

Public Cover Sheet



Inquiry into Enhancing Victoria's Liveability

Submission number: 20

Name of participant: Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria

Date received: 31 January 2008

Number of Earlier Submissions:

Number of Pages: 5

Attachments submitted with this Submission:

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**ethnic
communities'
council of
victoria**

January 17 2008

ECCV SUBMISSION TO THE VICTORIAN COMPETITION AND EFFICIENCY COMMISSION

Inquiry into enhancing Victoria's liveability

1. The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) welcomes the opportunity to present a submission to the Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission's inquiry into enhancing Victoria's liveability.
2. ECCV was established in 1974 as a voluntary community based organisation. ECCV is now a broadly based, state-wide, peak advocacy body representing ethnic and multicultural communities across Victoria. ECCV has a volunteer executive of 19 people representing over 160 member organisations. ECCV works for culturally and linguistically appropriate services and access for Victorians from non-English speaking backgrounds and develops policies and strategies in this area.
3. Victoria is arguably Australia's most multicultural state, with around 20 per cent of Victorians speaking a language other than English at home and nearly half of Victorians either born overseas or having one or more parents born overseas. As such the Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission (VCEC) in conducting an inquiry into enhancing Victoria's liveability needs to consider the needs of Victoria's multicultural communities.
4. ECCV believes that the definition of *'liveability'* should not only focus on the economic developments of society, but also on the well-being and standards of living for individuals and communities. Access to adequate services and maintaining comfortable living standards and affordability is a significant issue for those who have low-incomes and others who are disadvantaged such as those suffering from disabilities and those from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. In addressing these issues, ECCV's submission focuses on a number of policy areas that affect CALD communities in relation to liveability. ECCV will be providing policy recommendations in the areas of employment, aged care, transport, health, provincial Victoria and housing accessibility.

5. Employment:

People from CALD backgrounds, especially those from refugee backgrounds face significant barriers to gaining meaningful employment. A lack of local work experience is also a barrier to obtaining employment. A substantial amount of investment needs to go to recognising overseas qualifications and work experience, as it is often under-valued by Australian employers.

Statewide Resources Centre
150 Palmerston Street
Carlton Victoria 3053

t 03 9349 4122
f 03 9349 4967
eccv@eccv.org.au
www.eccv.org.au

ABN 65071572705



Despite low unemployment figures, barriers to workforce participation remain acute in many CALD communities. For some entrants 18 months after arrival the unemployment rate is as high as 43 per cent, compared with the state average of around 4 per cent. There is a need to establish a Refugee Skills Bridging Program to assist refugees' transition into their qualified professions by working with employers and offering migrants and people from refugee backgrounds work placements and on the job training.

With the support of the Government, further skills awareness programs could be conducted to target employers and industries and encouraging them to employ staff from diverse backgrounds. For many migrant communities, having successful employment is fundamental to their settlement and for creating opportunities for their social and economic participation in society. Additionally, migrants bring an array of skills that would bring strong dividends to the State, particularly in the context of bilingual language abilities and overseas experience.

6. Aged Care: supporting our seniors

Victoria is experiencing a rapidly growing CALD ageing population. By 2011, 38 per cent of seniors in Melbourne will be from CALD backgrounds as many of our post-war migrants enter their senior years. Ethno-specific providers are the missing link in the debate about culturally appropriate home and community care services. There is little effort made in building the capacity and funding of ethno-specific agencies to provide responsive and professional services where their communities are larger enough to warrant ethno-specific services. Clearly communities with large ethno-specific populations should be entitled to deliver services, particularly communities such as the Italian, Greek and Polish communities who have large numbers of seniors with low level-English proficiency. Social support delivered by ethno-specific agencies should receive increased funding of 10 per cent to cater for the large unmet demand for these services by CALD communities.

Pensioners born overseas comprise nearly 40 per cent of aged pensioners and this figure is currently rising. Many full pensioners are struggling to make ends meet due to rising costs which are above the Consumer Price Index (CPI) in areas like public transport, food, utilities and health care. These costs are rising at a higher rate than the old age pension, which is linked to an aggregate CPI and average male weekly earnings. ECCV calls on the Victorian Government to introduce further concession schemes and pricing policies to ensure that the costs of utilities, healthcare, rates and transport are affordable for those on low incomes.

Health and pharmaceutical costs have increased by more than twice the inflation or CPI rate since 1990. As they age, seniors tend to need health and pharmaceutical services to a greater extent. The old age pension provision of \$262 a week, or \$219 a week each if you are a couple is simply not enough to live on with rising costs in the areas of transport, health care, household services and utilities.

Further when the Victorian Government withdrew the \$80 pensioner motor vehicle full concession in 2004, many pensioners feel they were not adequately compensated through other measures. Most of the savings from this measure went to younger families, students and health care card holders. Pensioners only received an increase in local government rates concessions which was not as great as the lost motor vehicle concession amount. ECCV recommends the Government to reintroduce the motor vehicle registration concession discount.



The maximum pensioner rates concession of \$168 is now far too low given that average property rates are now over \$1,000 in Victoria. Research by Gavin Dufty at St Vincent de Paul has shown that for pensioners renting in the private rental market and using public transport the cost of living has gone up at a much higher rate than the pension has increased. Dufty states that pensioners renting their homes and using public transport have seen increases in the cost of living at 30 per cent greater than the inflation rate. Effectively, the value of their pension has decreased for many in the last ten years. ECCV believes that these are important issues that should be addressed to ensure a comfortable standard of living for our senior Victorians.

As a member organisation of *the Fair Go for Pensioners' Coalition*, ECCV supports the following statement of claims:

1. That the former Victorian State Government pensioner motor vehicle registration concession discount be reintroduced.
2. That utility concession rates be standardised throughout the year, in recognition that cooling systems in summer are as important to seniors' health and well-being as heating systems in winter.
3. That there should be an increase in the pensioner concession rates for utilities and council fees.
4. That public transport should be made free for pensioners.

7. Transport

Access to transport is a significant issue for those who have low-incomes and others who are disadvantaged such as those suffering from disabilities and those from CALD backgrounds. The inquiry needs to invest in the development of programs which address the need for disadvantaged migrants to take advantage of Victoria's expanding public and private transport systems.

As a number of CALD community members have difficulties reading English, ECCV considers the development of multilingual documents at Victoria's public transport transit points a key priority. A greater investment in multilingual booklets and leaflets not only benefits migrants but also the high number of tourists that come to Victoria per year. This would ensure that directions and information are understood by those with low-level English proficiency and ensure maximum effectiveness of communication strategies.

A greater allocation of funding and planning for Community Transport options for the many Victorians who are unable to access public or private forms of transport is needed. Community Transport options currently cater to, but are not limited to, the frail aged, people who are isolated or socio-economically disadvantaged, people with disabilities and young people. ECCV recommends that the Victorian Government incorporate Community Transport as a service and policy portfolio within the Department of Infrastructure. The inquiry should also provide support to the Department to develop and coordinate funding initiatives to support vehicle purchase and changeover by Community Transport providers.

8. Housing

Due to the housing crisis in Australia and Victoria, many new arrivals are unable to afford rent. They are sometimes forced to move to regional areas with lower cost housing where sometimes there may be no available jobs. ECCV recommends that the Victorian Government develop policies to address concerns and support people from new and emerging communities living in public housing estates.



Rates of home ownership and weekly income levels for Horn of African and Sudanese communities are much lower compared to other Victorian communities. For instance, home ownership rates among Ethiopian born persons are 10.3 per cent, as compared to 39.2 per cent for the average Victorian. A large number of Victorians born in Eritrea receive a very low level of income, less than \$160 per week, which is significantly less than the Victorian average weekly income.

A particular issue for our new and emerging communities is concern around the lack of available and suitable public housing for African families that have large numbers of children. It is important that every member of the family is given adequate facilities and conditions to ensure healthy and comfortable living standards.

ECCV also recommends greater flexibility in regulations on public housing in terms of the number of residents living in public housing. This leaves many refugee families being dropped down the waiting list due to large numbers in families. Families are then forced to enter the private rental market where they struggle to make ends meet due to high costs in rent and utilities. Some have also faced various forms of discrimination and have been removed from properties due to their incapability to pay rent.

9. Health and well-being

People from CALD and new and emerging communities are still facing many barriers in accessing health services. Our health care services must provide information to ensure that all clients receive appropriate health care responses. For new migrants, especially from the Horn of Africa and Sudan, there is a general lack of health prevention services, including understanding the causes of mental health and communicable diseases. Too few culturally appropriate support programs are in place and there is a need for more service providers to understand varying attitudes to mental health problems. Also, the lack of interpreters within the health sector and the difficulty of navigating our health system often cause problems for our CALD communities.

ECCV recommends the government increase funding to provide guaranteed access to interpreters and translators for patients at critical points during their health care. The Victorian Government should also guarantee that all major health promotion initiatives should ensure a minimum of 10 per cent of their activities are targeted towards relevant CALD communities.

ECCV understands that the delivery of mental health services present significant challenges. People from CALD backgrounds have lower rates of access to mental health services due to language and/or cultural differences, stigma, the lack of knowledge of mental health illness and increased rates of social disadvantage. CALD consumers face challenges giving informed consent in their care and treatment or sharing information with service providers.

ECCV recommends that ethno-specific agencies should be directly funded to provide counselling services to their respective communities. CALD consumers often feel more comfortable when speaking in their own languages. Service partnerships between ethno-specific multicultural and mainstream providers supported by DHS should also be highly encouraged.



10. Provincial Victoria

Access to adequate employment, health and transport services are particular areas of concern for improving liveability across provincial Victoria. In order to meet the skills shortages felt acutely across provincial Victoria, the Victorian Governments' Skilled Migration Program has significantly increased the numbers of migrants settling permanently in regional communities in recent years. In addition, larger numbers of refugees and humanitarian entrants are settling in regional Victoria either through direct settlement or secondary migration.

As more migrants are settling in provincial Victoria, ECCV recommends that further strategies are needed to improving access to interpreting and translating services in regional communities. Specific strategies may include greater funding of interpreting services, ensuring that government department language service policies are followed, and offering scholarships to bilingual persons from new and emerging communities.

ECCV recommends that the inquiry should specifically acknowledge and seek to address the particular disadvantage experienced by rural and regional communities in relation to public transport. Access to regular and reliable public transportation is an ongoing issue in many regional communities and CALD communities can be particularly disadvantaged in terms of access.

11. Conclusion

ECCV supports the VCEC's aim to investigate and enhance Victoria's liveability as a society that serves the needs and aspirations of all Victorians. ECCV hopes that the Commission will give full consideration to ECCV's highlighted policy areas and its recommendations to address the needs of Victoria's culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

While ECCV supports economic growth and business development, ECCV's submission hopes to inform the commission that a society's liveability is also based on social cohesion, community participation, affordability, the quality of life and the accessibility to services. A great number of people today still face significant hardship as they struggle to make ends meet due to the increase in cost of living and limited access to services. This can also create extra costs for society in areas like health and law enforcement. Policy initiatives must be explored to ensure that those from refugee backgrounds and migrant low-income earners can share in our prosperity.