



## **Submission in response to the inquiry into improving crisis communication to culturally and linguistically diverse communities**

### **Introduction**

The Chinese Australian Services Society Limited, as an entity of the group commonly known as “CASS” in the community, welcomes the opportunity to lodge a submission to the NSW Parliament’s Legislative Assembly Committee on Community Services on the inquiry into improving crisis communication to CALD communities. As a longstanding community group, CASS has been dedicated to assisting disadvantaged people of the multicultural communities and advocating on their behalf. Our submission contains the views and concerns we received from our staff members, service users and people in our community, through observations and conclusions while delivering services to our clients from CALD communities.

### **About Our Group**

We are commonly known in the community as “CASS”, the brand name of our Group. We are a multi-discipline community services provider delivering a comprehensive range of social and welfare services to multicultural communities. CASS consists of a group of entities, all are not-for-profit charities and registered companies limited by guarantee, including principally the parent entity, the Chinese Australian Services Society Ltd (founded in 1981), and the subsidiary, CASS Care Ltd (established in 2002) which is also an endorsed public benevolent institution (PBI) by the Australian Taxation Office.

Over the past 40 years, CASS has grown from a concept into a major social and welfare services provider with a comprehensive range of community services, catering to the needs of cradle to seniors, including residential aged care, child care, home ageing and disability services, settlement and health services, vocation and training, volunteering, Chinese language classes, cultural and interests classes, etc.

At present, more than 4,000 families access CASS services and activities every week. CASS employs over 500 staff members and has a team of over 300 active volunteers helping to deliver services and activities to people from CALD backgrounds and the wider community. It aims to promote diversity, inclusion and harmony among multicultural communities.

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## **Our response to improving crisis communications to CALD communities**

We are glad that the NSW Parliament's Legislative Assembly Committee on Community Services is seeking consultation on improving crisis communications to the multicultural community. Owing to language barriers and limited access to mainstream media, people of CALD communities are often disadvantaged in receiving essential information promptly in emergency events.

In contributing to the consultation, we would like to raise the following issues and recommendations:

### **1. Use of multicultural and CALD community groups and networks to distribute in-language information**

According to the 2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census, there were over 300 separately identified languages spoken in Australian homes. More than one-fifth (21%) of Australians spoke a language other than English at home. After English, the next most common languages spoken at home were Mandarin, Arabic, Cantonese and Vietnamese.

We strongly encourage the government to work closely with community organisations such as CASS, to distribute information in relevant language and enhance communication within CALD communities. As outlined by the Migrant Council Australia, effective communication provides information to people in three ways: a language they understand, at a level they comprehend and from a source they trust. Multicultural and CALD organisations that have reliable reputation, solid membership base and strong community networks are able to support the government with information distribution, dissemination and direct communication to people within the community, ensuring equality of access to information by them.

Over the last 6 – 8 years, CASS utilises its own resources running 34 Seniors Activity Groups across Sydney, participated by seniors of Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese and Indonesian backgrounds. During the COVID-19 lockdown, CASS arranged weekly online recreational activities and in-language webinars to keep seniors informed with updated and latest COVID news. For those participants who lacked technological skills, the team also organised one-on-one distanced training to teach them how to use their electronic devices with appropriate software or apps. During face-to-face activity sessions, participant numbers reach up to 100 members per session. In addition, CASS is able to reach a large number of audiences through our various social media platforms, including Facebook, WeChat, WhatsApp, Kakao Talk, Naver Café and various websites. Our multilingual staff connect with people from CALD backgrounds in their own community language, helping them to overcome their language barriers. These services offer the government great opportunities to engage in direct communication

with a large number of recipients from CALD backgrounds through community groups and enhance the face-to-face communication between government agencies and the wider community.

Many CALD seniors are unable to access social media platforms due to the lack of technological skills and limited English. A lack of culturally appropriate service providers and bilingual workers are also some of the fundamental factors preventing effective crisis communication to CALD communities. There has been an increase in demand for interpreting and translation services. CASS settlement Services Clients have increased by more than 50% in the last two years. Multicultural and CALD community groups are able to act as communication bridges between the government and communities, helping both parties to overcome these challenges. For example, many seniors were unaware that booster COVID shots were available. CASS volunteers communicated with the seniors via SMS and phone calls, informing them of the latest health updates and assisting in booking their booster shot appointments. To cater to the diverse needs of the seniors and their preferred communication channels, CASS also conducts radio programs to promote valuable and community information to seniors. Community organisations such as CASS are in advantageous positions to support governments in promoting information to multicultural communities. In turn, government should also consider the provision of funding and resources to support these community organisations.

However, there are newer and less resourceful CALD organisations that the committee needs to address to get the government message across. One possibility may be to provide funding to extend the information provision capability of organisations who have already established good distribution platforms.

## **2. Ways to improve channels of communication with CALD communities**

In addition to collaborating with multicultural and CALD community groups and utilising various social media platforms, governments should also lead the community in organising discussion groups and roundtable meetings. This promotes engagement and creates links across multicultural communities. Discussions should cover a wide range of issues relating to community needs and be issues-based. This will provide an opportunity for community leaders and representatives of different cultural groups to unite around a shared interest, enabling them to exchange knowledge and examine capability gaps which will amplify community voices. Most importantly, this will enhance the preparedness of governments and community organisations, so that when emergencies occurs, the involved members will be able to reach out to the community and distribute information promptly.

The database of government agencies such as Multicultural NSW should be maintained accurately and updated regularly. This will ensure in crisis events, the right personnel can be contacted directly and information distributed through the right channels promptly. Otherwise, community organisations have

missed out on opportunities to support the government in spreading information to CALD communities as they have not received information from the government.

Information sharing should be presented by reliable agencies which are accessible and trusted by the target CALD communities. As one of the leading non-profit CALD organisations in NSW, CASS has been providing government funded settlement services to newly arrive Chinese speaking migrants for almost 30 years. Using our own resources, we also provide settlement services to assist Korean migrants. Reputable multicultural community organisations, such as CASS, are fortunately able to select communication channels based on relevant community needs. For example, the Chinese community relies on WeChat, Weibo, Little Red Book, WhatsApp, Chinese Radio Stations and various other media to receive and exchange information, the Korean community, however, prefers Kakao Talk or Naver Café, whilst the Vietnamese and Indonesian communities favour Facebook posts and WhatsApp messages.

### **3. Addressing racism and discrimination related to crisis communications.**

In 1975, the Racial Discrimination Act came into force. In 1995, the Act was extended to make public acts of racial hatred against the law. Despite these legal protections, individuals from CALD communities continue to be the victims of racism and discrimination. During the COVID-19 pandemic, CALD communities experienced increased discrimination and targeted racism, in particular, people in the Chinese community.

The media has significant power in using its influence to distribute information. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the promotion of fake news and misinformation has affected the general public's mindset and put the wellbeing of CALD communities at risk. Apart from the Scalon report, the Lowy Institute 2021 survey of Chinese-Australians, one in three (31%) said they had been called offensive names and one in five (18%) had been physically threatened or attacked in the previous 12 months due to their Chinese heritage. About the same time at the outbreak of COVID-19, a community survey conducted by the Asian Australian Alliance has received over 400 reports of race related incidents since April 2020. The preliminary findings indicate incidents have included racist slurs and abuse, physical intimidation and being coughed at or spat on. The vast majority of incidents have happened in public spaces and the perpetrators were complete strangers. The impact that these incidents have on social cohesion should not be downplayed and in many cases resulted in mental health issues. They can be highly corrosive because it signals that those of Asian appearance are seen as a threat or blamed on the basis of their racial appearance and not considered as equal individuals who should be treated with respect like other Australians. Societal inaction only makes things worse as it can be interpreted that responding to anti-Asian racism is not considered important. In this connection, the government must act to address the issue of racism promptly and effectively.

When communicating with CALD communities, it is important to tailor messages to align with different cultural contexts and values. CASS' multilingual staff are able to utilise their cultural skills and knowledge to facilitate interactions with people of CALD backgrounds based on relevant community needs. To cater for the surge in demand in mental health support, the CASS H-Line Non-Crisis Hotline was established. With the participation of experienced and professional mental health personnel together with a group of well-trained and dedicated volunteers, the service provides mental health and psychological support, playing a significant role in catering to the specific needs of CALD communities during the pandemic.

The government should revisit its agenda on multiculturalism and review its performance outcomes. It is also worth considering whether additional laws and policies may be required to be implemented to protect victims of racism and additional resources are provided in raising awareness and improving reporting channels. The issues surrounding racism and discrimination are long-term challenges. A national platform must be created whereby State members are able to speak up on behalf of the community in order to tackle the racism and its impact on mental health, apart from liaising with Federal members of Parliament. These initiatives would allow leaders to come together and advise the federal government on issues within CALD communities. Better coordination and mutual support between Federal Government and State Government agencies on action against racism and promotion of multiculturalism should be considered.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we would appreciate the NSW Parliament's Legislative Assembly Committee on Community Services considers the viewpoints and concerns expressed in this submission. By partnering with multicultural communities and adopting a number of the strategies mentioned above, it will certainly assist in improving crisis communications to all CALD communities. We would be delighted to further discuss and elaborate on these viewpoints and concerns.