OMBUDSMAN CRITICISES GOVERNMENT INTERPRETER SERVICES

The Commonwealth Ombudsman has released a report criticising several large Commonwealth departments for providing inadequate interpreter services.

“FECCA is disappointed that more than twenty years after the introduction of multicultural policies in Australia, large Commonwealth departments are still providing substandard interpreter services”, said Beryl Mulder, Acting Chair of FECCA.

“The Commonwealth’s Access and Equity framework requires Commonwealth Government agencies to provide information in a timely manner in appropriate languages. According to the Ombudsman’s report many government departments are not meeting this objective.

“Language services provide a real lifeline to many people of migrant, refugee and Indigenous backgrounds. Failing to provide adequate interpreter services can result in poor service outcomes with their associated human and financial cost. It is discriminatory and breaches the rights of Australians with limited English capacity.

“While there have been recent positive initiatives by the new government in certain areas, such as with detention centres and pharmacies, the Ombudsman’s report shows that the time has come for more substantial action.

“FECCA supports the recommendations of the Ombudsman’s report. We call on the federal government to develop a whole of government approach to interpreter and translation services at the highest levels. All Commonwealth departments and agencies should have consistent language services policies and practices in place. These should be modelled on agencies such as Centrelink who are highlighted in this report as having good language service policies.

“The Commonwealth Access and Equity Framework should include more detailed and prescriptive requirements around language services and it should be signed up to by state, territory and local governments as was the case with the previous Charter for Public Service,” concluded Beryl Mulder.

March 26 2009. Media comment: Peter van Vliet on 0421 558 544 or Beryl Mulder on 0418 821 912