Engaging people with disability in the multicultural sector: barriers to accessing services and employment

A survey report by the Federation of Ethnic Communities’ Councils of Australia

WHY A SURVEY?

In its role as the peak national body representing Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, FECCA strives to ensure that the needs and aspirations of its constituency are given proper recognition in public policy. FECCA provides advocacy, develops policy and promotes issues on behalf of its constituency to the Australian Government and the broader community. It is critical that FECCA works on a broad range of specific policy issues that affect CALD Australians and Australia’s multicultural agenda, including disability issues.

FECCA Disabilities’ Chair position is one of the five thematic mandates on the FECCA Executive. The Disabilities’ Chair convenes a dedicated Disability Advisory Committee tasked with the development of FECCA’s disability policy and strategy, without prejudice to work being pursued by other organisations. The Committee is comprised of committed disability advocates many of whom are CALD people with disability themselves, who serve either in their individual capacity or as representatives of other organisations.

The Committee recognises the importance of building partnerships with key stakeholders to promote the rights and interests of people from CALD backgrounds with disability in all areas of Australia’s policy and practice. Among other organisations, the Committee collaborates with the National Ethnic Disability Alliance (NEDA) as the peak body representing the rights and interests of people from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) with disability, their families and carers.

The Committee has decided to conduct this survey to find out how much access people with disability have to multicultural organisations, such as FECCA members at the state, territory and regional levels. The other objective was also to ensure that FECCA’s disability advocacy priorities are consistent with the needs of its constituents. The Committee wanted to hear from multicultural advocacy organisations and services providers regardless of the extent of their engagement with people with disability.

The respondents were asked about barriers facing CALD people with disability accessing services or employment, as well as ways of addressing such barriers. The survey also asked to specify any initiatives, locally or nationally, that support CALD people with disability or promote their interest. Finally, the participants were asked to identify key disability policy areas that are particularly important for FECCA to prioritise and pursue at the national level.

FECCA conducted this survey in an attempt to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the levels of involvement of CALD people with disability in community and not-for-profit organisations, as well as of our constituents’ needs and aspirations.
RESPONDENTS AND HOW THEY CONNECT WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY

The survey was completed by 44 multicultural advocacy organisations and service providers, many of whom are FECCA members. The respondents demonstrated diverse capacity and levels of involvement of people with disability. The majority (60 per cent) of the organisations employed under 50 staff.

Half of the organisations also responded that over 10 people from CALD backgrounds living with disability access their services every week.

In order to understand how accessible organisations are to people with disability, the survey asked the respondents to provide their feedback on specific measures. Only about 7 per cent of the organisations indicated that they did not take any measures to make their workplace more accessible for people with disability.

40 per cent of the organisations did not employ people from CALD backgrounds with disability.

Half of them indicated that between 100 and 1000 clients access their organisations’ services each week.
Respondents were also asked to explain how they distribute information about available services to people from CALD backgrounds living with disability and their carers.

The survey asked the respondents to rate their engagement with people from CALD backgrounds with disability and their carers.

The survey also revealed that 64 per cent of the respondents had been aware of FECCA’s Disability Policy.
SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS: WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS AND HOW DO WE OVERCOME THEM?

Awareness and understanding

One of the fundamental findings of the survey was that CALD people with disability lack awareness of services and their availability.

“Lack of disclosure for CALD people with disability means that some are missing out on services specifically tailored for them.”

The responses demonstrated that often CALD people with disability are not aware that information can be provided in languages other than English or that services exist for them, which is largely due to limited information made available. Lack of accessible information and complex service systems were noted as additional factors impacting on the levels of awareness among CALD clients.

These comments were followed by significant concerns over understanding by agencies and organisations of issues faced by CALD people with disability.

The responses demonstrated that the most appropriate way of addressing the lack of awareness and understanding among CALD communities would be to inform them about the availability of services and information in languages other than English, as well as of their entitlements. It was noted that information to CALD communities should be disseminated through a community development approach, information sessions, and on-going networking to promote the availability of services.

Stigma and fear

Stigma in the community and the issue of disability still being treated as “taboo”, were identified as another barrier for CALD people with disability accessing services or employment. The responses indicated that, according to some community perceptions, a person with disability cannot undertake education or employment, and that such stigmas may be difficult for organisations to overcome. Similar assumptions may exist among organisations’ employees.

Some responses indicated that low representation of people from CALD backgrounds accessing disability services should be addressed first, before moving onto the issue of CALD people with disability in accessing employment, which could be improved through targeting CALD communities when advertising job opportunities.

Another reported barrier was fear experienced by CALD people with disability that their needs would not be understood or accommodated, which often causes them to turn to their families for care.

Cultural awareness and financial capacity of organisations

“People with disability already access our services but not those with intellectual disability as we do not have the capacity including funding, to provide appropriate care.”

Multicultural organisations or service providers are usually very small organisations, often running on volunteers only and receiving specific small grants with precise deliverables. Most organisations cannot afford to pay for insurance that is a prerequisite for receiving larger grants. In addition, in some areas, there are no organisations that work specifically with people from CALD backgrounds living with disability.

It was noted by the respondents that certain cultural barriers may exist that discourage CALD people with disability to participate. Staff may not be fully aware of cultural sensitivities. Service providers may lack culturally appropriate models of care. This could, in part, be addressed through appropriate training for staff not just in the area of cultural awareness, but also on provision of care to people living with particular disabilities.
Funding was identified as the key barrier preventing organisations from enhancing their capacity to engage with CALD people with disability. As a minimum, adequate funding would secure required staff support. In addition, it was noted that funding for community workers was required to foster access, equity and inclusion.

Several respondents indicated that barriers faced by CALD people with disability in accessing organisations for services or employment could be addressed through improved organisational policies, including disability action plans and cultural diversity policies.

**Collaborations and partnerships**

“Dissemination of information to other service providers is sadly lacking.”

An overwhelming majority of the responses emphasised the need for developing collaborations and partnerships towards sharing information and resources.

Organisations’ capacity to engage or employ CALD people with disability was discussed at length. Particular concerns were expressed about the lack of partnerships between multicultural or ethnic-specific organisations and mainstream services, including through co-location of disability services within ethnic-specific services. The responses also discussed the lack of partnerships between organisations and specialist employment services.

Overall, the responses indicated that there needs to be a stronger focus on collaboration between government, not-for-profit organisations, and community groups.

**Language**

According to the survey results, language may pose certain communication barriers – clients may not identify that they require assistance as the service and terminology does not exist in, or translate clearly to, their languages. The issue of availability of translating and interpreting services is critical in this regard, not just for providing services, but also for educating and promoting services to people in their languages.

**Accessibility of venues**

Venues may present serious issues for people with disability, as buildings and offices may not be designed with accessibility in mind. Some of the most common issues included unavailability of accessible toilets, emergency evacuation being accessible via stairs only, and no wheelchair access to all offices. It was noted that addressing these barriers may involve significant changes to infrastructure, including moving to an accessible venue. Commitment to policy or procedure on disability access to buildings was underscored as an important step in overcoming this barrier.

**Transport**

Some respondents indicated that transport is often a major issue for people with disability in accessing services or employment.

“Transport is constantly being identified by the government agencies as an enabler yet both Federal and State governments continue to defer the discussion on how people with disability can access affordable, accessible transport, such as trains, buses, taxis or community transport.”
WHAT WORKS LOCALLY AND NATIONALLY?

Not-for-profit organisations providing advocacy on behalf of people from non-English speaking backgrounds with disability were identified as successful initiatives at the national, as well as State/Territory levels.

**Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (AFDO)** – national peak body representing the interests of all people with disability across Australia.

**National Ethnic Disability Alliance (NEDA)** – national peak organisation representing the rights and interests of people from non-English speaking background with disability.

**Multicultural Disability Advocacy Organisation (MDAA)** – peak organisation for CALD people with disability in NSW.

**AMPARO Advocacy** – QLD-based organisation that provides individual and systemic advocacy on behalf of people from non-English speaking backgrounds with disability.

**Queensland Aged and Disability Advocacy (QADA)** – organisation that provides information, education and advocacy support.

**Ethnic Disability Advocacy Centre (EDAC)** – peak advocacy organisation for CALD people with disability in WA.

**Rights in Action** – organisation that provides advocacy assistance to people with disability living in certain areas in QLD.

**SAMARPAN** – a newly established, volunteer-run organisation supporting people with disability from Indian and South Asian backgrounds in NSW.

Multicultural organisations, including FECCA’s Disability Advisory Committee and member peak organisations in States and Territories, were also identified as contributing to initiatives advancing rights and interests of CALD people with disability.

**Action on Disability within Ethnic Communities (ADEC)** was established in 1982 by the Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria (ECCV) to promote access to services for children from CALD backgrounds with disability. Originally managed by the ECCV Committee on Disability and Ethnicity, ADEC grew to become an organisation promoting full participation of CALD people with disability, their carers and families, in the Victorian community.

Initiatives aimed at raising awareness of issues affecting people from CALD backgrounds with disability were reflected prominently in the survey results.

**EthnicAbility** – a weekly half-hour radio programme on disability and ethnicity, supported by EDAC in WA.

**Mental Health Week** – annual national awareness event to promote community awareness about mental health issues, encourage reduction of stigma and discrimination against people living with mental illness, and promote positive mental health and wellbeing.

**Disability Action Week** – QLD awareness event to encourage positive attitudes towards people with disability, and promote access to the wider community.

Language services provided by TIS National, of the Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Border Protection, were identified as critical for addressing communication barriers.

Multicultural officer positions within mainstream organisations and cultural awareness training for staff were noted as examples of good practices towards overcoming barriers for CALD people with disability.
WHAT IS FECCA’S ROLE?

Many respondents thought that FECCA should focus on promoting greater awareness to the community Australia-wide on the issues impacting on people from CALD backgrounds with disability, their families and carers. According to the survey results, FECCA should also work towards raising awareness of CALD people with disability and their carers about access to programs and services, including the National Disability Insurance Scheme, as well as support small organisations by providing them with relevant and up-to-date information.

Education and employment of CALD people with disability were identified as areas that require FECCA’s focused attention.

Equitable access to services, including culturally appropriate services and access to language services, was specified as an important area for FECCA to pursue. It was noted that there should be stronger focus on availability and accessibility of services in rural and regional areas, as the majority of positive initiatives are implemented in metropolitan locations.

The survey results also revealed the need to focus on specific groups that people with disability may identify with, including women, older people, and people from new and emerging communities. These groups have their individual needs that need to be taken into account, such as transitioning to residential aged care residential units - for older people, and navigating unfamiliar complex systems - for people from new and emerging communities.

Some responses suggested that FECCA should undertake more work on multicultural mental health.

Treatment of people with disability in Australia’s migration system was another issue that the respondents believed FECCA should pursue at the national level, as it affects people with disability and their families.

The survey results suggested that FECCA should be a voice for CALD people with disability and advocate strongly for recognition of the needs of CALD people with disability in both policy and practice.

“We need actual implementation plans at local level.”

Lastly, enhancing engagement with multicultural organisations and developing partnerships between sectors were emphasised as key to FECCA’s advocating on behalf of people from CALD backgrounds, including people with disability.