



Change and resilience during COVID-19

How CISVic member agencies experienced the pandemic and adapted to support local communities

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the managers, staff and volunteers from CISVic member agencies who took the time to participate in this research, especially in the context of the pandemic in 2020 and all the challenges and demands that came with this.

We would also like to thank and acknowledge their commitment, persistence and creativity in continuing to support communities through this very difficult time. The true value of their work is immeasurable.

Abbreviations

BOM	Board of Management
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CISVic	Community Information and Support Victoria
COM	Committee of Management
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CSW	Community Support Worker
DHHS	Department of Health and Human Services (Victoria)
DSS	Department of Social Services (federal)
EFT	Electronic Funds Transfer
EO	Executive Officer
ER	Emergency Relief
LGAs	Local Government Areas
NILS	No Interest Loan Scheme
ASRC	Asylum Seeker Resource Centre
WFV	Working For Victoria
WHO	World Health Organisation

Community Information & Support Victoria (CISVic)

CISVic is the peak body representing local community information and support services in Victoria. Member services assist people experiencing personal and financial difficulties by providing information, referral and support, including Emergency Relief.

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Executive summary

Early in the first COVID lockdown in March 2020, CISVic made a decision to carry out research on the provision of community support during a pandemic, to inform future service delivery and responses by CISVic and other relevant parties.

Topics for investigation

Specific topics for investigation were:

1. the impacts of the pandemic on communities and CISVic member agencies
2. issues and challenges for communities and agencies
3. description of agency responses to circumstances of the pandemic (including responses of staff and volunteers)
4. government responses and actions at all levels as relevant, and
5. recommendations for pandemics and similar situations in the future.

Research design

A range of research methods were used and the findings were analysed together or 'triangulated' for this report. The methods are listed below:

- Member agency records kept for this research during the pandemic
- Membership surveys X 2
- CISVic staff focus groups X 2
- Thematic analysis of CISVic membership meetings reported separately (Evans 2020)
- Integration of CISVic volunteer census (Wilson and Evans 2020)
- Desktop research

The research activities were carried out from March 2020 to December 2020 in order to track COVID-related experiences, impacts, developments and responses as they unfolded.

Findings

The findings from this research are presented in three sections.

The first section provides a timeline of key events that occurred during the pandemic and the experiences and responses of CISVic member agencies in relation to these events. The timeline offers an overview of how the pandemic progressed throughout 2020, beginning with the initial shock and changes that occurred in March and ending in December 2020 when there appeared to be a way out of the worst effects of the pandemic. The timeline reveals two main waves of COVID-19 that affected communities and CISVic agencies assisting them. The months from March until June involved adaptation to the pandemic, persisting with necessary changes, and attempting to reopen. This became known as the first wave. The months from July to December

involved re-entering lockdown with a second wave of COVID-19, continuing resilience, and seeing a way out toward the end of the year.

The second section provides a closer look at the experiences and responses of member agencies supporting communities in the first wave, as derived from a range of consultations and their own documentation of events.

The third section covers consultations and information collected in the second wave from July – referring to the unfolding of the pandemic in that phase but also including reflections on the year of the pandemic as a whole. The third section captures the ongoing nature of the pandemic; while many of the trends from the first wave continued into the second wave, some were amplified or changed, while others were resolved. In sum, key findings (in chronological order) included:

- CISVic member agencies lost the majority of their volunteers from March 2020 onwards, as many were in the older age group most vulnerable to COVID.
- Agencies responded quickly to the limitations posed by the public health crisis and adapted their services to continue meeting community need throughout the pandemic. At the same time they protected the health of community members, volunteers and paid staff by adjusting to remote support rather than face-to-face assistance.
- Agencies saw new cohorts of people who had never needed their services before including newly unemployed people and people on limited visas. They saw a reduced number of existing users when the federal government's COVID supplement for Centrelink recipients provided enough income for this group of people to meet living costs.
- Member agencies were more prepared for the second wave, with many logistical hurdles to service delivery under lockdown having been already overcome.
- Agencies saw more people presenting with anxiety, depression, loneliness and hopelessness in the second wave. Workers began experiencing fatigue due to the increased workload and pressure placed on the smaller workforce.
- The Working for Victoria (WFV) funding from the state government during the second wave helped to alleviate some worker stress. Additional funding from the federal government Department of Social Services for Emergency Relief throughout the pandemic was welcomed.
- As the state and country began to recover from the height of the pandemic, some agency representatives held concerns that JobSeeker (unemployment) payments needed to be raised permanently, with one highlighting that *'the pandemic will have reverberating effects in 2021 and beyond'*.
- Positives from the pandemic included renewed community spirit and the goodwill of staff, volunteers and a range of local organisations working together to meet the needs of people seeking help during a crisis. In addition, many member agencies said they would keep at least some of the changes made to optimise service delivery during the pandemic in 2020.

'Everyone showing so much respect and care to each individual. Keeping everyone safe and, for me, meeting all the wonderful workers from CISVic and amazing volunteers.'

Conclusion

While the pandemic had severe impacts on communities and workforces, CISVic member agencies demonstrated flexibility in ensuring that community needs were met despite a range of challenges. These included a drastically reduced volunteer workforce, social distancing requirements, the need to take up new technologies and service delivery methods, and the general anxieties and fears of experiencing a global pandemic. The CISVic peak body supported agencies through key information dissemination, policy and procedure development, group advocacy, and the acquisition of additional funding for Emergency Relief and service delivery.

Loss of income for people in the community was one of the biggest presenting issues and it is predicted that the consequences of this will last beyond 2020. Governments provided funding to CISVic member agencies during the pandemic as well as increased income support to some members of the community. CISVic member agencies certainly saw the benefit of these measures and would like to see these continue, or even be extended in the future.

Reporting in early 2021, we are certainly not 'out of the woods'. A range of threats from COVID-19 continue into 2021. While there has been a general winding back of 'social isolation' restrictions and an opening up of state borders, there has also been decisive action to contain outbreaks in certain instances, and most lately a concern that the virus will spread to the Australian mainland from Papua New Guinea. Although vaccination of the population has begun, we're still in the midst of a global pandemic that involves a dangerously mutating virus. One thing is certain – our member agencies will persist in responding to need as it presents in the local communities that they are part of.

Summary of actions that assisted CISVic member agencies

- Clear communications and updates relating to COVID-19 from the Victorian Government.
- Additional Emergency Relief funding from the federal Department of Social Services (DSS), and 'Working for Victoria' (WV) funding from the Victorian Government for staffing to cover loss of volunteers, and the release of more DSS funding for welfare services, financial counselling, microfinance and No Interest Loans (NILS).
- Assistance for community members including COVID supplements to Centrelink payments, rent relief grants, a moratorium on evictions, and housing of homeless people.
- A range of new local partnerships and collaborations with councils, welfare services, businesses and clubs, and substantial donations of labour and food.
- CISVic's operational support, which included, COVID-related communication, ongoing liaison with relevant government departments, facilitating information sharing across the membership, and obtaining new avenues of funding to enable ongoing community support.
- Community spirit, commitment and flexibility at an agency level to continue support for local people.

Summary of changes introduced by CISVic member agencies

- Introduction of a range of new policies and procedures to keep everyone COVID-free and comply with government requirements.
- Reorganisation of volunteer and staffing arrangements, and creation of new rosters.
- Convening of special Board and Committee of Management meetings to keep abreast of changes to government policy and guidelines, and community need, and make necessary decisions to keep supporting communities.
- Liaison and collaboration with a range of bodies and organisations including: councils, local MPs, other social support providers, food charities, clubs, and businesses.
- Sharing of resources and information with other social support providers and coordinating efforts to support the local community as a whole.
- Negotiation of alternative avenues of donations and funding, and finding new supply chains for food and essentials.
- Communication of up-to-date COVID-related information to staff, volunteers and community members.
- Use of new modalities for ongoing management and operations such as new IT software and means of communicating with volunteers, staff and CISVic personnel (such as Zoom meetings).
- Use of new modalities to continue support while complying with social distancing requirements including: phone assessment and assistance, Email and online help, and delivering financial assistance via electronic means such as shopping vouchers, and bank transfers.
- Adaptation to the needs of new presenting groups, such as people who have never needed social support before, migrants on temporary visas, and people sleeping rough who have lost their usual supports.
- A general shift to more focus on food relief, especially at the beginning of the first wave, (often involving logistics around storage, refrigeration, packing, delivery and pick-ups).
- Adaptation of premises in some cases to allow modified face-to-face support.
- Welfare checks of usual volunteers and service users, usually by phone.

Introduction

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic which started in Australia in early 2020 wrought huge and unexpected changes in all facets of life, for households, communities, and businesses, and for the healthcare and social support sectors. While many people tragically died (820 Victorians had died as of 31 December 2020),¹ many were severely affected by social distancing requirements to limit the spread of the virus, for example by loss of jobs and income, sudden destitution, housing insecurity, and homelessness.

Professionals who could work from home fared better than casual employees in the hospitality, retail and caring sectors, and better than those working in the 'gig economy'. Women were disproportionately affected by job and income loss (Richardson and Dennis 2020; Wood, Griffith and Crowley 2021). In addition to material stress and lack of food and essentials, the mental health of many people who were forced to socially isolate deteriorated during the lengthy 'lockdowns'. At the same time, while economic analysis shows that wealthy people became wealthier during the pandemic overall², COVID-19 supplements to certain Centrelink payments, such as 'JobSeeker' for unemployed people, increased for many temporarily, providing some much-needed financial relief and reducing usual reliance on material relief agencies to survive.

CISVic member agencies were at the frontline from the first lockdown in March 2020, working in local communities to support people in need but in much-changed circumstances. Social distancing requirements from the Victorian Government, coupled with a drastically reduced volunteer workforce, meant that new ways of providing support had to be found. CISVic staff realised early on that this was a historically unique period, and that it was important to document, and later analyse the changes happening in communities and the local support agencies that continued their support work in most cases. This report is the culmination of this early realisation, even while we also realise that the pandemic is not over. It is hoped that this research can inform future responses to pandemics and similar crises on a range of levels, and provide insights about optimal ways of supporting communities in need.

¹ Department of Health (31 December 2020)

https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020/12/coronavirus-covid-19-at-a-glance-31-december-2020_0.pdf [PDF], Australian Government, viewed 18 February 2021.

² The Economist (23 October 2020) <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/10/23/some-rich-people-are-getting-even-richer-during-the-pandemic>, viewed March 2021

Neate R (26 January 2021) <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/jan/26/us-billionaires-have-received-11tn-windfall-in-covid-pandemic>, *The Guardian*, viewed March 2021

Manjoo F (25 November 2020) <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/25/opinion/coronavirus-billionaires.html>, *The New York Times*, viewed March 2021

About this research

The research itself includes daily and weekly records kept by certain CISVic member agencies about the impacts of the pandemic and their endeavours to keep supporting communities in adverse and demanding circumstances. It also includes surveys on member agencies (in April-May and December 2020), and focus groups with CISVic staff supporting the agencies and directly managing three branch agencies. In addition, the research draws insights from a thematic analysis of CISVic membership meetings that was carried out by Zoom during 2020 (Evans 2020), and a CISVic 'volunteer census' (Wilson and Evans 2020).

Outline of report

The following section includes the methodology for the research, including its central aims and objectives. The next 'Findings' section has three parts. The first part provides a timeline of key events – at the broader level as relevant to the spread of the virus and government responses, but also at the agency level, based on accounts of the impacts on local people and service adaptations. The second part of the Findings section provides information and insights about COVID-19 impacts, issues and responses during the 'first wave' (roughly March to June), based on information from agencies through a variety of avenues and consultation with CISVic staff. The third part of the Findings section covers the second wave, from the second 'lockdown' in July 2020 to the end of that year.

The Discussion pulls the various strands of the research together and has a look at the changing landscape, experiences and responses throughout the pandemic in 2020, mostly gleaned from CISVic member agencies and CISVic staff.

The report concludes with recommendations to inform ongoing responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, future pandemics and similar crises, at both service and broader political-societal levels.

Methodology

Aim

Early in the first COVID lockdown in March 2020, CISVic made a decision to carry out research on delivering a service during a pandemic, to inform future service delivery and responses by CISVic and other relevant parties.

Research topics

Specific topics for investigation were:

1. the impacts of the pandemic on communities and CISVic member agencies
2. issues and challenges for communities and agencies
3. description of agency responses to circumstances of the pandemic (including responses of staff and volunteers)
4. government responses and actions at all levels as relevant, and
5. recommendations for pandemics and similar situations in the future.

Research design

A range of research methods was used and the findings were analysed together or 'triangulated' for this report. The methods are listed below:

- *Member agency COVID records*
A template was provided to member agencies on 20 April to document COVID-related impacts on the agency and the community and how they responded. Seventeen agencies kept a record during the 'first wave'. In July, in the second lockdown, a new request to keep these records was sent to certain members who had previously kept records. Five agencies kept these records. (See Attachment A for template)
- *Membership surveys*
Two member surveys were conducted – one in April and one in December 2020.³ (See Attachment B)
- *Focus groups*
Two focus groups were conducted with CISVic peak body staff – one in May (remotely via Zoom) and one in December 2020 (the second in person at the CISVic offices⁴). (See Attachment C)

³ The first survey informed CISVic's submission to the Federal Senate Inquiry into Australia's Response to COVID-19 on 25 May 2020.

⁴ This was the first-time staff had seen each other in person since March.

- *Thematic analysis of membership meetings*
A thematic analysis of member’s meetings convened by CISVic during the pandemic was carried out by a RMIT Social Work student on placement with CISVic (Evans 2020). The findings were compiled in a separate report, and have been integrated into the analysis for this report. (See Attachment D)
- *CISVic volunteer census*
While the volunteer census (Wilson and Evans 2020) involved a general survey of volunteers and agency managers in March and December 2020, the latter included specific COVID-related questions. Findings from these surveys are drawn on in the analysis for this report although they were not part of the original research design. (See Attachment E)
- *Desktop research*
This component included a review of Australian and Victorian government media releases, news media articles and other sources to ascertain the dates of key events and COVID-19 case statistics for the purpose of the timeline in the following section.

Given the ongoing and episodic nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was considered important to collect information regularly throughout the pandemic. Therefore, this research captured point-in-time information, as well as reflections by key personnel, in order to understand the experiences of delivering a service during a pandemic.

The research used a triangulation approach, whereby information was collected from a range of sources and using a variety of methodologies, thus enabling a holistic analysis and ensuring confidence in the findings.

Sampling

Given the constraints and demands of delivering a support service to local communities during a pandemic, the researchers were careful not to burden member agencies with numerous requests for participation in research activities. Nevertheless, many did find the time to participate in surveys and COVID record keeping as evidenced in the table below, in general providing detailed and high-quality information.

Table 1: No. of respondents by consultation method

	Timeline of events	
	First wave accounts	Second wave accounts
Agency COVID records	17 respondents	5 respondents (July only)
Member surveys	18 respondents	24 respondents
CISVic focus groups	6 participants	10 participants (8 in person and 2 via video)

Description of research participants

Agency COVID records

The agency records were completed by agency managers.

First member survey

Eighteen people completed the first survey sent out in April. Four held the role of Executive Officer. Two were Branch Coordinators and three were Program Coordinators. Four respondents were Managers, two were Presidents, one was an honorary Treasurer, and one was a committee member. Only one respondent did not state their role.

Second member survey

Twenty-four people participated in the second survey. Respondents were from 21 agencies. Three held the role of President of their organisation. Ten were managers of the service, with position titles including: Chief Executive Officer, Executive Officer, (Branch) Coordinator, and (General/Centre) Manager. In addition, five survey participants were program managers or leaders of different types. Their programs included volunteer coordination, community and financial wellbeing, and community connection and support. Three were direct service providers, one being a 'Better Futures' practitioner, and two Community Support Workers. Two held operational roles within their organisation i.e. an Organisation Development Coordinator and a Finance Officer.

CISVic focus Groups

Six staff members from the CISVic peak body participated in the first focus group in May and 10 participated in December.

The first focus group was convened on 6 May via Zoom. The second focus group was convened in December 2020 at CISVic's offices in the Melbourne CBD, with two connecting remotely.

Findings

This section provides a timeline of key events during the pandemic and agency experiences and responses. This is followed by accounts from both the first and second wave of COVID-19 in Victoria in 2020.

Timeline of key events and agency responses

The timeline provided here is drawn from member agency accounts kept during COVID-19 – firstly in the period March to May 2020, and then in the following July. To provide some broader context, this section is also drawn from public records for key events that affected communities and support agencies during this time. While a summary is provided here, a fuller account is given in Attachment F.

March: Initial shock and change

The most momentous changes were certainly in March 2020. The first death from COVID-19 in Australia was on 1 March. On 10 March the Victorian Government released its COVID-19 Pandemic Plan for the state health sector, and on 12 March the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic. The next day national restrictions on public gatherings of more than 500 people were announced. A few days later, on 16 March, the Victorian Government declared a State of Emergency for four weeks to ‘flatten the (COVID-19) curve’. Then on 18 March the state Government banned public gatherings of more than 100. Australia closed its borders to all non-citizens and non-residents on 20 March.

From this point to the end of March, Stage 1, Stage 2, and Stage 3 restrictions were announced by the Premier (22, 25, and 28 March respectively). On 22 March the Premier announced that Victoria would implement a shutdown of all non-essential activities and that school holidays would be brought forward, thus largely ‘emptying out’ schools on site from 24 March. This was followed by panic buying, with supermarket shelves stripped of many items, which was to have repercussions for agencies lacking items to distribute to people in need. The first death from COVID-19 in Victoria was on 26 March. The peak of the first wave occurred on 28 March with 111 cases recorded that day. On 30 March Stage 3 restrictions commenced such that people could only leave their homes for four reasons: food and supplies, medical care, exercise, and work or education. In addition, gatherings could not exceed two people unless they were from the same household or for work or education. This became known as the ‘lockdown’.

Over March, a range of support and economic stimulus measures were announced by the Australian and the Victorian governments to counteract the negative impacts of the pandemic. For example, the Australian Government announced the JobSeeker (unemployment) coronavirus supplement of \$550 per fortnight, which roughly doubled the minimum base rate. The next day, the Victorian Government announced a \$1.7 billion economic survival and jobs package, including a \$500 million Working for Victoria Fund to assist those impacted by COVID-19 job losses, job seekers looking for work and employers finding suitable employees in the context of the pandemic. Then on 30 March, the federal government announced the wage subsidy payment for employers meeting certain criteria named ‘JobKeeper’.

With all this happening, and with virtually no notice due to the circumstances of the pandemic, CISVic and member agencies were forced to change their way of doing business and supporting communities very quickly. As a peak body, CISVic drafted a pandemic lockdown plan, provided COVID policy and procedure templates for agencies to use and adapt, and became a communication channel between the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and agencies. CISVic also began weekly remote meetings with member agencies (via Zoom) to discuss and clarify issues and provide a space for agencies to share experiences and information. Agencies quickly adapted to social distancing requirements, having lost most of their volunteer workforce in the context of the pandemic. They introduced new policies and procedures, restructured rosters, held special Committee/Board of Management meetings, and began new and novel ways of supporting community members – remotely in most cases, with some still able to offer modified face-to-face support. At least one agency, Agency 12 had to close at this time and another, Agency 8 closed its ‘Op shop’ from 22 March. Some agencies were very active in this period, variously liaising with councils, local MPs, and partnering with local agencies and food charities. One agency noticed new groups seeking help from late March, including international students, and migrants on limited visas (a trend that was to expand with the progression of the pandemic).

Summary of support provided by CISVic to member agencies

- Briefing sessions passing on key news and information (e.g. what is COVID/PPE, tower lockdowns, vaccination program).
- Pandemic-specific policies and procedures.
- COVID-safe plans for service delivery.
- Representation to government departments, members of parliament, funding bodies.
- Additional funding for Emergency Relief programs (from DSS and philanthropy).
- Regular E-bulletins.
- Weekly and then fortnightly whole membership meetings for news and sharing information.
- Individual, tailored support to members as requested.

April: Adapting to the pandemic

In April, Stage 3 restrictions in Victoria were well under way and CISVic member agencies were declared an ‘Essential Service’ (to the relief of agency staff worried that they would be found to be violating restrictions in the course of supporting the community). On 7 April the Victorian Government announced that all government primary, secondary and special schools would move to flexible and remote learning for Term 2. Five days later, the Premier extended the State of Emergency by an additional four weeks, to 11 May. The end of April saw a massive expansion of COVID-19 testing in Victoria.

During April, member agencies continued to explore and implement new ways of operating and providing support in local communities. There were often gaps in service due to other agencies closing down, at least in the short term, as well as a break in

normal supply chains from supermarkets and food charities in some cases. For example, many agencies initially struggled to access supplies of hand sanitiser and disinfectant. In response to this, coupled with urgent community need in the context of the pandemic and the associated lockdown, a range of new collaborations and partnerships were formed. These included food relief organisations, local businesses and organisations, local restaurants, and councils and council staff (who in some cases provided 'hands on' help). There was more focus on food relief than usual, and many agencies began food deliveries to people's homes and provided cooked meals, which were donated to them. Alternative avenues of donation and funding were also sought and became available, and agencies were particularly relieved at receiving additional Emergency Relief funding from the federal Department of Social Services (DSS). The operational and administrative load for member agencies massively increased during this time, with new logistics and arrangements for providing help, and a range of additional compliance and reporting requirements.

There were indications that the people seeking help had changed too. Member agencies were seeing more people who had never used support services before, and less 'regulars' who were receiving extra income via the COVID-19 supplement to JobSeeker payments. Many agencies, but not all, were seeing more homeless people, including rough sleepers, as the usual services these people used were closed. The mental health of service users as well as volunteers was a particular concern, in the absence of their usual social interactions.

May: Persisting with changes

In May the Victorian Government made consecutive announcements about the easing of COVID-19 restrictions. On 11 May the easing of restrictions on social gatherings was announced, and on the following day we learned that government school students would begin a phased return. A further easing of restrictions was announced on 24 May. However, on the last day of May the Victorian Minister for Health announced an extension of the State of Emergency to 21 June.

For member agencies many of the challenges and issues continued from April. They made fundamental changes to their operations to support community members while social distancing, learning and harnessing new IT software and methods, and utilising different modes of communication with service users, volunteers, staff and CISVic personnel. New reporting and data collection demands continued to be onerous, especially in the context of a heavier workload for fewer workers.

Community issues that arose during this time included the social isolation of agency volunteers, the desperate plight of homeless people (many of whom lost access to usual supports), the demands for parents of remote education along with technology costs, and the shortage of essential items in supermarkets and for agencies to distribute. One agency reported spending considerable time informing people of the changing COVID rules and regulations, which were particularly confusing for people with an intellectual disability.

Member agencies continued to exercise a high level of commitment and persistence in May. They were proud of their agency's ability to be quickly responsive to community needs, as locally embedded agencies. In addition, many agencies proactively reached out to their usual volunteers to monitor and ensure their wellbeing, and they carried out 'welfare checks' of regular service users by phone. While some agencies began

preparations for reopening and recovery, this was necessarily put off by the announcement on 31 May that the State of Emergency would be extended to 21 June.

June: Attempting to reopen

On the first day of June, venues in Victoria reopened with a limit to 20 patrons. The Victorian Government announced a further easing of restrictions from 22 June, including for community services. However, daily cases were beginning to rise with 25 new cases announced on 20 June, after a few days of ten or more cases daily. In response, on 21 June the state government further extended the State of Emergency to 19 July, and on 30 June the Premier announced a return to stronger restrictions after recording 64 daily cases and 75 daily cases the day before.⁵

As member agencies mainly kept records of COVID-19 impacts and responses for this project from March to May, and then in July, we do not have so many records from this source for June. Nevertheless, we know that CISVic member meetings became less frequent i.e. fortnightly, indicating more confidence in the establishment of new processes and ways of operating. Member agencies continued to express concern about the time and resources required for data collection and reporting to DSS and other funding bodies, even while the extra funds that had been released were appreciated. A range of partnerships were made or continued to meet community need including councils, charities, and food relief organisations. At least one agency drafted procedures for recovery and reopening.

July: Re-entering lockdown

At 11:59pm on 1 July, 10 Melbourne postcodes⁶ were put back into lockdown under stay-at-home orders.⁷ This was due to a high concentration of COVID cases in those postcodes. Residents could only leave the house for four reasons: for work or school, for care or caregiving, for daily exercise, or to get food and other essentials. People could leave their postcodes for work, school and caregiving only. In early July we also saw the controversial lockdown of certain high rise public housing towers in Flemington after the identification of positive COVID-19 cases there. On 9 July, Stage 3 'Stay at Home' restrictions were reinstated across metropolitan Melbourne and Mitchell Shire. On 10 July, the state recorded 288 daily cases.⁸ On 21 July, the federal government announced an extension of the JobKeeper (wage subsidy) payment until 28 March 2021, albeit to be modified from 27 September. Forthcoming reductions to both JobSeeker and JobKeeper were announced.

While officially back in lockdown (with most member agencies having continued new modes of service delivery), members welcomed the communication by CISVic to agencies on 20 July that a Working For Victoria (WFV) tender was successful. This was for \$2.1 million to employ 51 workers for six months, including 32 Support Workers, 17 Case Workers, and two Project Coordinators. The funding was to enable CISVic member agencies to continue support for communities in the absence of the usual volunteer workforce. It was taken as: '*...recognition of the value of our work supporting*

⁵ Hayne J (10 July 2020) <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-10/coronavirus-cases-victoria-numbers/12444034>, ABC, viewed 11 February 2021.

⁶ The postcodes were: 3012, 3021, 3032, 3038, 3042, 3046, 3047, 3055, 3060, 3064.

⁷ Nally A (30 June 2020) <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-30/victorias-coronavirus-outbreak-prompts-stay-at-home-order/12407518>, ABC, viewed 25 March 2021.

⁸ Hayne 2020, *ibid.*

the community while recognising the vulnerabilities of a predominantly volunteer workforce in a pandemic' (Email communication from CISVic Executive Officer (EO)). Subsequently some agencies chose to employ staff directly while others left formal recruitment and employment of their new staff to CISVic.

At this point, while moving back into lockdown and continuing new modes of organisation and service delivery, many managers and workers were feeling rather worn out by the ongoing relentless demands of the pandemic. Thus they looked forward to WFV staff back up, with some recognition that COVID-19 restrictions would continue, at least into the near future.

August-September: Continuing resilience

In August, the seriousness of the pandemic escalated once more. On 2 August Victoria was declared a State of Disaster (this was in addition to the State of Emergency which was first implemented back in March and continued to be in affect during these months)⁹ and Stage 4 restrictions were applied to metropolitan Melbourne. The next day a lockdown was extended to the whole state. On 4 August, Victoria recorded 693 daily cases¹⁰ which was its highest total of daily cases for the whole pandemic. In mid-August, on the 16th day, the Victorian State of Emergency was extended by four weeks.

The most notable dates in September were the reductions in both JobSeeker and JobKeeper payments (25 September¹¹ and 28 September¹² respectively), the former which had enabled many regular service users to manage with no or less agency support as they could now afford life's basic necessities.

October-December: Seeing a way out

In October, on-site learning resumed in Victorian schools (on the 12th day). On 27 October nearing midnight, Stage 4 restrictions lifted making 28 October the first full day without these restrictions in 112 days. On 29 October DHHS updated its industry COVID-19 guidelines, such that face-to-face service could resume albeit following certain guidelines.

In November there were no new cases of COVID-19 in Victoria, (and this continued up to 22 December). Victoria began easing restrictions from 8 November. By midnight 9 November the border between the regional and metro areas of Victoria was lifted. On 10 November it was announced that the COVID supplement to JobSeeker would be extended to 31 March 2021, but at a much lower rate from January.

⁹ Murray-Atfield Y 2020 (2 August 2020) <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-08-02/victoria-coronavirus-state-of-disaster-explained/12516570>, ABC, viewed 11 February 2021.

¹⁰ Evershed N (20 October 2020) <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/datablog/ng-interactive/2020/oct/20/victoria-coronavirus-map-melbourne-covid-19-cases-by-region-vic-case-numbers-data-trend-graph-rising-falling-corona-hotspots-areas-postcodes>, *The Guardian*, viewed 11 February 2021.

¹¹ BDO (21 July 2020) <https://www.bdo.com.au/en-au/insights/tax/technical-updates/jobkeeper-extended-until-march-2021-with-two-tiered-rates-and-jobseeker-also-extended>, viewed 11 February 2021.

¹² Australian Taxation Office (16 December 2020) <https://www.ato.gov.au/General/JobKeeper-Payment/JobKeeper-key-dates/#Pastdatesandfortnights>, viewed 11 February 2021.

On 22 December Victoria recorded three new cases of COVID-19 since the day before. At this point, people were very aware that the trajectory of COVID-19 infection in the community is unpredictable and that ongoing care and vigilance is required by all to contain the virus.

Working for Victoria developments

As noted above, the Victorian Government released 'Working For Victoria' (WFV) funding to assist employers find staff, and job seekers find work during the pandemic. At a sector level, this funding provided a much needed boost for CISVic member agencies from July 2020 well into 2021, enabling them to continue supporting communities. Details are provided in the tables below.

Table 2: Type of WFV staff by commencement period (N=56)

Type of staff	No. staff	Commencement period
Caseworker	15	28/7/20 – 16/11/20
Project Coordinator	3	27/8/20 – 30/11/20
Community Support Worker	34	7/9/20 – 11/1/20
Administration/support	4	4/11/20 – 5/1/21

Table 3: Months of commencement of WFV staff (N=56)

Month of commencement		No. staff
2020	July	1
	August	2
	September	9
	October	25
	November	17
2021	January	2

During this time CISVic provided comprehensive training for all front line staff, many who were employed through WFV funding. This included:

- accredited training for support workers via the Community Support Workers course
- non-accredited training e.g. Working with interpreters, Dealing with challenging situations, Recognising and responding to family violence, Tenancy rights and responsibilities, and Utility hardship.

First wave accounts from CISVic and member agencies

This sub section pulls together agency accounts kept from March to May, results from a member survey, and a focus group with CISVic staff. The term 'first wave' roughly refers to the period from March to June 2020.

Impacts and issues for communities and agencies

Loss of volunteer workforce

As previously mentioned, CISVic member services are delivered by a high proportion of volunteers, with training in 'Community Support Work' provided by the CISVic peak body. Overall, there were roughly 450 paid staff and 5,000 volunteers before the pandemic. Many volunteers are vulnerable to COVID-19 as they tend to be in older age brackets, thus they needed to withdraw their labour from agencies during the pandemic. This was a special challenge to volunteer-only agencies, a few of which were forced to close, at least in the early stages. In most of the agencies the extra workload and situational demands fell to paid staff and managers and the remaining volunteers, if there were any.

Changing to remote service delivery

With the requirements of social distancing, most CISVic member agencies closed their doors for face-to-face support, however the majority maintained their operations by conducting phone assessment, support and referral, and by using electronic avenues to deliver financial assistance and vouchers. In addition, many member agencies began delivering or arranging for the delivery of food parcels, or enabling groceries and necessary items to be picked up on site. Some made structural changes to their building, so that on-site services were still possible, for example having screens erected or phone support conducted from another room. Overall, as member agencies are locally based and mostly not bound by centralised bureaucratic lines of command, they were able to respond and adapt very quickly to the new circumstances under COVID-19. In fact, the majority changed their way of doing things while maintaining a service for the community overnight or in a matter of days. At the same time, many other local services closed, at least in the initial period of the lockdown, often reducing options for referral and increasing the demand on CISVic agencies, especially for immediate material support such as food and financial assistance.

Supply chain disruptions

As well as the requirement for 'social distancing', another major challenge was the severe disruption to normal food chains, largely due to 'panic hoarding' of food and other items in the general population. Many agencies were not able to order the usual supplies from supermarkets and also from food banks. This was particularly worrying, given the vulnerability of the people seeking support from CISVic member agencies. Fortunately, this situation somewhat eased by late May 2020.

Distress and anxiety in the community

In addition, there was a high level of anxiety in the community about the COVID-19 virus. CISVic's holistic assessment and support model was well placed to address this alongside immediate material support. Some agencies reported spending more time on phone counselling and support. Many were providing proactive 'welfare checks' of

vulnerable community members by phone (assessed as vulnerable through previous contact). Member agencies were also highly aware of the welfare of their regular volunteers who were forced into isolation for their own health and safety, many of whom draw meaning and social connection through their volunteer work.

Changes in the people seeking help

As CISVic member agencies are locally based, there is some variation in the type of community demand – in general and during the pandemic, according to local demographic characteristics. For example, quite a few agencies saw a surge in demand for material assistance from people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds during the first wave of the pandemic. Others were confronted with overwhelming demand from people who are rough sleeping.

In general, member agencies were approached for help from people who have never sought assistance before – newly unemployed people, as well as international students, and people on restricted visas not eligible for Centrelink support or access to health care. (One CISVic member, Agency 17, reported that between March and April 2020, 40 per cent of people seeking help had lost their jobs or experienced reduced income). Many of these people were in precarious and desperate situations, either homeless or at risk of homelessness and with no income for food or basic life necessities. People who were already homeless and sleeping rough were also particularly vulnerable, as already mentioned. Agencies in some areas were being approached by many people in this situation, especially as the services they normally went to for support, including food, shelter and showers, were closed. This culminated in communal as well as individual crises, as it is difficult to isolate yourself along COVID-19 guidelines when you have no permanent place to live. On the other hand, as noted in the previous section, several agencies reported that quite a few people who usually rely on them for food and financial support were benefitting from Centrelink COVID supplements and therefore in less need.

Another challenge was home-schooling for students whose families could not afford devices or internet access to enable this. It should be noted that this is an ongoing problem with escalating school costs beyond the budgets of many families and children missing out on basic education as a result. The pandemic certainly brought the issue of educational disadvantage into high relief, with many families approaching CISVic member agencies for assistance with school costs.

Member survey quotes

‘Parents are experiencing great frustration regarding the home schooling of their children and the difficulties that they are having supporting them, however (they) do appreciate that this is necessary.’

‘... We have expanded the supports we are offering the homeless in the form of more frequent parcels available, content expanded to include thermos which can be filled at our office during office hours. The homeless are relying on our service more with a number of other support services closed. Referrals to our housing support agency have been more challenging with the move to being entirely contactless which has added additional work for us being the direct link providing more detailed referral and intake and the provision of mobile phones to those with no phones and the added management of the program...’

'...We have lost more than 60 per cent of our volunteers due to health and age concerns increasing the demands on a much smaller team. (There are) more labour intensive processes to sort and pre-pack fruit and veg to limit social contact.'

'We have noticed that the effects of social isolation on those already isolated has been significant. They feel more disconnected and disheartened than ever before.'

Agency responses and actions

As described above, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, member agencies reported switching to remote service delivery and in the few agencies still open for face-to-face support, social distancing and hygiene measures were put in place.

As well as adapting their modes of service delivery to the new groups of people seeking help, agencies provided extra types of support due to other local services being currently unavailable. As mentioned in the timeline, 'welfare checks' of regular service users became a feature of service provision.

Operational tasks included the quick development and implementation of new policies and procedures, the re-arrangement of food supplies with the disruption to supply chains, and apparently onerous and time-consuming reporting to different funding bodies. This work fell to less staff as most volunteers were forced to isolate.

CISVic was proactive as a peak body in providing advice and support on policy, governance and operational matters to member agencies, relating to COVID-19. CISVic provided advocacy on issues affecting agencies and vulnerable community members, applying and lobbying for additional resources or system changes as needed, while working closely with all levels of government and other relevant peak bodies and organisations.

For the volunteer-only CISVic member agencies that remained open, the new demands of service adaptation, communication technology, administration, and data collation were especially onerous and CISVic as a peak body provided extra support for them to keep their services open.

Member survey quotes

'We closed our Centre to the public. We had to completely change our approach to providing ER (Emergency Relief) services from seeing clients in our Centre face-to-face, to doing phone interviews and delivering food to client's homes. We had to close our meals program and our Op Shop and our Visitor Information Centre. We reduced our volunteer workforce from 110 to about 20, most of whom are doing food delivery tasks, once a week. We have seen a reduction in the number of clients seeking ER support from our pantry and crisis fund but an increase in the demand for weekly fresh food. We have seen a significant increase in the supply of fresh food, meals and non-perishable food/items and funds (Government and Philanthropic) for Emergency Relief.'

'Due to the age of our volunteers we initially closed our agency and transferred all our Emergency Relief food stock to other agencies. We then hired a social worker to remotely provide emergency financial relief in the form of EFTs, e-vouchers and mailed out food vouchers.'

'The organisation has closed its doors to the public and we are delivering all services via phone, email, and social media. The demand for most services has decreased, but the number of new clients has increased to about 30 per cent of total clients.'

'... we are doing mostly telephone support for our main Centre activities, we have needed to instigate a home delivery service for material aid, and we have had to increase the face to face component of our rough sleeping program as many of the other agencies have stopped direct service delivery.'

'Our support to community members has been expanded at this time. We are able to provide Emergency Relief financial assistance via EFT (electronic funds transfer) and e-vouchers, we are better connected to our local agencies and are able to make direct referrals to their services. We are providing more time for assessment and more referrals as we have seen a slight decrease in the number of community members contacting us which allows us to better assess and assist those community members who come to us for help.'

'Remote service delivery has limited (us to) very few types of assistance, mainly direct food parcels. Through a partnership with another local agency we have commenced deliveries of most food vouchers and with each delivery our partner agency delivers a food parcel based on household size. EFT is available to avoid use of express post. Our level of material aid assistance and frequency has increased per household/family. We have had to bring in paid staff from other areas to assist to replace volunteers.'

Government responses and actions

In general, governmental requirements for 'social distancing' were accepted and appreciated as necessary, even with services requiring immediate redesign and most volunteers staying home, leaving services severely under-staffed.

Additional Emergency Relief funding from the federal Department of Social Services (DSS) to meet increased demand and implement necessary change to keep services open and relevant were welcomed by member agencies (40 per cent increase for each 2020 and 2021). Some agencies received them 'with relief'. These funds enabled services to keep open, staff to be employed, longer opening hours, and the purchase of material infrastructure such as fridges in which to store perishable goods. In the same vein, services expressed appreciation of the release of funds for additional welfare services, financial counselling, microfinance, and No Interest Loans Schemes (NILS).

Not only did Centrelink COVID-19 supplements enable people living in poverty to buy food and necessities and to pay rent and bills, they prevented many newly unemployed people from becoming homeless. As noted above, several agencies reported less contact from some longer term 'regulars' whose basic life expenses usually exceeded their income. From agency reports, regulars were able to put the COVID-19 Centrelink supplements to good use such as: utility/phone bills, car registration, car service and repairs, much-needed new glasses, and a new bike replacing one stolen a while ago. In one case a person said she was able to get out of debt and that the Centrelink supplement had relieved her financial burden.

While the DSS provides Emergency Relief funding to a range of organisations for distribution, including a consortium of CISVic agencies, member agencies reported that staff at state and local government levels did not always appear to know this. In several cases, there was duplication of services and even redirection of resources, in response to COVID-19. One CISVic survey respondent said: *'A number of organisations, government departments and charities have duplicated work that Emergency Relief agencies have been doing'*. At the same time it should be noted that providing material aid is often only a first step to assisting people and connecting them to additional support they may need, within the holistic CISVic model (Nguyen 2013).

Local governments have a coordinating role in responding to disaster management as per delegation, however they were reportedly highly variable in the extent to which they took up this role during the first lockdown. Forty-four per cent of agency survey respondents said local councils played a coordinating role during the first wave. Some councils were evidently exemplary in supporting, coordinating and communicating with local support agencies while disseminating information to community members about what help is available. However, according to some CISVic members, other councils did little, at least during this initial period of the pandemic. In the worst cases, council activities created confusion and unnecessary duplication of services.

While member agencies very much welcomed and appreciated additional Emergency Relief funding from DSS, they found the associated reporting and data requirements laborious and onerous. As already noted, CISVic member agencies are largely volunteer-staffed and highly efficient in terms of the service they deliver in relation to their resources. Thus time-consuming reporting requirements inevitably eat into a substantial proportion of the funds that would otherwise be used for directly assisting community members. This point refers to a range of new requirements for information and data from various bodies during the first wave. Bodies making new calls on time and labour for data collation included not only DSS, but local governments, health services and peak bodies, each requesting information in a unique way in terms of content and framing. This contrasts with some previous emergency situations (such as the Victorian bushfire disasters in 2009) when usual bureaucratic requirements were suspended while all resources focused on meeting urgent community needs.

Some agency managers said it would have saved a lot of concern if their agency had been deemed an 'Essential Service' by government much earlier after the 'lockdown'. In particular staff and volunteers were concerned they could be deemed in violation of the lockdown without this designation to their service (even while they knew the support they were providing in the community was vital and potentially life-saving).

Federal government eligibility criteria for income support meant that many agencies were assisting people with no means of support and no means of being fed and sheltered, such as international students and people on restricted visas. Many casual jobs suddenly disappeared when social distancing led a lot of businesses to close, and people who had been dependent on these jobs but not eligible for social support payments became destitute overnight. People from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds were particularly vulnerable as they often lack access to universal services such as income support, tenancy support, mental health services, employment services and family violence support. According to one CISVic member agency: *'If we do not increase access and reduce isolation for CALD communities, we will have a tale of two recoveries in Australia marked on cultural lines.'*

Government responses also affected rough sleepers. Even before COVID-19 there was a severe lack of supported or affordable housing, and government action to address this issue. The seriousness of this situation certainly came into high relief with the pandemic. With the inadequate supply and high cost of housing, and the disappearance of income for many, agencies were seeing not only newly unemployed but newly homeless people. Further, historical government inaction to address school costs heightened educational disadvantage during the pandemic, as discussed above.

Member survey quotes

‘Social distancing seems to have been taken up quite well in the community with members doing their best. Most people are keeping to restrictions and guidelines so that the threat will be lessened.’

Government financial supplements

‘Many clients have reported that they spent the \$750 stimulus payment on rent, utility bills or car rego, and we are not seeing as many of our regular clients due to the increase in JobSeeker payments.’

‘Government provision of direct financial support to the public such as stimulus packages and increased JobSeeker has assisted particularly those already dependent on Centrelink. These payments have also helped people losing employment, but may not cover all income loss. Access to Super seems to be helping some to keep afloat while waiting to go back to work.’

‘An increase in the JobSeeker and JobKeeper and one-off stimulus payments to those on benefits, seems to have reduced the demand for Emergency Relief in the short term. We are however, just starting to see new clients who have never been on benefits before and never needed our services before. We do expect that demand will escalate as the impacts of unemployment hit home, lockdown measures are reduced and people who have not needed us in the past become aware of our services.’

‘The sum of responses at all levels of government has been effective in largely eliminating the health impacts of COVID-19. The increased and special Centrelink payments seem to have reduced the need for Emergency Relief among our long-term clients.’

‘People have been extremely relieved about receiving the Economic Support Payment - it has helped so many people get on top of their debts. People are also looking forward to the Coronavirus Supplement and being able to meet their financial commitments for the first time in a very long time. However, this has not been the case for many of our community members, such as people seeking asylum who have been overlooked... but who are a very financially vulnerable group, many of them working in the casual and part time unskilled labour force who have been hardest hit by job losses.’

Emergency Relief funding

‘Additional government funding has ensured our agency has been able to remain open and able to provide all services and programs to our community. We have now been able to afford to employ our staff for longer hours to maintain full service provision. As a volunteer-based agency we have stood down all volunteers and so the workload has increased substantially for the paid staff...’

'Additional Emergency Relief funding has afforded us greater flexibility to respond to the changing needs of our community, but the flip side is the amount of reporting and surveys is very time consuming. 'Social distancing' has caused confusion as to whether ER services are still operating and included in one of the four approved activities. It has impacted enormously on the way we provide our services, ensuring social distancing at all times. Developing policies to support the changed service delivery and restrictions has been very time consuming and challenging for small organisations like ours who do not have a dedicated team or person to do policies who can keep up with the requirements...

'Complex cases are growing, we are maxed out in our capacity already. Three out of seven days per week are paid for by philanthropy. More funding is needed to cover basic Emergency Relief services in this area (including phones and phone access for clients). Many clients cannot contact services via phone.'

Education costs

'Parents home schooling - mixed feedback, but those without devices are definitely disadvantaged, with some finding it difficult to provide the support needed for students.'

'Clients with children have spoken about how stressful distance education is – especially those with kids with disabilities.'

Second wave accounts from CISVic and member agencies

This sub section pulls together information obtained in the period of the COVID-19 pandemic that has become known as the 'second wave,' which roughly spanned from July to December 2020. The information is drawn from agency records kept for this research by some member agencies in July (during the second lockdown), a membership survey conducted in December and a focus group with CISVic staff also conducted in December. Although these consultations were carried out in the second wave, they include reflections on the pandemic as a whole.

Impacts and issues for communities and agencies

Impacts on community members

Survey respondents were asked about the main impacts of the pandemic, from an agency perspective. Many spoke of the negative material effects that the pandemic had on community members with the loss of work and income, and a heightened need for help with basic material needs. There was concern that this would become worse with the anticipated winding back of government COVID supplements to JobSeeker and similar Centrelink payments. Housing became unstable for many due to an inability to pay rent or make mortgage payments. The increased cost of technology with home schooling continued to be a stress for many families.

Survey respondents noted the increased demand for Emergency Relief, suspected to be catalysed by the 'lack of ongoing financial support from the government.' This included help with financial support, food parcels and meals, travel costs and medical expenses.

Distinctly in the second phase almost all member agencies noted negative impacts of the pandemic on mental health, often relating to social isolation and job insecurity. Negative emotions were said to include: anxiety, uncertainty, depression, loneliness and feelings of hopelessness. Lack of social connection, brought about by COVID-safe requirements, was said to disproportionately affect those who were already marginalised. One survey respondent noticed a particular deterioration in mental health for homeless people, along with an increase in alcohol and drug use. A couple of agencies also highlighted an increase in family violence.

Many first wave trends continued into the second wave, for example, agencies continued to experience reduced capacity to meet demand, not only because volunteering was 'decimated', but also due to the breakdown of usual food supply chains from supermarkets and food relief organisations.

As reported in 'first wave' accounts, migrants on limited visas were severely affected by the pandemic such as refugees and international students. People in this group found themselves destitute when they lost their work and were ineligible for government assistance. One survey respondent noted that inequalities were amplified during this time. Overall, agencies continued to see people who had never accessed support services before, alongside a reduction of 'regulars'.

On the whole, member survey findings were consistent with feedback from the CISVic focus group held in December 2020, highlighting escalated demand for Emergency Relief from international students along with the need to provide health support such as personal protective equipment (PPE), sanitisers and masks. As related by CISVic staff, individual advocacy for members of the community proved difficult for workers, due to many external networks and services shutting down or businesses rearranging their operations e.g. doctors transitioning to telehealth and service delays from businesses like Telcos. Not only did this restrict community members' access to help, it put further pressure on understaffed agencies as they were having to provide more assistance with less staffing.

Member survey quotes

'Anxiety, uncertainty, loss of job security, loss of income, sense of isolation, loneliness, but on the flip side, for those that have not been negatively impacted by COVID it has created a sense of community and many pay it forward. Opportunities have arisen. People donating and thinking of others who may not have done this in the past.'

'... The number of clients using our services did increase during this pandemic and there was not one type of group using the services. We noticed that the clients were of different communities and backgrounds compared to before the pandemic.'

'The inequalities of our systems have been highlighted. One example is people on bridging visas who have been contributing to the Australian economy and paying taxes being unable to access income support. At an individual level, the main impacts have been social isolation in an unprecedented way, insufficient income to support their families for even basic items such as food, and most notably the impact on the mental health of almost everyone in some way.'

'... Many clients experienced a severe disruption to their normal social and community supports, and without technology they became extremely disconnected and isolated. Huge challenges for clients without technology and/or without a phone or data to access services that had gone online.'

'The main impacts on our community members have varied. Amongst our client base that receives Centrelink there has been a lot of relief that they finally have government payments that are meeting their financial expenses due to the various increases that were made during the pandemic. Our community members that were already marginalised have been more so during the pandemic and have experienced increased feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Our international student population has been the hardest hit during the pandemic....'

Main challenges for agencies

When asked about the main challenges or difficulties for agencies during the pandemic, the most frequent survey response was the loss of the volunteer workforce along with the increased workload.

Continuing from the first phase of the pandemic, respondents highlighted the challenge of keeping up with constantly changing operational demands, including new procedures, additional and onerous reporting requirements, and increased communication (email) demands. There were a variety of service delivery challenges associated with helping people under new 'COVID-safe' procedures and social distancing arrangements. (In most cases people could not be assisted on site). One said: '*adjusting service delivery with the ever-changing restriction requirements*' was a challenge. Difficulties with technology increased the burden, including poor internet connection and lack of access for support personnel to their data base while working from home. Other operational demands such as unsuccessful grant applications, negotiating a border crossing, and addressing the problem of fraudsters who were taking advantage of less stringent eligibility requirements during the crisis, were time-consuming.

Conducting interviews by phone was also time consuming by one report. Another spoke of the change in service delivery when supporting new service users and people with complex needs, including people on limited visas who experience language barriers, and people with high financial support needs that cannot be met within the resources of the agency.

Service operation challenges, already mentioned in relation to the first wave, were the inconsistent supply of food for distribution, and meeting the demand left by other agencies that had closed.

The CISVic focus group observed the loss of the volunteer workforce which put a lot of stress on core staffing groups as this occurred almost overnight for agencies. However, through the later Working for Victoria (WFV) fund and the recruitment of highly skilled and professional volunteers (including people who volunteered during the pandemic because they lost their job), there was an increase in qualified staff.

Unfortunately the CISVic Student Placement Program was reduced from nine (in 2019) to two in 2020 for the first semester, and from 10 in 2019 to one in 2020 for the second semester. The uncertainty with the Program is anticipated to continue into 2021, with challenges for CISVic, member agencies and universities to plan and coordinate in an uncertain and changing environment.

CISVic, fortunately, had the infrastructure and information technology (IT) already in place to allow staff to quickly transition to working from home when the pandemic

began. However, CISVic staff reflected that smaller agencies with less funding did not always have the capacity to implement necessary measures such as automatic and electronic processes and the electronic transfer of funds (EFT) to assist community members. Another challenge was the uncertainty surrounding COVID restrictions as not all agencies had the resources or knowledge to keep up with the constantly changing information and demands (a situation CISVic was aware of through the year and made various moves to address).

Focus group participants also expressed concerns for the trauma that frontline workers endured, and continue to endure, working during a pandemic. Directly witnessing the level of desolation that some community members were experiencing was compounded by the added layer of their own fears and anxieties about the pandemic. In particular, some participants were worried about a 'third wave' that might take place, circumscribed by the trauma experienced by frontline workers. Some CISVic staff were wary of agencies becoming more risk adverse and wondered whether that would impact on attracting and retaining volunteers.

Home schooling was a challenge for CISVic workers with dependent children. Some staff found the 'accessibility' of people's lives during Zoom meetings to be a juggle, with kids, pets and home deliveries all impacting on work. In some cases it was also found to be rather engaging.

Member survey quotes

'... Keeping up with the constant changes, policy writing, COVID-safe plans, risk management plans, continuity plans and more. Such a huge expectation for a staff of 1.8 EFT.'

'Learning to work remotely, being agile in replacing inefficient IT systems quickly. Learning how to Zoom. Redirecting phones to mobiles and rotating the mobiles in lockdown so we didn't get worker fatigue. Huge increase in email communication to obtain decisions from multiple staff at one time...'

'Staying open to assist the community while following local and federal government guidelines.'

'Other agencies in our LGA (local government area) not being open and us having to also support clients out of our catchment.'

'Encouraging people to connect to meaningful COVID safe activities to improve and support residents mental health and feelings of self worth and connectedness.'

'The challenges have been a lack of workers to resource the agency. However, with thanks to the Working for Victoria fund we have been able to meet the needs of our community.'

'... Lack of space and appropriateness of our premises to provide our services - lack of shelter outside so many discussions were held in the rain or under trees for shelter, alternatively hot weather challenging for older groups and lack of space for chairs or seating.'

'Significant financial strain, isolation and lack of ability to support each other in person. Vicarious trauma and trauma from having the work come into staff homes...'

'Loss of volunteers, increased pressure on remaining staff and volunteers.'

'Challenges of phone based service delivery - phone service seems much less conducive to rich assessments and responses. Difficulty of supporting highly distressed clients remotely.'

'Wearing of PPE and social distancing requirements very challenging. Masks were difficult for volunteers when talking is the main aspect of their work.'

'Our building is very old so made social distancing and density limits very challenging as there are a lot of small rooms, so people became disconnected in the workplace as we were unable to gather and support a positive workplace environment. Increased reporting requirements for DSS.'

'Loss of some services such as Fresh Food Program. Very unreliable rescued food provision in the early period of pandemic. Issues with supplies of food due to shortages related to panic buying.'

'Family case worker found phone service extremely challenging for clients with children at home as they had constant disruptions. Sometimes very difficult to contact clients on mobile numbers provided.'

Positive aspects of the pandemic overall

When asked about any positive aspects of the pandemic for their agency, most described the flexibility with which they were able to respond to community need and social distancing requirements within a very short time frame. One said they moved off three sites into their remote home sites in one day and were fully operational by the second day. New avenues of support for community members included remote phone assessment and assistance, online help, food delivery, E-vouchers, and welfare checks of past service users. The learning of new skills and increased use of technology to enable service continuity was appreciated, for example Zoom meetings and online training.

Many spoke of the community spirit and goodwill of volunteers and staff in working together and adapting the service to meet community need, for example: '*everyone showing so much respect and care...*', '*amazing community spirit and supports*', and a '*high sense of purpose and rallying amongst volunteers*'. In a similar spirit, several agencies named new partnerships with other local agencies and councils as a positive aspect of the pandemic. Donations and support from traditional and non-traditional sources as well as from local and state government was especially appreciated, for example from businesses, RACV, church congregations and local residents.

In addition, the temporary housing of homeless people by the state government, with 2000 rough sleepers moved into vacant hotels,¹³ was seen as a positive impact of the pandemic.

¹³ Andrews D (28 July 2020) <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/homes-homeless-victorians-during-pandemic-and-beyond> [media release], Victorian Government, viewed 11 February 2021.

The opportunity to engage a new cohort of volunteers was appreciated too, in the context of the loss of most existing volunteers and escalating and changing operational and service demands. This was consistent with observations shared by CISVic staff.

Other positive aspects of the pandemic were raised: heightened awareness of the service, the ability to assist new community members, and greater connection with existing service users.

CISVic viewed the engagement with the Working for Victoria initiative as a positive to come from the pandemic. Member agencies and the peak body benefited from having the opportunity to increase their workforce during this time. One focus group participant commented that the Working for Victoria funding '*gave me a job*' at CISVic. Furthermore, having more staff in the peak body has been useful for supporting member agencies.

Staff at CISVic discussed their own experiences with the inadvertent blend of home life and work life that occurred working remotely. For some this was positive because there was less commuting, and it was a more productive work environment. One staff member talked about their cat giving birth to kittens during an online meeting! Others, however, described feelings of disconnection.

Staff also felt that their group advocacy work was stronger because the pandemic had raised the profile of Emergency Relief and of CISVic as a peak body. Focus group members thought this might increase their chances for future service resourcing, advocacy on key systemic and service issues, and research opportunities.

CISVic staff also observed that many member agencies were more prepared for the second wave. This was seen as a positive as it demonstrated the learning that agencies had acquired, and their resilience while enduring reoccurring challenges and ongoing uncertainty through the pandemic.

Member survey quotes

'Amazing community spirit and supports. Overwhelming donations and offers of practical help. Financial supports from local and state governments. Many new volunteers sourced through lack of employment, desire to help...'

'Everyone showing so much respect and care to each individual. Keeping everyone safe and for me meeting all the wonderful workers from CISVIC and amazing volunteers.'

'- Being able to support clients weekly with food relief - An increase in donations from community members, church congregation, individuals and businesses wanting to support our service - Witnessing the outpouring of generosity and incredible adaptability during this time.'

'We recruited new younger volunteers many of whom have continued to volunteer. Our grant opportunities have increased significantly, from this we have been able to employ more support personnel.'

'COVID restrictions forced us to rethink our service model and we are implementing a new way of working.'

'The flexibility of being able to work from home and each program putting up their hand to help in community wellbeing.'

Agency responses and actions

Service changes due to the pandemic

Survey respondents were asked if the type and level of their agency's support changed during the pandemic. Two agencies said they initially closed, before reopening. Most spoke of the arrangements they made to deliver services remotely due to social distancing requirements (as noted in discussion of the first wave). This was characterised by an increased use of technology, for example email communication, phone interviews, use of a phone answering machine with follow-up, electronic fund transfers (EFT) into bank accounts, and the sending of E-vouchers for shopping. Some agencies arranged for volunteers to assist community members from home. Respondents also reported an increase in home deliveries. While there was less capacity for face-to-face interviews with social distancing, one agency described the direct help they provided at the door of the agency.

As also previously noted, significant service change followed the sudden loss of the volunteer workforce, necessitating the re-drawing of rosters and a much greater work burden for less staff and/or volunteers (though, as one highlighted, this was alleviated somewhat with the employment of staff through Working For Victoria funding enabling a 'stable and responsive service model'). One respondent said that demand on their agency increased with other local agencies closing. In contrast, another highlighted the new partnerships with other agencies that were formed to respond to community need.

The type of service in most demand also changed, with an amplified need for Emergency Relief, particularly food in the form of parcels and shopping vouchers. (One agency replaced their usual Christmas hampers with vouchers). A few respondents noted that there was less choice of food on offer, while highlighting the interruption to normal food supply chains for agencies. Other types of Emergency Relief that increased were assistance to pay rent, utility and phone bills, and financial assistance in general. One agency changed its homelessness program to prevent people congregating in a way that wasn't safe. It issued more mobile phones to homeless people so that they could connect better to other services, which was enabled by a philanthropic donation. This agency also paid for homeless people to use the laundromat, with the closing of the laundry program they usually used.

Some agencies said that they were able to offer a deeper, more connected service during the pandemic, for example scrapping usual waiting periods for assistance, offering a more individually tailored approach, and generally offering a higher level of support for less people. Some agencies also described an increase in their proactive outreach work, with a focus on holistic community wellbeing. Outreach 'health checks' by phone were often extended to volunteers who were social distancing, and regular service users that the agency had not seen for a while.

Again, a couple of agencies mentioned the increase in donations and new volunteers that helped them to meet increased demand, including food from local farmers, and prepared meals from cafes and hospitality businesses.

In line with this, CISVic staff noticed that service provision shifted over the course of the pandemic from financial relief to food. This required further flexibility from member agencies as they had to organise the selection, storage and distribution of food and associated requirements to carry out this work, such as space, refrigeration capacity, and electricity use. Clearly, the new practices enabled member agencies to continue and expand their support for their communities, and to offer greater accessibility for

local people seeking help. The CISVic focus group concluded that the strong commitment of staff and volunteers in member agencies enabled these service changes and allowed help to reach communities during a crucial time.

Member survey quotes

'The Pandemic meant we lost 80 per cent of our volunteers within a matter of weeks. We had a small team step up and work many shifts to cover the service. The service delivery changed to comply with social distancing etc, reducing interview capacity, opening up to phone interviews, we included home deliveries and pre-packaging fruit and veg to speed up the process of service delivery.'

'Initially we had to close for a couple of weeks to set up a system to work from home using an answering machine/phone back service assisting clients by EFT and home delivery of vouchers/food parcels. At the beginning of June we opened part time assisting clients at the door. Apart from reducing our weekly hours because some volunteers, many being older, at this stage are still not wanting to come back, we are continuing to assist clients with food vouchers/parcels/referrals/bill payments etc.'

'We have ramped up our services in many ways and have received a lot of community support to do this; e.g. 240 new volunteers came forward to volunteer at the start of the (pandemic); large donations of food from local farmers; cafes for COVID project has supported over 25 local hospitality venues to make 10,000 meals for us.'

'Yes, we ended up providing more in vouchers than actual physical food. We are also looking at more creative ways to assist clients by having our WFV support worker focus on school relief...'

'We have actively encouraged random acts of kindness and being neighbourly, people to connect differently e.g. (using) telephone, face time, skype and Zoom gatherings. We have supported fit and healthy volunteers to connect and support essential services to deliver food parcels, meals and other essential items to vulnerable people. We have conducted health checks to volunteers linked with our agency.'

'We had to completely change our homelessness outreach program, preventing people from congregating and thus providing much less engagement, we had to stop providing a laundry service at the program due to space issues and start paying for clients to use a commercial laundry locally, a large added cost. Clients were often not able to shower at the program due to limited space and social distancing requirements. We have provided more mobile phones to people, using philanthropic funding support. Connections with other services improved to ensure clients were receiving the support they needed.'

Helpful collaborations with other organisations

Survey respondents were asked what collaborations were helpful to them during the pandemic, if any. There was a wide variety in responses, with many agencies finding collaborations with other organisations helpful for delivering assistance where it was needed. Some agencies also discussed collaborations in which they helped other organisations undertake their work in the community.

Member agencies described a process similar to 'outsourcing' whereby they worked with other agencies in order to meet community need in a way that would not have

been possible if organisations worked independently. In some circumstances agencies utilised delivery drivers from other services or from their local council. One agency spoke about its capacity to facilitate the distribution of food but not the storage of food. They worked with OZ Harvest and the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) to distribute food immediately, effectively bypassing the storage stage that posed a logistical problem. Another spoke about their local council '*donating the use of a hall for our food parcel operations*'. A third agency was offered 6,000 pre-packaged meals which they did not have the capacity to distribute, however it was able to refer the meals to another service that acted as a distribution point for other local agencies. Overall, organisations sharing responsibility for different stages of the food distribution process constituted a common form of collaboration, allowing agencies to deliver food to the local community while still working within their means.

Many agencies discussed collaborating with local and 'like-minded' agencies. This could include CISVic member agencies, as well as other community services in the area. Local councils often provided helpful partnerships as well. Emergency Relief and other networks fostered connections between organisations, and the capacity to communicate remotely greatly influenced the success of these networks.

A few agencies discussed the ways they were able to help other organisations and provide support to their service users, for example through food delivery, and through co-supporting community members attending a local allied health organisation. Church groups also provided helpful collaborations for two agencies, with one agency saying their church congregation 'has been amazing'. One CISVic agency shared a donation of food from a cinema chain with another member agency. Two agencies described forming partnerships with St. Kilda Mums, an organisation that receives and distributes donated goods for babies and children. These are just a few examples. Many agencies said their collaboration with the CISVic peak body was helpful and important, with one noting that CISVic provided guidance on 'policy and procedure development.'

Overall, connecting, networking and collaborating with other community agencies and organisations allowed CISVic member agencies to fulfil the expanded needs in the community during the pandemic. The sharing of resources and information was important to the success of agency approaches and in many cases food distribution would not have been possible without such collaboration. One member agency listed 21 different organisations that they had partnered with during the pandemic, describing their relationships as 'absolutely awesome'.

Member survey quotes

'Potential partnership developed with a local agency so that if we were unable to meet the demands for home delivery they would step in. They are Bridges Community Connecting Communities - a transport and activity service for seniors and those with a disability. We never needed to use their service, but the relationship was developed and there if we needed it. There has been a lot of sharing of resources. From our perspective we have been contacted twice with offers of food that we could not take but referred them on to other services. One referral was for 6,000 pre-packaged meals that we got delivered to one service who had the space and then 20 other agencies were given the opportunity to come and collect the meals for their own distribution. This type of sharing relationship has been one of the greatest benefits to all.'

'Engagement with local council recovery and relief meetings has meant knowledge of how other similar agencies are operating and opportunities to collaborate.'

'We have collaborated with OZ Harvest and the ASRC to deliver food parcels to the community during the pandemic. This has been extremely helpful as we do not have the physical space to store food or pack parcels but have had the ability to be a distributor.'

'We had one local agency who would deliver food packages for us.'

Support for member agencies from CISVic

When asked at the end of the second survey if they had anything to add, one respondent expressed the desire to see clients face-to-face again.

Other member respondents thanked CISVic for its support with the following comments.

Member survey quotes

'[AGENCY] would like to thank the peak body CISVic for their tremendous effort this year. Everybody has worked incredibly hard to support the sector.'

'Thank you CISVic for your meetings and keeping us updated as needed, thank CISVic for WFV worker.'

'Guidance and instruction provided by CISVic was invaluable as we made attempts to work through a situation which was completely foreign. Whilst there was a lot of information provided during this time from many avenues, it was difficult and confusing to decipher. CISVic's guidance has been extremely important in wading through all of the varying degrees of information to find exactly what we needed to continue our valuable work.'

'Thank you to the team at CISVic for your strong leadership and innovation.'

Government responses and actions

Coordination role of local councils

Fifteen survey respondents indicated that their local council played a coordinating role in the crisis response representing 63 per cent of respondents (up from 44 per cent in the first member survey). A further nine respondents indicated that their council had only played a coordinating role in part. One said they would like better collaboration with their council.

Evidently, experiences with council were mixed, however, the majority of agencies had a positive experience most of the time. Some agencies described their councils as 'a huge support' or 'extremely helpful.' Councils were involved in redeploying staff, coordinating meetings, providing extra funding or grants, developing 'COVID-safe' guidelines, and organising food and meals. One agency described their local council starting a '*Help Your Neighbour campaign.*' Another said that their council was quick to respond to them. Notably, one council paid for a 'deep clean' to the premises when a volunteer at the agency tested positive to COVID-19.

Other agencies found that their council was not quick to respond to requests, did not take on much of a coordination role and offered no additional funding. One agency discussed how their local council developed and duplicated their food parcel program rather than focusing on strengthening the existing service delivery program. The survey respondent believed that properly resourcing the existing program would have been more effective. Another agency said that their council neglected to put their contact information in communications going out to the community at the start of the pandemic.

According to both the member survey and the CISVic focus group in December, there was huge variation in the type and level of support from councils.

Member survey quotes

'[Council] has been most supportive of us and have assisted us whenever possible. They have coordinated meetings with all the different agencies in [local government area] and done deliveries on our behalf and circulated details of when we are open.'

'Council allowed for our area to remain open to service clients whilst the rest of the building was in lockdown. Always able to contact the council, who were very quick to respond.'

'Both councils have provided extra funds during this time as well as redeployed staff, food collections, volunteers and meals.'

'Our Council ran their own food parcel service, parallel to ours and the two other CIS's in our LGA. This was very frustrating as it was a doubling up of services and was less effective than having the Council simply support the existing agencies. However, they have been supportive of our services to the community as well, providing a venue, staff and small amounts of food. The pandemic seems to have raised their awareness of homelessness in our area, and possibly other social issues as well. Our hope is this will be a bigger focus for them in future.'

'Well organised and comprehensive response (by council).'

Helpful state and federal government responses

Throughout the pandemic federal and state governments made decisions that impacted on Emergency Relief services and communities, in particular the communities that CISVic member agencies work with.

Survey respondents were asked what responses from federal and state governments were helpful, if any, during the pandemic. Many agencies indicated that the increased Emergency Relief funding they received from the Australian Government was helpful from an operational perspective. Similarly, many agencies said that the Working for Victoria funding provided by the Victorian Government was invaluable, with one agency calling the initiative a 'game changer' for their agency. The funding allowed this particular agency to work normal service hours because it had the necessary staff to do this.

Agency respondents also observed the federal government COVID-19 supplement for Centrelink recipients and the increase to the JobSeeker rate greatly helped their existing service users. One respondent said that the increase has '*allowed many clients to actually afford to live.*' Two agencies expressed concern for what happens when all

the assistance ends, saying that *'people are going to be drastically affected'* once everything stops. This agency said that the COVID-19 supplement, JobKeeper, and rental, power and utility assistance were all a great help for community members during the pandemic.

A few agency respondents were pleased with the communication offered by the Victorian Government. Two said the daily announcements from the state premier were helpful. Another said the DHHS website¹⁴ was good, and a fourth agency appreciated that the DHHS posters and signs were easy to understand for non-English speaking people. One respondent said the provision of masks from the state government were helpful.

One respondent spoke favourably about having a meeting with a Victorian Government minister about needing more food relief and eight weeks later DHHS introducing the food relief grant. They said they were *'delighted'*, adding that the state government should fund food relief. Rent relief grants and the moratorium on evictions were also responses from the state government that agencies felt were helpful for struggling community members.

Overall, agency respondents were appreciative of the extra funding offered by federal and state governments. Focus group participants also spoke highly of the increased funding, noting that agencies with a bigger funding base had more ability to act, while smaller agencies had less capacity. CISVic staff observed that medium sized agencies were in the best position, having enough resources to adapt but not being overly constrained by bureaucratic processes, enabling them to to implement changes in a timely fashion.

CISVic staff were impressed with the engagement level of DSS, contrasting with comments from some agency representatives expressing appreciation for departmental engagement while still lamenting that the department was still not listening.

Member survey quotes

'Organisationally: extra funding from federal level, Working for Victoria staff from state level, masks from state level. Generally: Coronavirus supplemental payments have been great, they have allowed many clients to actually afford to live. Moratorium on evictions and rent increases has been very helpful for clients. Rent Relief (and other assistance) has been helpful, although difficult to access.'

'The DSS COVID funding has been very useful in more recent times with the demand for support increasing rapidly. The Working for Victoria funding has been a game changer for [Agency] allowing us to open up to normal hours.'

'The COVID supplement was a HUGE blessing and certainly eased the burden on services.'

'The additional funds from DSS via CISVIC have been crucial in meeting COVID related needs. JobKeeper/JobSeeker has been helpful... but not enough.'

'Communication that is easy to understand, posters and signs that are easy to understand as clients first language is not English.'

¹⁴ Department of Health and Human Services (n.d) <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus>, viewed 25 February 2021.

Gaps or flaws in Federal and State government responses

The gaps and flaws in Federal and State government responses highlighted by agencies were diverse.

Agency survey respondents said that refusing to permanently increase the JobSeeker rate was a flaw of the federal government's response as this *'pandemic will have reverberating effects in 2021 and beyond.'* Agencies believe that if the government is going to take away this support then they need to replace it with another program because people who are relying on the increased payment and supplements still need assistance to meet the cost of living.

Many agencies also raised the lack of support from both main levels of governments for international students, migrants, and asylum seekers. Very simply put, Centrelink income support 'not being available to all,' was a gap in federal government policy that negatively impacted on many of the people agencies were trying to assist. One agency described these groups of people as having 'literally no income,' adding that *'the level of stress for these groups, especially if they have children, has been immense.'*

Two survey respondents felt that although the federal government was requiring a lot of information, reporting and consultation, they were not actively listening to what agencies were saying. One agency said that state government requirements for data collection and reporting had been overwhelming.

One respondent hoped that all levels of governments will learn from the experience of this pandemic, and be better at implementing a response, should a pandemic happen again in the near future.

Member survey quotes

'State government funding of food relief more broadly. Short sighted federal government response of stimulus payments - we need to Raise the Rate (of Centrelink payments).'

'Money for clients for bill help once JobKeeper and JobSeeker reduced.'

'While the Federal Gov representative has been checking regularly, I feel there is a lack of listening to us and providing information on money available for future funding and planning. State government requirements have been overwhelming at times and lack of support if needed.'

'Centrelink income support not being available to all.'

'Lack of support for migrant and refugee individuals and families, and many New Zealanders. Onerous reporting requirements for agencies receiving extra funds from Federal level. Lack of support for casual workers. Federal Government should have extended Centrelink support for Victorians, recognising the longer-term effects of our second wave. Very worried there will be a large wave of evictions after the moratorium is lifted, concern there is no plan for this. No guarantees of extra funding for the period after Coronavirus supplements end, when we anticipate a high demand for services.'

'Support for international students has been lacking on a State and Federal level.'

Lessons for the future

Keeping agency changes

Out of 24 respondents in the 'second wave' survey in December, 20 (over 80 per cent) indicated they would like to keep one or more of the changes that they made during the pandemic. Only one respondent indicated they did not want to keep any of the changes and three indicated that they were not sure.

Many agency representatives said they were going to continue utilising the flexibility that they developed throughout the pandemic. This could be in the form of Zoom meetings, working from home, having both face-to-face and telephone options for interviews, or changing the way people were rostered. Giving people different options for how they would like their interview to be conducted was a key change that many agencies wanted to keep because it allows for an approach that prioritises accessibility for the community member seeking help. Home delivery was another mode of service delivery that some agencies wanted to keep. In addition, networking and collaborating was apparently made easier with technology such as Zoom and many agencies expressed a desire to continue fostering the partnerships they had developed during the pandemic.

Two agencies said they will keep social distancing measures such as having less people in the building and contactless pickups. Another two agencies described implementing an appointment system during the pandemic that they will continue with.

Overall, agencies hope to continue being more flexible and receptive to the needs of service users, workers and volunteers.

Member survey quotes

'We have a completely new way of working and are keeping most of what was implemented and are redesigning other programs to better fit our core values and mission.'

'We would like to keep the various ER options we provide to clients, the flexibility for them to be able to come to the office or have a telephone appointment and the flexibility that we can offer to workers.'

'Wellbeing Maintenance Program - regular calls to clients on a needs be basis - telephone counselling and referrals for clients to be assisted more professionally.'

'We now roster our warehouse/facility differently and that will stay, less volunteers on each shift but now we have two or even three shifts a day, before COVID we had one. The new contacts and collaborative relationships we have, as discussed above, have given us many more touch points with the community, which will now be the norm for us.'

'We will keep our employed reception staff and the appointment system. Some online meetings will also be utilised. A mix of in person and online is expected. COVID has provided us with an opportunity to look at some more efficient and less time-consuming ways of networking and meeting. However, the value of in person meetings should not be lost.'

Assistance for agencies to respond to future pandemics

Member survey respondents had various ideas about what would assist them to respond to pandemics in the future. Most said they would need more funding and the government would need to act faster in getting financial assistance out to the community. Some agencies would like governments to commit to funding and food supplies from the present, in the case of another pandemic in the future. In general, respondents wanted greater financial support for all people in positions of disadvantage.

In an implicit endorsement of the Working For Victoria (WFV) scheme, respondents said they would like paid staff to provide assistance in future pandemics, and the requisite funding to support this. One suggested having access to a volunteer recruitment 'app' to enable contact with people who wish to volunteer during a pandemic. Another said a specialist mental health worker would be useful.

Some respondents suggested that simply having the experience of this pandemic will be 'invaluable' in future responses. One agency said that if CISVic could offer the same guidance that they did during this pandemic in the future then that would be helpful. Others said having the policies and procedures already in place from this pandemic will be enough to assist them in the future. One agency proposed having a pandemic response plan similar to a fire evacuation plan where, *'we all know what to do if the alarm goes off.'* Another said that there needs to be disaster committees bringing a variety of services together to discuss how to best support the community.

Three respondents believed they would need better infrastructure to respond to a future pandemic. Two of these agencies said they need bigger and better buildings because that *'has been a major barrier to [their] ability to perform [their] duties in an appropriate way,'* particularly in terms of having space to continue operations while social distancing. A third agency said they need upgraded technology infrastructure to have *'sufficient devices to ensure all staff could work remotely'* as they continue to struggle with this 9 months after the pandemic began.

Member survey quotes

'More money sooner, from Government, to assist those in need. The establishment of 'disaster like' agencies committees, incorporating all those concerned, with getting support into the community.'

'We will use this pandemic as policy/ procedure base rules and regulations for future pandemics. Future commitment to PANDEMIC funding by the government would assist.'

'Overall, we were well prepared for the pandemic and seamlessly shifted from face to face to remote interactions with our community.'

'Government to recognise the importance of place-based response and support, and to therefore resource the local agency/group to respond rather than response from Melbourne e.g. food relief boxes being posted from Melbourne to [regional town].'

'Paid staff would be useful when volunteers are vulnerable and unable to attend.'

General recommendations for future pandemics

Respondents gave diverse recommendations for responding to future pandemics. In general, agencies would like the government to act faster both in enforcing protective health measures and in financially supporting all members of the community. Some agencies suggested locking down sooner and staying locked down for longer to prevent a second wave. In similar vein, other agencies said mask wearing should be implemented from the beginning. Agencies also wanted better federal and state government coordination in the areas of border closures and hotel quarantine, particularly internal communication between state government departments.

Again, respondents suggested that governments should allow people on visas to access Centrelink. One agency representative believed that people on visas should have 'equal access' to supports as Australian citizens during a pandemic. Further, support for people in positions of disadvantage needs to be implemented quicker. Reportedly, by the time the support came through many people were already in 'dire situations'. More timely assistance would greatly assist communities and the agencies that support them. Two agency respondents believed pandemic response plans are required that bring together crisis services to enhance service delivery. Another proposed increased funding support. One suggested that the state government ensures food supplies for crisis agencies during food chain disruptions, such as happened during the pandemic.

Overwhelmingly, 'act early' was the message from the second member survey to respond to future pandemics.

Member survey quotes

'Close borders first, immediate masks worn, and two metre spacing and keep all business open following the rules.'

'Fast response from (Victorian) government to lockdown and secure quarantine Hotels. Keep up the daily communication with the state. Great job Dan.'

'Lockdown harder sooner for longer no second wave. Increase funding support.'

'Quicker implementation of schemes to support the vulnerable. Many didn't commence until three to four months into the pandemic which left many in dire situations.'

'I think we have learned a lot through this time but to have protections in place for those on visas, etc. would be fantastic. They should, at least for the time of the pandemic, have equal access to Centrelink payments and Medicare as citizens of Australia. I'm not sure how this would work but there definitely needs to be more consideration given.'

'Better coordinated government departments so that there are less problems in areas such as quarantine programs. A more coordinated approach between state and federal governments could be great.'

'That all councils develop a pandemic response plan, including coordinating pandemic response in partnership with local crisis support agencies and supporting those agencies to enhance their services. State government to have confirmed supply of food and essentials to crisis support agencies.'

Discussion

In response to the pandemic and the social distancing measures introduced by the Victorian Government to reduce community transmission, CISVic member agencies quickly innovated their services to ensure that community needs were still met. Agencies adapted to a drastically reduced workforce, with many older volunteers needing to withdraw their labour. They changed and adjusted their service delivery methods to protect the health and wellbeing of community members, volunteers and paid staff, and supported new groups in the community, while coping with various disruptions to the sector and broader society.

However the effects of the pandemic on local communities and CISVic member agencies supporting them, was not uniform across the year 2020. It happened in two distinct waves – the first being roughly from March to June, and the second roughly from July to December. In the initial crisis period of the lockdown in March, people's lives changed overnight. Forced to socially isolate, many people lost their jobs and income – particularly those already in casual or insecure employment, with a majority of these being women (Richardson and Dennis 2020; Wood, Griffith and Crowley 2021). Agencies had to adjust quickly to support community members in dire need, while adhering to strict social distancing requirements and meeting all the logistical challenges. The second wave from July was characterised by a further 'lockdown' announced by the Victorian Government to prevent uncontrollable community transmission of the virus. This wave came with additional challenges including mental health difficulties for some volunteers and community members such as loneliness, anxiety and depression. Remaining managers and staff carrying the workload became fatigued as the period of the lockdown went on.

At the beginning, the most immediate impact of the pandemic for CISVic member agencies came when a substantial section of the volunteer workforce was unable to work. Given that roughly sixty per cent of CISVic member agency volunteers are above the age of 65, and eighty-eight per cent above the age of 55, many volunteers found themselves in high-risk age groups vulnerable to contracting severe cases of COVID-19 (Wilson and Evans 2020). Some agencies told older volunteers to stay at home, while other volunteers chose not to volunteer, given the risk (Wilson and Evans 2020). Volunteer-run agencies had to close temporarily. This is consistent with findings from the thematic analysis of CISVic membership meetings in 2020 relating to the first wave (Evans 2020).

To compound this, the contagious nature of COVID-19 made it unsafe for agencies to offer support to clients face-to-face or in person. Agencies demonstrated flexibility and commitment to communities in finding new ways of assisting people that ensured needs were met while protecting the health and wellbeing of the community and workers. According to agency COVID records, membership surveys, CISVic focus groups and CISVic membership meetings (Evans 2020), agencies adapted with new forms of service delivery such as phone assessments and support, home deliveries, e-vouchers, electronic bank transfers and contactless pick-ups to ensure continuity of service delivery to the community. Agencies evidently adjusted quickly to the demands presented by COVID-19 and were able to sustain operational changes for the duration of the pandemic throughout 2020. This appears to be a unique outcome for a community sector service with the RESET 2020 study finding that the pandemic disrupted the sector, including revenue streams and program delivery (The X Factor

Collective 2020). While some CISVic member agencies lost revenue when their 'Op shops' closed, government funding and grants for Emergency Relief programs greatly assisted agencies. Although, CISVic member agencies were impacted by the pandemic, and forced to change the way they delivered services, community needs were still met in a variety of creative ways suited to context with much cross-pollination of ideas and solutions. In fact, some volunteers in the census (Wilson and Evans 2020), as well as managers and paid staff consulted for this report, said they were able to help community members with a more attentive and needs-tailored approach than pre-pandemic. CISVic services were also more accessible to some members of the community because of the remote delivery of services that didn't require service users to present in person.

As evidenced through this research, agencies saw both community needs and cohorts of people seeking assistance change throughout the pandemic. Financial and food relief, along with support for rent and utility bills, were in high demand as many people lost income and could not afford to cover basic living costs. Regular users of the service often required less assistance because COVID-19 supplements helped recipients of JobSeeker (formerly Newstart) meet basic living costs for a time. However, international students and temporary visa holders were ineligible for government support (O'Sullivan, Rahamathulla and Pawar 2020). This resulted in community agencies seeing a high proportion of new people from such groups, as the only support available to them was from community agencies, groups and organisations. This is consistent with findings from Evans (2020) and O'Sullivan et al (2020) who found that community organisations, multicultural groups and churches supported international students and temporary visa holders during this time. Furthermore, as with this research, Evans found that CISVic member agencies saw a rise in newly unemployed people contacting their service who had never needed social support or Emergency Relief before. This group of people struggled to meet their costs of living on a severely reduced income while trying to adjust to the JobSeeker rate.

Agencies coped with severe disruptions such as lack of access to food and materials. This happened as food supply chains were affected by panic buying in the general population. Agencies also found that many local or adjacent organisations who they would usually refer community members to were closed or temporarily unavailable. This put more pressure on CISVic member agencies to meet community needs with less internal workforce capacity and the reduced resources and availability of other services. This was partially mitigated when agencies formed collaborations with other organisations that were operating, in order to achieve together what agencies could not achieve on their own (Evans 2020). In some cases, services worked together, each taking responsibility for different stages of the food storage and distribution process in order to ensure food reached community members in need.

As already noted, while the first wave of the pandemic (March-June 2020) was characterised by agencies making operational and logistical changes, the second wave (July-December 2020) was characterised by fatigue and mental health concerns for both community members and workers. The emotional effects of the pandemic were certainly amplified during the second wave with the prolonged lockdown, for remaining staff and volunteers, as well as community members.

As evident in this research and reported elsewhere (Evans 2020; O'Sullivan et al. 2020), government support was crucial to member agencies and the communities they supported in 2020. Overall, CISVic member agencies were grateful for extra funding provided by governments and found this revenue critical to delivering necessary

services, not least extra Emergency Relief funding from the federal Department of Social Services. In addition, state government funding through the Working for Victoria initiative allowed CISVic and interested member agencies to hire 56 staff for six months, which was instrumental for their ongoing viability and certainly addressed the danger of widespread worker 'burnout'. Agencies are, however, concerned about the effects of the JobSeeker rate returning to pre-pandemic levels at the end of March 2021¹⁵. Agency managers have held this concern from as early as April 2020 (Evans 2020). This fear is supported by O'Sullivan et al (2020) who claim that in order to recover well from the pandemic, social supports must remain in place i.e.:

Without a quality human resource base, no economic recovery will be complete and successful. Policy development needs to be inclusive, focused on people and communities and their comprehensive social development and security, respecting Australia's cultural diversity and paying particular attention to health, housing, education, employment, access to digital technology and adequate income support as the labour market is anticipated not to recover fully from the pandemic for some time (p. 146).

CISVic member agencies learned a lot about their own capacity and capabilities in adapting to delivering services during a pandemic. The evident strength of community agencies during a crisis is amplified by O'Sullivan et al. (2020) who have this to say:

The demands that the pandemic has placed on charities and other social services show the importance of a strong service sector, grounded in community connectedness, able to operate flexibly and responsively to unexpected developments (p. 147).

This point is certainly borne out by this research. CISVic member agencies demonstrated enormous commitment and willingness to adapt and meet the considerable challenges of the pandemic, in order to continue supporting local people and communities. This involved embracing new technologies and modes of service delivery, creative collaborations, additional funding from state and federal governments, support from councils, donations from businesses and charities, and operational and management support from CISVic. No doubt it also involved a lot of late nights and persistence by managers overseeing services, while being aware of the consequences for people on the ground if help wasn't available. Perhaps most important of all, the ongoing tailored support was underpinned by strong, lasting connections and relationships in the local area where member agencies are situated.

¹⁵ The federal government announced a permanent rise in JobSeeker of \$25 per week from April 2021, much lower than recommended by a wide range of organisations including Australian Council of Social Services, KPMG Australia, and the Business Council of Australia.

Recommendations for future pandemics and crises

Agencies

It is recommended that CISVic member agencies:

- design and maintain pandemic/disaster plans based on the learnings from the COVID-19 pandemic and this report
- continue to play a key role in supporting communities, adapting operations and service delivery as necessary and remaining flexible and responsive to local needs and conditions.

CISVic

It is recommended that CISVic:

- continues to provide operational support, information, and liaison with government and other relevant organisations, to member agencies
- assists member agencies in obtaining the necessary funding and resourcing to meet community need.

Local councils

It is recommended that all local councils:

- are aware of their role in responding to crises and disasters, and that they have policies and strategies in place to coordinate local responses
- are familiar with relevant service providers in the local community, including Emergency Relief providers, in order to optimally coordinate agencies in future responses and avoid replicating existing services unnecessarily
- ensure that CISVic member agencies and similar have access to food for community dissemination in the event of future consumer-led food chain disruptions.

State government

It is recommended that the state government:

- formally recognises the essential role that CISVic member agencies play in supporting local communities as early as possible in future crises
- proactively introduces health prevention strategies early on
- provides recurrent funding to support Emergency Relief programs
- continues proactive regular communication to the population, with tailored support for CALD communities to ensure health, safety and social connection, in the context of respectful relationships

- continues to provide additional funding for CISVic member agencies to support communities at the coal face during crises (for example to cover staffing via the 'Working for Victoria' program).

State and federal governments

It is recommended that state and federal governments:

- plan in advance for the optimal coordination of all levels of government and the agencies they fund to respond to future crises
- introduce stimulus and financial assistance as soon as possible to avoid people experiencing hardship
- take into consideration the limited capacity of agencies when deciding on reporting requirements for increased funding
- provide ongoing access to affordable housing for all.

Federal government

It is recommended that the federal government:

- continues to provide additional funding for CISVic member agencies to support communities at the coal face during crises, for example for Emergency Relief via the Department of Social Services.
- provides equitable and humane support for all in the community to survive in future crises, including migrants on limited visas, international students, homeless people, and all disadvantaged, marginalised, and vulnerable people living here.
- introduce a permanent increase to the JobSeeker rate and similar Centrelink payments to bring the payments at least to the poverty line.
- continues the practice of engagement with CISVic member agencies delivering Emergency Relief, with a two-way communication channel.

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Attachment B: Member Surveys

First survey (April 2020)

Questions

1. Agency name
 2. Your role or position
 3. How has your level of support for community members changed in relation to COVID-19, if at all?
 4. Please describe any impacts of Government responses to COVID-19 you have noticed (e.g. Government responses like ER funding, 'social distancing', and Centrelink payments. This may refer to Federal or State Government responses).
 5. What Government responses have been helpful, if any?
 6. What additional Government responses would be helpful?
 7. Has your local council played a coordinating role in response to the COVID-19 crisis?
(Yes/No/In part/Not sure)
Please elaborate
 8. Would you like to keep the changes your agency has made in response to COVID-19, when the pandemic is over?
(Yes/No/Not sure)
Please elaborate
 9. Is there anything else you would like to add?
-

Second survey (December 2020)

Questions

1. Agency name
2. Your role or position
3. From you agency's perspective, what have been the main impacts of the pandemic on community members?
4. How has the type and level of your agency's support for community members changed during the pandemic, if at all?
5. What have been the main challenges or difficulties for your agency during the pandemic, if any?
6. What have been positive aspects of the pandemic for your agency, if any?
7. What collaborations with other organisations have been helpful during the pandemic, if any?
8. Has your local council played a coordinating role in response to the COVID-19 crisis?
(Yes/No/In part/Not sure)
Comments
9. What have been the most helpful state/federal responses to the pandemic, if any?
10. What have been the gaps or flaws in state/federal responses to the pandemic, if any?

11. Would you like to keep the changes your agency has made in response to COVID-19, when the pandemic is over?
(Yes/No/Not sure)
Please elaborate
 12. What would assist your agency in responding to future pandemics?
 13. In general, what would you recommend as a response to future pandemics?
 14. Is there anything you would like to add?
-

Attachment C: Focus group interview schedules

First CISVic focus group (May 2020)

Guiding questions

- 1 How have you seen or heard of the COVID pandemic affecting member agencies?
Prompts: Has the capacity to provide material assistance been affected? In what way/s?
 - 2 What has enabled member agencies to keep supporting the community when they have done this?¹
 - 3 What has prevented them from supporting the community, if anything?²
 - 4 How has the pandemic affected your own work with CISVic?
 - 5 What government responses to COVID have had an impact – either positive, negative or neutral?
 - 6 What has been the role of councils in coordinating a response to COVID, if any?
 - 7 Is there anything you would like to add?
-

Second CISVic focus group (December 2020)

Guiding questions

1. How have you seen or heard of COVID affecting member agencies throughout the pandemic? What changes were there over time?
2. What enabled member agencies to keep supporting the community when they have done this?
3. What prevented them from supporting the community, if anything?
4. How has the pandemic affected your own work with CISVic?

Attachment D: Thematic analysis executive summary (extended)

This research found that although the experiences of agencies differed, there were certain commonalities. Through analysing the discussions held between agency managers seven themes that defined their experiences of the pandemic were highlighted:

1. *Adapting service delivery:* CISVic member agencies modified the way they delivered services to continue meeting community need during the pandemic while ensuring the health and safety of staff and community members. Some of these modifications were home delivery of goods such as food parcels or conducting assessments over the phone rather than face-to-face.
2. *Communities and meeting community needs:* Many agencies reported seeing three groups of people often during the pandemic; newly unemployed people who had no prior knowledge of income support (Centrelink) or Emergency Relief, international students who were not eligible for JobSeeker or JobKeeper payments, and migrants on visas which allowed them to live and work in Australia but not access income support. Many agencies reported seeing two groups of people less, potentially due to the increased income support they received; existing community members of the service, and people experiencing homelessness. The community needs which were prevalent during this time were food relief, rent relief and help with utilities.
3. *Volunteer workforce:* The volunteer workforce was severely impacted by the pandemic with many volunteers being especially vulnerable to COVID-19 because of their age. The reduced capacity put pressure on paid staff and remaining volunteers, impacting how services were able to meet community need.
4. *Impact of governments:* All levels of government had a large influence on how agencies operated and what services they were able to provide, particularly in regard to the funding that each level of government was able to offer agencies. Federal government policies impacted the income support that people received which in turn influenced the people that agencies saw, state government influenced the way agencies operated through the protective health measures they put into place (i.e. lockdowns, restrictions) and local councils influenced the direct physical support the agencies received (i.e. buildings, extra staff) with some councils being very supportive and others offering almost no assistance.
5. *Collaboration:* For agencies, partnerships with other groups, organisations and local businesses became vital for service delivery. Collaborations that agencies engaged in included community donations, other community agencies and Emergency Relief providers, transport services, charitable foundations, medical professionals, food shares, cafes and restaurants, Rotary clubs, Centrelink, the RACV, and universities and TAFEs.
6. *Agency concerns:* Throughout the pandemic, agencies had considerable concerns, however, none was more prominent than the possibility of the JobSeeker rate returning to its pre-pandemic level. Other concerns centred on the initial lockdown process, difficulties in bulk buying food when Coles and Woolworths stopped accepting bulk orders during the stock shortages, ensuring technology was set up to protect confidential information, agency staff shortages, lack of space to ensure social distancing, and communicating to the community that services were still open.
7. *Community experiences:* The feedback that agencies received from community members was positive. People who were new to accessing Emergency Relief or ineligible for other forms of support were grateful that there was a place that they could go to for help.

These seven themes describe the direct impact of COVID-19 on CISVic member agencies and communities, and how agencies responded to ensure that community need continued to be met during the pandemic.

In addition, there were three underlying themes that underpinned the experiences of CISVic member agencies during the pandemic. These themes were:

1. *Systemic inequalities*: Income support increased for some groups of people deemed eligible while other groups of people were excluded. Consequently, agencies saw a shift in the groups of people requiring assistance, demonstrating that income support systems greatly affect who requires Emergency Relief.
2. *Resilience in overcoming adversity*: Agencies were able to be flexible within a constantly changing environment in order to continue doing the work they have always done, demonstrating their resilience and commitment to support their community.
3. *Unity*: Community agencies formed partnerships to support community members by connecting with the community, other community organisations, businesses and groups, demonstrating that unity in times of hardships is a community's greatest strength.

Attachment E: Volunteer census COVID related key findings

The 2020 Volunteer Census was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the delay, it gave CISVic the opportunity to do a follow up survey to gain a better understanding of how COVID-19 impacted our volunteer base.

CISVic member agencies are staffed predominantly by volunteers with some agencies having a mixed workforce but others being solely volunteer run. Many agency managers reported losing 'half' of their volunteers overnight when the pandemic began (24 March 2020). This was mainly due to the health risk that COVID-19 posed to older volunteers, but also due to social distancing limitations that restricted how many people could work onsite. Some agencies had to close temporarily due to lack of staff. The reduced capacity put pressure on remaining volunteers and paid staff, particularly in the face of increasing demand and the need to adapt to new ways of delivering services that were remote and COVID-safe. In particular, increased data demands put a strain on the small workforces. Managers were unable to hire new volunteers as training new staff during a pandemic was difficult. Volunteers suffered from social isolation and some agency managers ensured that they continued to connect with their volunteers through phone calls and 'Zoom' sessions. As the pandemic progressed, agency managers expressed growing concern that volunteers were suffering from vicarious trauma. Community members were beginning to present with more complex issues and this compounded the general fears and anxieties that volunteers had regarding the pandemic. It was found that further training and support will be needed for returning and new volunteers.

Overall, the loss of volunteers was one of the biggest implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. Agencies had reduced capacity to meet increasing need and volunteers missed the social experience that volunteering provided them. The pandemic demonstrated how reliant the community, information and support sector is on volunteers and dually how critical the volunteer workforce is to fulfil community need.

Other key findings from the COVID addendum survey to the 2020 Volunteer Census:

- Volunteers were impressed with how their agencies handled service delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic by meeting community need while keeping volunteers, paid staff and community members safe.
- Despite the pandemic, many volunteers who volunteered during the crisis intend to continue volunteering and many volunteers who had to stop volunteering during the pandemic intend to return to volunteering.
- Volunteers found work meaningful during the pandemic but missed interacting with community members and each other.
- Volunteers felt supported by their agency during the pandemic.

Attachment F: COVID-19 events timeline

NB: The first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Victoria and Australia on 25 January 2020.

MARCH

	Key events	Key CISVic and member agency actions
1	First death from COVID-19 in Australia.	
<i>Week beginning 2 March</i>		Agency 1 sent a communication email to stakeholders with practical responses to the pandemic.
2		Agency 2 formed a Pandemic Committee.
<i>Week beginning 9 March</i>		CISVic provided COVID-19 policy drafts for member agencies. Agency 1 started drafting COVID-19 policies and procedures. Agency 3: experienced a high level of uncertainty, panic buying, increased health concerns for staff and volunteers, and a lack of clear messages until the DHHS briefing on 13 March. In this week Agency 3 introduced social distancing and hygiene procedures, and communicated information and assurances to staff, volunteers and the community. Agency 2 restructured its volunteer roster.
10	Victorian Government releases its COVID-19 Pandemic Plan for the Victorian Health Sector.	
12	Federal Government announces \$17.6 billion stimulus package to 'keep Australians in jobs, businesses in business and support households.' WHO declares COVID-19 a pandemic.	CISVic drafted a pandemic lockdown plan.
13	National restrictions on public gatherings of more than 500 people. CISVic attended a DHHS Briefing for the community sector Presenters included Chief Health Officer (CHO) Brett Sutton.	CISVic conducted a Zoom conference with member agencies to inform them of key messages from a Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) briefing. Agency 4 wrote program procedures over the weekend, cancelled face-to-face meetings, and advised the Board of Management (BOM). Agency 5 prepared a report for the Committee of Management (COM).
14		CISVic and its three branches implemented a Social Distancing Policy.

<p><i>Week beginning 16 March</i></p>	<p>Panic buying increased, supermarket partners ceased support (Agency 1)</p>	<p>Agency 1 developed a COVID-19 contingency plan and workplan.</p> <p>Agency 6 organised for half of their volunteers to stay at home, and social distancing and hygiene procedures were put in place.</p> <p>Agency 3 had less volunteers, and experienced a disrupted food supply chain. Agency was unable to buy food in bulk from major supermarkets and treated as an individual rather than a service. There was confusion in the community as to whether they were open. The agency changed its signage, ramped up Facebook communication, and expanded food supply chain relationships with a local supplier. Remaining volunteers were given more shifts. The Manager communicated with a local MP for clarity regarding the agency's status as an 'Essential Service', began regular communication with Council, wrote three COVID-relevant policies, and called Telstra for a quote on NBN (as the internet was slow).</p> <p>Agency 2 made changes to service delivery for social distancing, had limited choices on offer for Emergency Relief, and had less experienced interviewers. Agency lost 10% of volunteers. The agency worked closely with suppliers and other local ER agencies to share information and resources, and lobbied local MPs and the Shire for assistance. The Shire started working with the three CISVic member agencies by providing COVID-19 information.</p>
<p>16</p>	<p>Victorian Government declares a State of Emergency for four weeks to 'flatten the curve' and give the Victorian health system its best chance of managing COVID-19.</p>	<p>The CISVic team vacated its city office and started working remotely. CISVic branch staff remained onsite while delivering a remote service.</p> <p>Agency 4 decreased in staff and volunteers, back filled by those remaining.</p> <p>Agency 7 Branch Coordinator had individual discussions with volunteers and CISVIC; a decision was made by CISVic to cease face to face services.</p> <p>Agency 8 implemented a range of specific hygiene and social distancing measures for staff/volunteers. Commenced daily end of day meetings with volunteers and staff to determine if the agency would continue to open the next day.</p>
<p>17</p>		<p>Agency 9 was closed to the public. Volunteers were unable to refer new prospective volunteers to roles (resolved 30 March).</p> <p>Agency 5 COM made a decision that all volunteers would be canvassed for their availability during this time.</p> <p>Agency 7 contacted volunteers and advised them of cessation of volunteering. Services to be provided by Branch Coordinator, Head Office staff and Social Work student on placement.</p> <p>Agency 8 implemented a range of specific hygiene and social distancing procedures for staff/volunteers. Commenced daily end-of-day meetings with volunteers and staff to determine if they would continue to open the next day.</p> <p>Agency 10 COM decided to close the agency to at least 20 April, later amended to 18 May; regular meetings scheduled with Stonnington Relief & Recovery Committee (at least to 7 May).</p>
<p>18</p>	<p>Victorian Minister for Housing announces almost \$6 million in funding for Victorian homelessness organisations to reduce</p>	<p>Agency 1 developed policies, procedures and contingency plans, experienced a dramatic reduction in volunteers; and opening hours were reduced.</p> <p>Agency 5 made a decision to only operate three half-days per week due to reduced volunteer numbers.</p> <p>Agency 4 coordinator continued to provide assistance via phone without volunteers.</p>

	rough sleeping and homelessness. Victorian Government announces additional restrictions on with indoor public gatherings of more than 100 people banned.	
19		CISVic cancelled all face-to-face training for the foreseeable future. Agency 5 put out signs that the Op shop isn't open and no donations could be accepted.
20	JobSeeker coronavirus supplement of \$550 per fortnight announced (roughly doubling the minimum base rate). Australia closes its borders to all non-citizens and non-residents.	Agency 5 put out signs advising no entry to the service and a roster of the opening hours for the coming weeks until 1 May.
21	Victorian Government announces a \$1.7 billion economic survival and jobs package including a \$500 million Working For Victoria Fund, to help people who have lost their jobs find new opportunities	Agency 8: Opened its Op Shop for the last time before shutting due to COVID-19.
22	Premier announces Victoria would implement a shutdown of all non-essential activities over 48 hours and that school holidays would be brought forward, commencing 24 March.	
<i>Week beginning 23 March</i>	Inability to place supermarket orders (Agency 1)	Agency 1 made process changes; notified key bodies regarding service changes, and carried out service delivery, and data entry. Agency 9 closed its office temporarily to staff. Agency 3 had concerns about going to Stage 3 Lockdown and was unsure if it was classified as an Essential Service. A lot of homeless people were seeking help but no housing options were available, and there were still major food chain supply issues, particularly because agencies were unable to purchase food in bulk. Signage was further adjusted, social distancing measures were implemented, parcels for homeless people were expanded, and food delivery service for aged people was negotiated with a local not-for-profit. The Manager tried to organise remote banking and NBN, and negotiated use of a hall for food sorting and packing. Agency 2 had less experienced interviewers for material aid assessment. More material aid was available due to local agency SP Food for All. The Shire announced Community Care Packages and initially formed a CIS working party to deliver them. They had supply

		and internal issues, and then set up their own Shire triage system. The Shire provided a Hall for relocation of the Agency 2 pantry and food handling, a mobile cool store, a number of fridges, and bulk sanitiser. The Shire and Mornington Peninsula Foundation workshopped to find solutions. Agency 2 suspended its Monday Fresh Food program with Second Bite and Oz Harvest fresh food deliveries as it had limited volunteers. Co-located services went to phone service and ceased operating out of the building.
23		<p>Agency 1 implemented COVID-19 policies, procedures, signage, and notifications to stakeholders.</p> <p>CISVic scheduled team meetings three days per week (via Zoom)</p> <p>Agency 13 began cutting back program hours, and implementing social distancing and hygiene measures.</p> <p>Agency 7 placed a community pantry on its veranda and a mailbox for clients to leave the service a message to call them back for assistance.</p> <p>Agency 8 ran its meal program for the last time, and closed its Visitor Information Centre at weekends.</p> <p>Agency 11 volunteers were unwilling to continue at the office. After a teleconference with CISVic members, the agency closed its doors and ended face-to face interviews, while working remotely by phone from home.</p>
24		<p>CISVic members had a meeting via Zoom and discussed 'Service Delivery under Lockdown'.</p> <p>CISVic facilitated its first Emergency Relief providers network meeting.</p> <p>Agency 1 made more vouchers and E vouchers available. Contingency plans were implemented for all programs. Invitation to ER Response Committee.</p>
25	Victorian Premier announces that Stage 2 restrictions would commence in Victoria from midnight, including temporary closure of non-essential services.	<p>Agency 8 closed its Centre to the public and advised all 60 volunteers to self-isolate at home and not to come to the Centre. It continued to provide ER support by phone, and placed a table at the open door during business hours to enable access to bread and Needle and Syringe programs. Two full time staff continued to work from the Centre. On 19 and 26 March Agency 8 ran a modified Fresh Food program; packed bags of food and clients collected them. (It later modified the program further). At this point Agency 8 receives a delivery from SecondBite to the Centre, and packs up bags of food and delivers them to people. The agency bought a fridge, and lobbied to stop the closure of the Agency 8 Centrelink office. It was advised on this day that it would remain open for another six months, due to COVID-19.</p>
26	First death from COVID-19 in Victoria	<p>Agency 4 attended its first Yarra Ranges Emergency Relief Network (YRERN) Zoom meeting. The agency joined the committee to assist with local Emergency Relief coordination. It had difficulty accessing PPE, especially hand sanitiser – assistance from within LinC, EV, other agencies, and Council.</p>
27		<p>Agency 4: due to demand for fresh food, the Fresh Food program continued, albeit with hygiene and social distancing measures. Home deliveries were provided for self-isolators.</p> <p>Agency 7: A Social Work student on placement was provided with a mobile phone and offsite working capabilities.</p> <p>Agency 8 modified its Friday Oz Harvest delivery program from the previous arrangement of people coming to the Centre to get food,</p>

		<p>to bagging up and delivering bags of food to them. This required some volunteers. The agency worked closely with the Agency 8 Peninsula Shire to develop their Care Package program.</p> <p>Agency 12: three volunteers packed the contents of its pantry which were collected that day by Council for distribution to other agencies.</p>
28	<p>Victoria police granted additional powers to grant on-the-spot fines for individuals and business who breach coronavirus restrictions.</p>	
<i>Week beginning 30 March</i>	<p>Enter Stage 3 restrictions</p> <p>CISVic agencies declared as 'Essential Service' (according to Agency 3)</p>	<p>Agency 1 implemented new data entry processes and procedures, provided daily updates, and the Manager introduced herself to local government Emergency Relief.</p> <p>Agency 6 had video intercom installed, and volunteers adjusted to new processes.</p> <p>Agency 3 was relieved when it was declared they were classified as an Essential Service, but concerned about the compliance work involved with the 'Risk Management Plan'. The agency had trouble getting bulk orders with Woolworths, and trouble getting hand sanitiser and disinfectant. The Manager was excited to hear they would be getting part of the \$200 million Emergency Relief stimulus (via the federal Government DSS). There was a drop in the number of people seeking help - but there were more new service users and less 'regulars' due to the COVID supplement, JobSeeker and similar payments. There was concern about a housing service closing in the next week. The public was still confused about the agency's opening. The Manager finalised the Business Continuity Plan ¹⁷ (BCP) and Risk Management Plan, lobbied a local MP regarding the lack of supply from Woolworths et al, got sanitiser and disinfectant from Council, communicated to Council concern about the housing service closing, and oversaw fence advertising to say the agency is open. The agency also planned for Stage 4 restrictions, and carried out 'welfare checks' of past service users.</p> <p>Agency 2: Only the Splash programs (for homeless people) continued face-to-face but there was a major restructure of other programs. New interview process was set up for people seeking help, referrals to case workers increased, and brokerage increased. Information about options for assistance was updated, and fresh food delivery was resumed. The Shire began running a community package program alongside Agency 2.</p>
30	<p>Federal government announces \$130 billion JobKeeper (wage subsidy) payment - %1,500 per eligible employee pfn.</p> <p>Victorian Premier announces the introduction of Stage 3 restrictions, including: (i)</p>	<p>CISVic convened a member's meeting, and an ER providers meeting via Zoom.</p> <p>Agency 1 structured supports for remote staff and volunteers, developed online programming of Centre activities, reduced staff hours, and made an application to JobKeeper. The Manager attended network and local government area (LGA) meetings.</p> <p>Agency 13 worked with support workers to ensure assistance reaches people unable to access services due to language or other barriers.</p>

¹⁷ It was a requirement for this agency to have a detailed BCP in the event that a disaster rendered their office unusable, such as, a COVID outbreak or no power.

	people only being allowed to leave their homes for four reasons: food and supplies; medical care; exercise, and work/ education and (ii) gatherings of no more than two people unless household and for work or education.	
March		Agency 2 had less volunteers so staff stepped in. Hygiene and social distancing procedures were put in place and services were reduced.
March-9 April		Agency 8 was the only local ER provider that remained open during the pandemic at this point and thus had to pick up clients from other services. Agency 8 noticed a reduction in the number of people seeking ER assistance, which was now only available by phone. Staff just started to notice people using the services that had never used them before. The agency ramped up its promotion. It was unable to order in bulk from Woolworths for some weeks at this point. It was thought the additional ER funding from DSS would enable the agency to purchase another fridge and employ someone to run the Fresh Food program and look after all the logistics involved in becoming a food and non-perishable items warehouse. Community development was put on hold, meetings were held by Zoom, there were much fewer volunteers, and new relationships were formed with organisations and businesses.
30 Mar – 12 April		Agency 4: No Fresh Start ¹⁸ or ER program was operating during school holidays. The team leader was available for urgent needs. Planning for program changes from 14 April.
Late March onward		Agency 6 saw an increase in new service users, especially foreign workers, and including students and asylum seekers (who had no work and no means of support) and tourists who couldn't go home. There was a decrease in regular service users not receiving Emergency Relief due to COVID supplements.
March & April		Agency 14: There were less volunteers, reduced opening times, redeployment of internal staff, and more diversity in volunteers. The annual food drive was cancelled, with alternative avenues of donation. New volunteers were not always easy to deploy. The online Community Support Worker (CSW) course by CISVic started and short-term roles were created. Many new procedures were put in place e.g. new processes for food delivery and pick up. Some service users were distressed at the loss of social interaction on site. Strategies to address this included phone and WhatsApp contact and intensive casework by outreach. Public showers were closed affecting ER users. Agency 14 provided information about showers in other LGAs. ' <i>CISVic network meetings help exchange information about adapting services...</i> ' Agency 2: Returning volunteers were set up in their own room with their own equipment. 50 meals were donated from a local restaurant.

¹⁸ Fresh Start

APRIL

	Key events	Key CISVic/member actions <i>(in that order)</i>
April		<p>Agency 2 provided support by phone and delivered food and provided food vouchers, and Myki transport cards. Staff were stretched, often delivering food into early evening. Many homeless had nowhere to deliver food etc to. Packs were left at the side gate of the agency for them. Many service users were feeling lonely so they were given time to talk when they rang.</p> <p>Agency 18 issues: aging volunteers experiencing loneliness, increased need to use technology, people seeing Social Workers wanting face-to-face support, suspension of NILS program due to loss of volunteers, logistical challenges for financial counsellors, increased pressure on remaining staff – especially with required changes.</p>
2		<p>Agency 4 was short of long-life food items for food parcels. It was able to order from Foodbank ordering via Discovery Community Care.</p>
Week beginning 6 April		<p>Agency 1: transitioned to remote support, continued its communication plan, and formed new partnerships.</p> <p>Agency 3 was concerned about the mental health of volunteers who were not working. The agency was seeing a number of homeless people and there were no showers for them, with other services operating only remotely. The agency was not sure if it could claim JobKeeper. It started weekly welfare checks of volunteers and talked to Council regarding the needs of homeless people. Council asked a local service provider to reconsider discontinuance of services to homeless people. The agency developed a publicity flyer, reviewed food parcel content, and wrote new MOU for contactless homeless service on site.</p> <p>Agency 2 set up systems for interviewers to work from home. It resumed fresh food delivery. Help was provided by Council youth workers. The service was promoted through social media.</p>
6	30 March – 12 April	<p>Agency 4 closed its office due to inability to social distance in the small work space. At this time all staff and volunteers were working from home.</p> <p>Agency 8: A local restaurant started to provide the agency with 50 cooked meals a week.</p>
7	Victorian Government announces all government primary, secondary and special schools would move to remote and flexible learning for Term 2	<p>CISVic convened an Emergency Relief providers meeting via Zoom.</p> <p>Agency 1 was (re)invited to Council's ER Response Committee. A DSS weekly data request was responded to.</p>
8		<p>CISVic convened a member's meeting, via Zoom.</p> <p>Agency 12's COM decided to divert its phone to a CISVic Social Worker who would assist callers. Signs were to be placed on the agency's door to advise of this.</p>
9		<p>Agency 8 started getting a weekly delivery of non-perishable items from SecondBite. The first week valued the delivery at \$10,000 and the second week at \$17,000. These items were included in the Thursday and Friday Fresh Food deliveries. It</p>

		received an additional grant from Ross Trust of \$25,000. Agency 8 was the only local ER provider that remained open during this pandemic at this time and thus assisted community members from other services. There was a reduction in the number of people seeking ER assistance, only available by phone. There were new people seeking assistance. The agency increased service promotion. It was unable to order in bulk from Woolworths for some weeks. It was anticipated that additional ER funding from DSS would enable purchase of another fridge and employ someone to run the Fresh Food program and look after all the logistics involved in becoming a food and non-perishable items warehouse. COM meetings were carried out by Zoom. Most community development work was put on hold. A few new relationships were established with organisations and businesses.
10 April – 20 April		Agency 4: changes in behaviour of staff and volunteers due to anxiety in the context of COVID-19. Extra time spent by team leaders formulating and implementing support and better communication.
12	Victorian Premier announces that the State of Emergency for Victoria would be extended by an additional four weeks, until midnight 11 May 2020.	
Week beginning 13 April		<p>Agency 1 continued participation in the ER steering committee, with two local governments included. New partnerships were formed.</p> <p>Agency 3 received lot of community donations, The Woolworths order from 10 days previous still didn't arrive. There was increased work to support the contactless housing service on site. Overheads and the cost of food increased. There were concerns about getting critical information to service users, and confusion about the agency qualifying for JobKeeper. Service users were feeling anxious and isolated. Agency 3 started discussions with Rotary re local restaurant vouchers, flyers + info being put with food parcels. There were lots of remote meetings to keep informed. New procedures to help homeless people were put in place.</p> <p>Agency 2: Missing items from food deliveries-Coles & 2nd Bite. Found not enough clients took up the offer of a call back and returned to full interviews for every call. Reached out to rough sleepers, activity funded by MP Foundation & philanthropy. Grant from Ross Trust \$25k covers cash flow shortfall. Was delivered 50 meals from local restaurant.</p>
14		<p>CISVic: First on-line training module delivered, (data entry) 'portal training'.</p> <p>Agency 4: 'Fresh Start' to open on Mondays and Tuesdays, calls to be made to mobile phones and assistance provided by post, email or home delivery. Not open Thursdays and Fridays as not enough volunteers.</p>
15		CISVic convened a member's meeting by Zoom.
16		CISVic convened an ER provider's meeting by Zoom.

		Agency 19: A new webpage was updated with a link to Volunteering Victoria for prospective volunteers
18		CISVic applied for Working For Victoria (WV) funding to employ staff to backfill the loss of volunteer workers, due to many volunteers being in the older vulnerable age bracket and therefore unable to volunteer.
<i>Week beginning 20 April</i>		Agency 1 put in a JobKeeper application Agency 3 was relieved to learn they will receive a DSS funding boost. There was a growing sense of the community and coming together, even if it was at a distance. Agency waited for a Woolworths order to be filled after two and a half weeks. There were problems with poor internet. The agency negotiated with Council to put in place a place that included a solution providing laundry services for rough sleepers. Working with Rotary on a program to support local businesses doing it tough offering restaurant take away vouchers that could be included in the food parcels. Data showed that there was an increase in client numbers but a shift in demographics compared to the same time the previous year. The Manager gave a written update to state and federal MPs. Service continued assisting homeless people. Agency 2 put in systems for experienced volunteers to return to work, and did welfare checks of people who had not been in since COVID.
20		Agency 5 accepted an offer from RACV of cooked vegetarian meals to be delivered to the agency, which was very useful as Foodbank was not able to provide much in the way of frozen meals. Agency 12: 25 people rang for assistance and were diverted to the CISVic Social Worker who provided emotional and emergency support (ongoing from 20 April to 1 May).
21		CISVic convened an ER provider's meeting by Zoom. Agency 7 and LGA City Council hosted its first Food and Material Aid Network meeting.
22	The federal Government Department of Social Services (DSS) forms an Emergency Relief subcommittee	Announcement that DSS funding was a closed process for currently funded providers (such as the CISVic consortia). CISVic convened a member's meeting by Zoom. Agency 4 'shed a sigh of relief' with the notification of an increase in DSS funding. Agency 5 received the first delivery RACV cooked meals.
23		CISVic met with VCOSS and Emergency Management Victoria to start work on their Emergency Relief survey. Agency 8 employed a Fresh Food Program Coordinator with additional DSS ER funding.
24		CISVic attended an online Working for Victoria (WV) information session. Agency 13 had increased requests for fresh food home deliveries. Staff supported volunteers to coordinate delivery programs.
<i>Week beginning 27 April</i>		Agency 3: on the whole reporting for different agencies including DSS was a heavy burden. As a small agency, Knox responded more quickly than some larger bureaucratic organisations. There were lots of logistical issues to resolve, and

		more workload for fewer people. 'Welfare checks' of service users revealed high anxiety. Strategies were developed for getting all data in on time, and storage and logistics was 'problem solved'. A budget/caseworker role was developed, IT and communications solutions were chased up. The frustration of homeless people was addressed. Welfare checks were continued.
27	Coronavirus testing blitz: Premier Daniel Andrews and Minister for Health Jenny Mikakos announce the massive expansion of COVID-19 testing.	
28		CISVic convened an ER provider's meeting by Zoom to discuss DSS's new reporting requirements CISVic attended a Giving Tuesday Webinar, which led to the employment of a Communications and Media Officer
29		VCOSS/DHHS gave a COVID-19 briefing (live streamed). CISVic convened a member's meeting by Zoom.
30		CIVic convened a Case Workers Network meeting by Zoom. Agency 4 received a call from a DSS representative saying: ' <i>a DSS rep will be calling each week to determine service trends and gaps. As well as reporting via DEX we are required to report verbally each week</i> '.

MAY

	Key events	Key CISVic/member actions
1		
<i>Week beginning 4 May</i>		Agency 3: frustration with high levels of data and accountability by different parties e.g. Council, DSS, (<u>not required of other agencies giving ER</u>). Service users were grateful for grocery items. Mother's Day gift bags were prepared for 10 May. The success of the agency so far was due to strong communication and strong commitment from staff and volunteers. Agency 2: More volunteers wanted to return than could be accommodated. Updated URGS and other assistance information. Saw an increase in brokerage funds.
6		CISVic team meetings for peak body staff changed to twice per week (from three times per week from the start of working from home in March). CISVic convened a member's meeting by Zoom.
7		Agency 15 continued to work remotely, with volunteers conducting phone interviews in response to messages left on two answering machines. Support was provided via E-vouchers, EFT, Telstra vouchers and home delivery of vouchers/food parcels. Information/ advice/ referrals were also being given. Volunteers were missing personal contact through work. The agency was keeping in touch by phone, email etc. with volunteers. Agency 8: negotiated lower rent for its Op Shop.

11	Victorian Premier announces some easing of restrictions on social gathering.	
12	Victorian Government announces that government school students would begin a phased return to the classroom from 26 May.	
13		CISVic convened a member's meeting by Zoom.
14		DSS conducted its first meeting of the newly formed ER Sub Committee.
15		CISVic attended a VCOSS meeting about the Working for Victoria (WFV) funding.
18		Agency 1 began planning for recovery. Agency 8 introduced a range of procedures to start opening up the Centre.
19		CISVic submitted a tender for WFV funding to employ staff at member agencies to backfill volunteer positions.
24	Victorian Government announces a further easing of restrictions.	
26		Agency 8 re-opened its Op Shop on reduced opening hours.
27		CISVic members meeting changed to fortnightly schedule.
30		Agency 1 worked on weekly reporting for DHHS.
31	Victorian Minister for Health announces extension of State of Emergency in Victoria to 21 June 2020 to slow the spread of COVID-19.	
<i>No dates: Sent by Email 13 May</i>		<p>Agency 7: With many local services closed or being inaccessible, Agency 7 decided to keep the Branch Coordinator on site to answer calls immediately and respond to any people who attended the service needing help. People reported that the COVID supplement relieved their financial burden. Workers spent time with people discussing financial management during interviews in preparation for the increase to many Centrelink payments. The service allowed more discretion in the amounts of Emergency Relief provided for asylum seekers without Centrelink or jobs.</p> <p>Time spent with parents/ single parents on the telephone increased with the demands of remote education and linking children with support via technology.</p> <p>Referrals to NILS providers increased to pay for technology for school children during COVID.</p> <p>The service spent considerable time informing people of the rules and regulations regarding COVID19, especially with inconsistency between federal and state governments (especially confusing for people with intellectual disabilities). The service also decided to do on-line shopping for clients who are vulnerable and should not leave the house.</p>

		There was a shortage of essential items in stores causing much distress amongst already struggling households. Cheaper items (Homebrand) were no longer available, and people had to purchase more expensive items.
<i>April-May</i>		Agency 1 was in a holding pattern for a number of weeks allowing for reflection, staff supports, volunteer communications, and review of policies and procedures.
<i>End of May</i>		Agency 8: Received a grant of \$25,000 from the RM Ansett Trust

JUNE

	Key events	Key CISVic/member actions
<i>June</i>		Agency 1 received Recovery guidelines from Bayside City Council and drafted procedures for recovery and reopening. Also designed Sustainable Planning with volunteer recruitment and redeployment. Agency 8 received government assistance in the form of JobKeeper, cashflow boost and business support fund.
1	Victorian venues reopen with limits of 20 patrons.	
2		
10		Agency 16 convened a network meeting (by Zoom): New DSS requirements were discussed and concern was raised regarding the time and resources required. CISVic convened a member's meeting by Zoom.
13	Victorian Minister of Housing announces additional funding for people who are homeless to keep them in current emergency accommodation	
14	Announcement by Victorian Government From 22 June further easing of restrictions is planned for social events, ceremonies, community services, sport and exercise, cafes and restaurants, travel, and entertainment.	
18		CISVic convened an ER provider's meeting by Zoom. Agency 8 obtained a substantial quantity of Care Package from the Shire and St Vincent de Paul.
21	State of Emergency for Victoria extended by another four weeks until 19 July.	
22		CISVic attended a Zoom meeting with social enterprises - Good Food For All Roundtable.
24		CISVic convened a member's meeting by Zoom.

25		CISVic attended an Emergency Relief Victoria Sub Committee meeting with DSS.
30	Victorian Premier announces a return to tougher restrictions, including suburb lockdowns.	

JULY

	Key events	Key CISVic/member actions
July		<p>Agency 3 carried out onerous reporting processes for DSS funding and facilitation of surveys for Council.</p> <p>Agency 1 carried out online volunteer interviews and recruitment commenced. It commenced planning for the staged reintroduction of staff, services and programs.</p> <p>Agency 8: Close communication with and support from the Shire, including linking with food charities, a restaurant donating cooked meals, community organisations donating staffing and financial support for a fridge, space to put together Shire care packages, linking with organisations to distribute packages, bathroom upgrade for homeless people and 24 hour accessible lockers, and provision of face masks.</p>
2		CISVic attended a VCOSS/DHHS COVID-19 Digital Forum
4	Towers Hard Lockdown commences	
5		CISVic EO attended the first DHHS Briefing regarding the public housing Flemington Towers Hard Lockdown
7	Stage 3 'Stay at Home' restrictions reinstated across metropolitan Melbourne and Mitchell Shire from 11:59pm 8 July.	CISVic EO attended the second DHHS Briefing regarding the public housing Flemington Towers Hard Lockdown.
8		CISVic convened a member's meeting by Zoom.
9		CISVic EO attended the third DHHS Briefing regarding the public housing Flemington Towers Hard Lockdown.
16		<p><i>CISVic Board meeting (relevance to COVID?)</i></p> <p>CISVic convened an ER provider's meeting by Zoom.</p> <p>Working For Victoria (WV) tender approved.</p> <p>CISVic EO attended the fourth DHHS Briefing re public housing towers in Flemington 'hard lockdown'.</p>
20		<p>CISVic informed member agencies that the Working For Victoria (WV) tender lodged on their behalf was approved.</p> <p>Agency 13 continued to do welfare calls but many clients indicated they were managing fine financially at that point. The agency was providing assistance to clients who went on Jobkeeper and were new to needing financial assistance.</p> <p>Agency 8 closed the Centre again and moved to interviews by phone. It continued to have one volunteer CSW on site per shift, although it had not been able to fill all shifts.</p>

21	Federal government announce extension of JobKeeper payment until 28 March 2021, modified scheme from 27 September 2020, (+ reductions to JobSeeker and JobKeeper).	Agency 8 attended a Zoom meeting with Councillors and staff from Agency 8 Shire Council to brief them on the impact of COVID-19 on their services and service provision.
22		CISVic convened a member's meeting by Zoom. The successful WFV tender was discussed. (See 20 July).
23		CISVic attended an Emergency Relief Victoria Sub Committee meeting with DSS. Agency 8 ramped up delivery of weekly food parcels. The Centre closed again. Staff continued at the Centre. Interviews were conducted by phone where possible. Agency 8 expressed an interest to CISVic in taking on a full-time staff person for six months under the Working for Victoria program.
28		The first Working For Victoria (WFV) staff member was employed (Case Worker at Agency 7).
30		CISVic convened an ER provider's meeting by Zoom.

AUGUST

	Key events	Key CISVic/member actions
2	Victoria declares a State of Disaster. Stage 4 restrictions apply to Metropolitan Melbourne	
3	Victorian lockdown extended to the whole state.	
5	Worker Permit scheme begins in Victoria	CISVic convened a member's meeting by Zoom.
6		CISVic attended an Emergency Relief Victoria Sub Committee meeting with DSS.
13	Victorian Government announce that the coronavirus (COVID-19) Test Isolation Payment has increased to \$450.	Stage 4 restrictions brought to a halt recruitment for WFV positions.
16	Victorian state of emergency extended for four weeks.	
20		CISVic attended an Emergency Relief Victoria Sub Committee meeting with DSS.
27		Two Working For Victoria (WFV) Project Coordinators began employment.

SEPTEMBER

	Key events	Key CISVic/member actions
<i>September</i>		Nine WFV staff commenced in September.
3		CISVic attended an Emergency Relief Victoria Sub Committee meeting with DSS.
17		CISVic attended an Emergency Relief Victoria Sub Committee meeting with DSS.
23		WFV 'Milestone 1' funding was received for employment of staff by CISVic and member agencies.
27	Original JobKeeper payment scheme ends.	
28	JobKeeper payments change from a flat \$1,500 a fortnight to \$1,200 per fortnight for FT workers, and \$750 per fortnight for PT workers. JobSeeker + similar \$1,100 per fortnight - base amount cut to about \$815 a fortnight.	

OCTOBER

	Key events	Key CISVic/member actions
<i>October</i>		25 WFV staff commenced in October.
1		CISVic attended an Emergency Relief Victoria Sub Committee meeting with DSS.
12	In Victoria, on-site learning resumes in schools.	
15		CISVic attended an Emergency Relief Victoria Sub Committee meeting with DSS.
27-28	Stage 4 restrictions lift in Victoria from 11:59pm on 27 October, marking the end of an 112 day lockdown. The first day without stage 4 restrictions began at midnight on 28 October.	
29	DHHS updated industry guidelines: Face-to-face service can resume Face shields/eye coverings no longer mentioned, Density quotients remain at 1 person per 4 square metres.	CISVic attended an Emergency Relief Victoria Sub Committee meeting with DSS.

NOVEMBER

	Key events	Key CISVic/member actions
<i>November</i>	No new cases of COVID-19 in Victoria in November (til 22 December)	17 WFV staff commenced in November.
8	Victoria begins easing restrictions, venues reopen and two visitors slowed in homes.	
9	Regional/Metro border lifts in Victoria.	
10	JobSeeker extended to March 31 2021 (at lower rate from January)	
12		CISVic attended an Emergency Relief Victoria Sub Committee meeting with DSS.

DECEMBER

	Key events	Key CISVic/member actions
22	Victoria records three new cases of coronavirus since the day before.	

Themes from one agency: Agency 2

Reduced volunteer numbers generally due to self-isolation of high risk volunteers	Staff hours increased to cover the gaps.
Greater complexity in client needs , poor engagement with many agencies Lack of financial counselling resources	Need more face to face opportunities close to where the clients are Need more case management resources
Home delivery can add value to what we are doing	Some clients receiving assistance who normally could not access it as they could not present at Centre. Easier for clients who struggle with mobility, or who may not be able to afford petrol, or who rely on public transport.
ER agencies generally and CIS orgs in particular not valued and recognised for their expertise	Material aid is only one part of the picture and we would venture that 80% of our clients have multiple or complex needs. Current ER responses by non-specialist groups/organisations are not addressing those needs.
Narrow food parcel options do not recognise complex dietary needs amongst vulnerable cohorts	Need genuine supply chain interaction with ER agencies to maximise beneficial food choices.
Many clients thought we had closed.	LGA could greatly assist by using their communication channels, this has been poor in our Shire because of internal political agendas
Greater need in the community.	We moved to providing much greater quantities of food to the community. We are beginning to run out of items as they are just not available. Drain on resources.
Aggregation of rough sleepers is happening, we are seeing the beginning of tent cities mirroring what is happening around the world.	Rehousing options are extremely limited on the Peninsula, the temporary offer of short term (1 -2 weeks) to long term homeless is of little or no value. There is no doubt in our minds when federal government subsidies finish tent cities will grow exponentially and will become real points of community conflict