

REF: SUBMISSION TO FEDERAL SENATE INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIA'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

25th May 2020

Committee Secretary
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Dear Committee Secretary

Thank-you for your *Senate Inquiry into Australia's Response to COVID-19*. I believe this is a timely and important Inquiry to assess our nation's response to the pandemic and to inform future directions, especially as we are still very much in the time of COVID-19. Our agencies are at the pandemic 'coal face' and I welcome the opportunity for sharing our first-hand knowledge and experience about what is happening in communities and the agencies supporting them.

I am the Executive Officer of Community Information & Support Victoria (CISVic), the peak body representing 55 local community information and support services, across 64 sites in Victoria. We are also the lead agency in a consortium of 29 local centres delivering federally funded Emergency Relief under contracts. In the year 2018-2019 we distributed \$2 million in emergency relief to community members from 34 sites. Services provided by our member agencies include: material aid, food, information, advocacy, referral, case management, budgeting assistance, financial counselling, legal services, No interest loans, tax help, youth services, personal counselling, and settlement support. In the last financial year we had contact with 500,836 Victorians. Our approach to support is holistic and we are very often the 'first port of call' for people seeking assistance.

CISVic member services are delivered by a high proportion of volunteers, with training in 'Community Support Work' provided by CISVic as a peak body. Overall, there are roughly 450 paid staff and 5,000 volunteers. Many of the volunteers are vulnerable to COVID-19 as they are in older age brackets, and thus have needed to withdraw their labour from services. This has been a special challenge to volunteer-only agencies, a few of which were forced to close. In most of the agencies the extra workload and situational demands have fallen to paid staff and managers and the remaining volunteers.

The current situation with COVID-19

Service delivery

With social distancing, most CISVic member agencies have closed their doors for face-to-face support, but the majority have maintained their operations by conducting phone assessment, support and referral, and by using electronic avenues to deliver funds and vouchers. In addition, many member agencies have been delivering or arranging for delivery of food parcels, or

enabling groceries and necessary items to be picked up on site. Some have made structural changes to their building, so that on-site services are still possible, for example having screens erected or phone counselling and support from another room. Overall, as the agencies are locally based and not answerable to centralised bureaucratic lines of command, they have been 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 have closed, 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 has been severe disruption to normal food chains, largely due to 'panic hoarding' of food and other items. Many agencies have not been able to order the usual supplies from supermarkets and also from food banks. This has been particularly worrying, given the vulnerability of the people seeking support from our members. Fortunately, this situation has eased.

Distress & anxiety in community

In addition, there has been a high level of anxiety in the community due to the pandemic. CISVic's holistic assessment and support model has been well placed to address this alongside immediate material support. Some agencies have reported spending more time on phone counselling and support. Many have been providing proactive 'welfare checks' of vulnerable community members by phone (assessed as vulnerable through previous contact). Member agencies are also mindful of the welfare of their regular volunteers who are currently in isolation, many of whom draw meaning and social connection through their work.

Our COVID-19 clientele

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 are seeing a surge in demand for material assistance from people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds. Others are confronted with overwhelming demand from people who are rough sleeping.

In general, member agencies report being approached for help from people who have never sought assistance before – newly unemployed people, as well as international students, and people on restricted visas that do not enable Centrelink support or access to health care. (One CISVic member, South East Community Links, reports that between March and April this year, 40 per cent of clients had lost their jobs or experienced reduced income). Many of these people are in precarious and desperate situations, either homeless or at risk of homelessness and with no income for food or basic life necessities. In some areas, people who have been sleeping rough have found that usual homeless support services have closed, including access to shelter, showers, and food. At the same time several agencies report that some people who usually rely on them for food and financial support are benefitting from Centrelink supplements and apparently in less need of their service at this point.

Role as peak body

During the time of COVID-19, CISVic has been proactive as a peak body in providing advice and support on policy, governance and operational matters to member agencies. We have 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.

In CISVic volunteer-only agencies that have remained open, the new demands of service-change, communication technology, administration, and data collation have been especially onerous and CISVic as a peak body has been providing extra support for them to help keep their services open.

In the next section I will go to the main topic for your Inquiry, that is the Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as experienced by our member agencies and their local communities.

Quotes from the CISVic member survey

'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.'

'Parent 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.'

The Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Positive effects

CISVic is carrying out research on the impacts of COVID-19 on member agencies and communities, as well as agency responses, and what we can learn from this experience for the future. This submission is informed by some of the preliminary research activities, including a member survey, records kept by agencies as the pandemic unfolded, and a focus group with CISVic staff. In addition, we have been having weekly zoom meetings with member agencies from the beginning of the pandemic, and I am also drawing intelligence from these and other ongoing communications with members.

In general, the requirements for Social Distancing have been 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 Department of Social Services (DSS) to meet the additional demand and the changes needed to keep services open and relevant for community needs have been very welcome (some said 'with relief'). These funds have enabled services to keep open, employment of staff, longer opening hours, and the purchase of material infrastructure such as fridges. In the same vein, services have appreciated the release of funds

for additional welfare services, (FWC) Financial Counsellors, microfinance and No Interest Loans Schemes (NILS).

Centrelink supplements, such as Jobseeker have evidently been of great benefit to community members, enabling people living in poverty to buy food and necessities and to pay rent and bills. Importantly, it has prevented many newly unemployed people from becoming homeless. As noted above, several agencies report less contact from some longer term 'regulars' whose basic life expenses exceed their income on an ongoing basis. From agency reports, regulars have been 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.

Quotes from the CISVic member survey

'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 job seeker 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.'

'Additional Govt 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...'

'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.'

'An increase in the job seeker and job keeper 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.'

Areas for improvement

One area for improvement would be better coordination of all levels of government in supporting communities through local organisations and their peak bodies. In fact, this suggestion is aimed at all levels of government, not just federal. While the federal Department of Social Services (DSS) provides Emergency Relief funding to a range of organisations for distribution, including a consortium of CISVic agencies, sometimes staff at state and local government levels appeared

to have little knowledge of this. In some 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'*. We would add that CISVic's expertise extends far beyond handing out material aid or food parcels. As a peak body we provide training for member agencies in holistic engagement, assessment, support and referral. Thus, disseminating material aid is often only a first step to connecting people to the additional support they need, such as financial counselling or a family violence service.

In relation to this point, it should be noted that while councils have a coordinating role in responding to disaster management as per delegation, they have been highly variable in the extent to which they have taken up this role during COVID-19. Some have been exemplary in supporting, coordinating and communicating with local support agencies while disseminating information to community members about what help is available. According to some CISVic members, other councils have done little. In the worst cases, council activities have created confusion and unnecessary duplication of services.

While member agencies have welcomed and appreciated additional Emergency Relief funding from the Department of Social Services, they have found the associated reporting and data requirements laborious and onerous. As noted above, our member agencies are largely volunteer-staffed and highly efficient in terms of the service they deliver in relation to the resources they have. 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 calls for information and data from various bodies, not just DSS. Bodies making new calls on time and labour for data collation include 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 in which usual bureaucratic requirements have been suspended while all resources were focused on meeting urgent community needs.'

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

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 such as asylum seekers. As we know, many casual jobs disappeared overnight with the requirement to self-isolate. Those who had been dependent on these jobs but not eligible for Centrelink payments became destitute overnight. Evidently, this situation is not tenable and all people living in our communities need support for basic living expenses, not least housing and food.

'People from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds are 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, South East Community Links (SECL): "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.'

Even before COVID-19 there was a severe lack of supported or affordable housing. The seriousness of this situation has come into high relief with the pandemic. With the inadequate supply and high cost of housing, and the disappearance of income for many, agencies are seeing both newly unemployed and newly homeless people. Both groups seeking help are expected to increase, especially with any withdrawal of Jobkeeper, JobSeeker, and other Centrelink supplements.

People who were already homeless and sleeping rough are particularly vulnerable during this time. Some agencies are being approached by many people in this situation, especially as the services they normally go to for support, including food, shelter and showers, have closed. This culminate in communal as well as individual crises with spread of COVID-19, as it is difficult to isolate yourself along COVID-19 guidelines when you are homeless.

Another challenge has been 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 has certainly brought the issue of educational disadvantage into high relief, with many families approaching CISVic member agencies for assistance.

Quotes from the CISVic member survey

'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.'

'Complex cases are growing, we are maxed out in our capacity already - three out of seven days per week 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.'

'Parents home schooling, mixed feedback, but those without devices definitely disadvantaged, 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.'

'Additional ER 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...'

‘Jobkeeper payments while a welcome support for many, it was very difficult to determine if your organisation qualified and created yet further time spent working through the guidelines and long waiting times with the ATO to get an answer.’

‘The increase in the Centrelink payments has seen a reduction in our regular cohort accessing our service because with the additional money it is not quite so hard for them to make ends meet. But on the flip side those new to unemployment are finding it hard to manage on what may be considerably less than their paid employment was and not able to meet their normal living standards and commitments.’

Suggestions for future pandemics or crises

- All levels of government plan for and implement better coordination of their efforts in responding to pandemics and similar crises.
- All levels of government recognise the value of locally based agencies, such as CISVic members, that can change and adapt quickly in response to community need and opportunities for collaboration with other organisations in the local area.
- All levels of government streamline data and reporting requirements relating to Emergency Relief or similar funding for support agencies. Liaise with other funding bodies and levels of government to avoid duplication of data requirements and to make data collection coherent and consistent. Consider having all data collection and communication requirements costed in terms of time and labour for the receiving agencies.
- Nominate agencies disseminating Emergency Relief, such as CISVic member agencies, as an Essential Service as a first priority.
- Provide funding and resourcing for material and operational changes required for social distancing at Emergency Relief and support agencies, including new technology.
- Arrange for special payments for those not eligible for Centrelink payments, or include them in existing Centrelink payment arrangements. Start with a principle that no one living in our community should be left destitute and without means on which to live.

Suggestions for remaining period of COVID-19

- Provide ongoing funding for Community Support Workers, Case Workers and Coordinators to support service delivery for the whole community information and support sector, to continue holistic support for communities.
- Partner CALD organisations with universal services and provide case management services to increase CALD access to: income support, tenancy support, mental health

services, family violence services, employment services, home schooling and school disengagement, refugee and asylum seeker support.

- Expand eligibility for JobKeeper payments to include ex-workers currently who are currently excluded.
- Expand eligibility for Jobseeker payments to include international students and migrants on restricted visas. Retain supplemented Jobseeker payments beyond the initially stated six months.
- (As noted above) all levels of government streamline data and reporting requirements relating to Emergency Relief or similar funding for support agencies ...
- Initiate/ arrange a program of ongoing mass building of social housing as a matter of urgency.

Quotes from the CISVic member survey

'(There needs to be) a serious consideration of the level of the JobSeeker payment not returning back to pre-COVID-19 rates. There will be many people who haven't been in the welfare system before that will not be able to manage on the reduced payment.'

'(I suggest) DSS formally briefing DHHS about the role of the federally funded ER services so that the state could effectively factor in these services to the Emergency Response/Recovery plan for the state earlier. (it took some time for us to officially be advised we were an 'essential' service).'

'Avoid duplication of services that already exist - build on what exists and expand them with additional state funding to meet the anticipated increase in demand as we move into the recovery phase and the economic recovery that will take years.'

'Increase paid staff and volunteer management to meet the anticipated 10% unemployment and the flow on of effect this will have to ER services.'

Thank-you for your attention to the matters raised in this submission. Should you wish to discuss any of them, please do not hesitate to contact me on 0407 670 125 or at kate@cisvic.org.au.

Yours sincerely,



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