

# Change and resilience during COVID-19: How CISVic member agencies experienced the pandemic and adapted to support local communities

Zoe Evans and Dr. Jennifer Borrell

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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.

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.

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## Introduction

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),<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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](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.

during the pandemic overall<sup>2</sup>, 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.

## Research design

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. 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.

A range of research methods was used and the findings were analysed together or 'triangulated' for this report, including the following.

- Member agency COVID records (kept for this research)
- Membership surveys (in April and in December 2020)

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<sup>2</sup> 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

- Focus groups (in May and December 2020)
- Thematic analysis of membership meetings
- Integration of CISVic volunteer census
- Desktop research

## Summary of findings

- 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 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 both of 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.

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## Timeline of key events and agency responses

**March:** *Initial shock and change*

**April:** *Adapting to the pandemic*

**May:** *Persisting with changes*

**June:** *Attempting to reopen*

**July:** *Re-entering lockdown*

**August-September:** *Continuing resilience*

**October-December:** *Seeing a way out*

## Summary of actions that assisted CISVic member agencies

- Clear communications and updates relating to COVID-19 from the Victorian Government.
- Additional government funding to meet demand.
- 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.
- Operational, communication, liaison, and advocacy support from CISVic to member agencies.
- Community spirit, commitment and flexibility at an agency level to continue support for local people.

## 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 2021. 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)<sup>3</sup>.

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

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<sup>3</sup> O'Sullivan D, Rahamathulla M and Pawar M 2020, 'The impact and implications of COVID-19: An Australian perspective', *The International Journal of Community and Social Development*, vol 2, no 2, pp.134-151.

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.

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## 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

- introduces 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.

## Contact us

Community Information & Support Victoria (CISVic)

Suite 907, 343 Little Collins St

Melbourne VIC 3000

Email: [admin@cisvic.org.au](mailto:admin@cisvic.org.au)

Tel: 03 9672 2000