

Multicultural communities need to be part of Victoria's flood emergency plans, leaders say

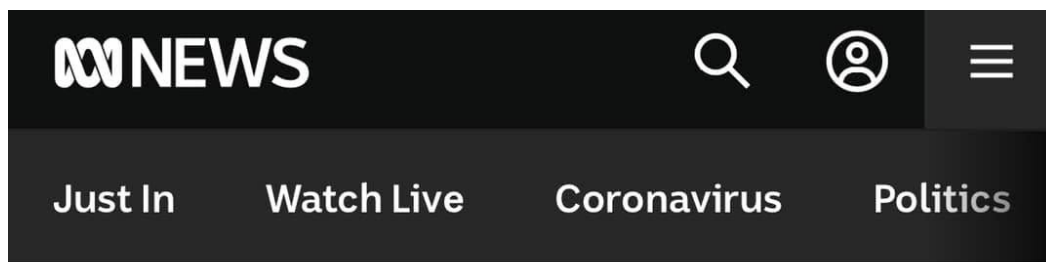
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By [Erwin Renaldi](#)

Posted 58m ago, updated 44m ago



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Mohammad Tajer says he was not aware of the flood emergency until he saw water on his street. *(Supplied)*

As flood waters began to rise on a residential street in Shepparton last Saturday, a Syrian family started to panic.

"We were scared," said mother-of-six Rawaa Tajer.

"[The kids] said to me, 'mum, what if the water enters the house while we are sleeping?'"

Mohammad Tajer, the father, decided to call triple 0 and state emergency services to request an evacuation, but could not understand the person on the other end of the line because he does not speak English fluently.



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Hussam Saraf, originally from Iraq, has been helping people who speak Arabic. *(Supplied)*

"We felt we were forgotten," said Mr Tajer, who moved his family to Australia four years ago and speaks Arabic.

In desperation, their 13-year-old daughter Suadd messaged her school teacher, who put her in contact with a school multicultural liaison officer.

"I received the message that one of the families was surrounded by water," said Hussam Saraf.

Mr Saraf, along with other volunteers from a multicultural flood response team, got a boat and rescued the family and took them to a relief centre.

The last-minute rescue is one of many stories emerging from flood-affected communities in Victoria, particularly Shepparton, which show how language barriers are still a problem in emergency situations for people who speak languages other than English.



Floods in Shepparton have cause widespread damage.
(Supplied)

Chris Hazelman, manager of the Ethnic Council of Shepparton, said while the multicultural communities' efforts to help out on the ground had been "fantastic", these groups need to be included in the emergency management planning process.

"At the moment, [they are] not a priority in the planning processes," Mr Hazelman said.

"There should be more of a focus on who is actually being impacted, and how we actually provide services to those people."

Shepparton is one of the most culturally diverse areas in Victoria, with people from almost 90 countries speaking 63 different languages, according to the Ethnic Council.

Many communities migrated to Shepparton after the Second World War, a trend that continues today as new waves of people move to Australia.

Volunteers struggle to understand requests for basic supplies



Ofeira Satele (second from left) is part of a group helping to translate information for diverse communities. *(Supplied)*

Ofeira Satele said her organisation, Know Your Roots Incorporated, had been translating rapidly changing emergency warnings into different languages including Fijian, Samoan, and Turkish.

"I just don't think ... the severity of the flood has been really explained to our multicultural communities, and that is the reason why they are getting stuck in their houses," said Ms Satele, a community youth coordinator.



The translated warnings plus other flood-related information is then posted on their social media site to reach the communities.

But it's not only emergency warnings and information that needs the help of translators.

Neha Samar, a volunteer at a Shepparton flood relief centre, said the language barrier is "one of the biggest hurdles" when it comes to understanding what people at the centres need.

Ms Samar said one family desperately needed baby formula, but staff could not understand their request.

"Until we found somebody to come and translate that in a language, we could not understand it was an immediate need," said Ms Samar, the founder of The Flamingo Project.

Volunteers at the relief centres also said some women do also not feel "culturally safe" staying in the relief centres with men.

"We've actually evacuated them out to the evacuation centre but with limited space, we've had to organise to buy a tent for them, get them some bedding as well," Ms Satele said.



Community leaders like Neha Samar say the language barrier is a challenge during the flood crisis.

(Supplied)

New role dedicated to diverse community

Including diverse communities in emergency planning was a lesson learned in the COVID-19 pandemic, that showed that [government health updates were not being translated properly](#), and [people had trouble accessing culturally appropriate services](#).

Ultimately, the pandemic responses showed that [a "one-size-fits-all approach" didn't work](#).

Vivienne Nguyen, from the Victorian Multicultural Commission, said government departments have implemented many of the pandemic lessons in their emergency responses, but the flood emergency was "slightly different" because of the immediate danger.



Ms Nguyen also said these communities needed to be part of emergency services planning, coordination and response processes.

"We have to be able to recognise the diversity of our community and to think about the flexible nature in which we plan and respond to crises" she said.

"And to do that, we've got to have the community involved and that community has to be resourced."

Community leaders and emergency services did meet earlier this week in Shepparton to talk over the crisis response, Ms Nguyen added.





An Australian Defence Force Bushmaster drives through floodwater in Shepparton. (AAP: Diego Fedele)

A spokesperson for the Victorian State Control Centre (SCC), the Victorian government agency tasked with overseeing the flood response, said authorities were already working with local community groups and ensuring their leaders were connected to local emergency management arrangements.

"A dedicated role has been established at the Shepparton Incident Control Centre to work directly with local CALD [culturally and linguistically diverse] community leaders," the spokesperson said.

"In addition, increased priority access to interpreters and more localised translated information materials have also been provided to CALD communities in and around the Shepparton area."

The SCC spokesperson said members of the community who require interpreters can ring the Victoria Emergency Hotline on 1800 226 226 to access information in-languages, and then press 9 to access the interpreter service directly.

The in-language service is also available for the Flood Recovery Hotline on 1800 560 760.

Community digs in to help out



Pasifika community members help make sandbags to protect property. (*Supplied*)

Despite the challenges, multicultural communities have been banding together to help the community.

The Pacific community have been part of a group making sandbags, while Azem Elmaz closed his kebab shop in Shepparton so that he, with the help of volunteers, could prepare food for those affected by the floods in Shepparton, Mooroopna and Tatura.

"It's been a busy few days ... in the last three days we've been working to make over 3,000 meals," Mr Elmaz said.



When COVID-19 hit Shepparton last year, Azem and Jeihan Elmaz dished out more than 500 meals per day for free. *(Supplied)*

Further afield, in Melbourne, Ram Gurung has been receiving calls for help from Nepalese community members in Shepparton.

Mr Gurung said the questions of "what to do now" and "how to get help" reminded him of calls for help in the pandemic.

"They also said they were hungry ... so I raised [money] to support them financially from here, and send it to them to buy food," he said.

Mr Gurung said he also helped his community to better understand the official information from emergency services.



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Ram Gurung has been coordinating with Nepalese community members in Shepparton to get food packages. *(Supplied)*