not possible. This shifted the focus of goals to a daily level. It meant that CLOs had to stick to the core project of what they were supposed to deliver, and any other achievements became a bonus rather than a focus. Some found it helpful to manage the work on a project-to-project basis, with each client being a project with a different set of goals for the CLO to deliver. The downside of this was the nagging tension at the back of CLOs minds that they may not be able to see every project through to completion and there will always be a need for further assistance.

The limited time frame had implications for the project and for CLOs' personal reputations. There was a risk that CLOs' good image within their communities would be tarnished if they gave out their National Seniors phone number but could no longer be contacted that way once the program ended. While jobs come and go, community is forever, and the relationship with it matters. For this reason, some CLOs gave out their private phone number instead. CLOs' personal investment in the work was the great strength of the program but the short-term nature of the program was not fully compatible with that.

Despite such sticky points, overall, the program achieved immeasurable benefits for the New and Emerging CALD communities it was working with. It overcame many challenges, and everyone involved is proud of the work they were able to do with limited resources.

Where to with assertive outreach?

Despite the many successes of the program, challenges remain. The most obvious is that the program's funding ended, so the support it provided no longer exists. This break in continuity of support was very concerning for the communities. Team members are worried about the people who still need help but may not receive it, and the people who will simply be left out because there was not enough time to reach everyone. They would very much like to have continuity of this work, particularly now that they have trialled the model and refined it. For the CLOs, while some professional relationships they forged with contacts will now revert to personal relationships, their capacity as volunteers is limited, and some relationships cannot continue at all without organisational support.

This program could potentially be brought into a larger endeavour as a specialist team operation, to target specific communities who are in great need. Teams of specialist CLOs could also then be expanded into a number of regional, similar teams with a higher-level management group. It would be critical to retain the essence of embedded community, language and cultural expertise which made this project so effective.

Providing sound information about COVID to communities in appropriate ways remains a challenge. Concerns remain that, in the absence of the program, community members will fall back on misleading "fake news" sources of information and conspiracy theories and will not be fully equipped to manage challenges the pandemic presents in the months and years to come. At the time of writing in mid-2021, Greater Sydney and NSW are suffering through their second wave of infections and other places such as Victoria, Queensland, and the ACT are also enduring lockdowns and other outbreak control measures. The cessation of funding for this program mid-year was unfortunately timed given the crisis is far from over, and in some places has only just begun. New and Emerging CALD communities need this program now more than ever. We hope our experiences will be useful for informing the new programs being funded to work with these communities.

Other COVID-related issues are also of concern. One is domestic violence resulting from families coming into conflict because of being together for long periods of time without relief. Another is the inability of people to attend funerals, making it difficult for them to process grief. General health issues among older people remains a challenge too.

There is a great deal of work left to be done in New and Emerging CALD communities. It is our hope that the program we have described in this report will be an inspiration for future endeavours.

“We’re supposed to be providing information about aged care, information about vaccination, information about COVID to all Australians. And we’re making a modest job of it if you’re English speaking and connected. Then when we get to the other groups, we’re firing things out that just go nowhere and we’re not getting in and communicating with these people. Very simply, what we’re dealing with really is unfair treatment through a lack of access and therefore discrimination against a group of Australians. Getting reliable information and communicating it is the game and we have proven a way of doing it. There’s a vision behind this way of doing things, and a lot of experience.”

Professor John McCallum

National Seniors Australia

ABN 89 050 523 003

Level 18, 215 Adelaide Street
Brisbane QLD 4000

GPO Box 1450
Brisbane QLD 4001

general@nationalseniors.com.au



facebook.com/nationalseniors



twitter.com/nationalseniors



youtube.com/user/NationalSeniorsAus



linkedin.com/company/national-seniors-australia/

1300 76 50 50

nationalseniors.com.au

National Seniors
AUSTRALIA