

Flood interview archive

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Nine screenshots supplied by Hussam Saraf, preserved as an archive.

The report discusses language access during the Shepparton floods.

Original reporting: Caitlin Cassidy / The Guardian

Portrait photograph: Mike Bowers / The Guardian

Personal post: facebook.com/share/p/151Lk2Lhepy/

The screenshots are arranged to follow the report, with the portrait last.

[Read the original Guardian report online](#)



Victoria

'We'd have lost lives': absence of translators in Shepparton flood response criticised

Volunteers have been the only way for the shire's thriving multicultural community to seek help during the emergency

When Hussam Saraf received a call from an Afghan woman trapped in flood waters just outside Shepparton on Friday evening, he was desperate to help.

The SES and police had been unable to assist the woman due to her lack of English. Saraf was able to act as an interpreter and she was ferried to safety.

The greater Shepparton secondary college cultural officer fears people would have died due to language barriers if the Shepparton floods had been as bad as predicted.

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With no formal translation services in place via emergency services or greater Shepparton city council, volunteers were the only way the shire's thriving multicultural community could seek help during the emergency.

On Monday, Saraf received two dozen calls from Arabic community members stuck in flood waters requesting assistance, while a WhatsApp group he created to distribute videos and messages on road closures in language has amassed 1,500 members.

“No one prepared for the Cald [culturally and linguistically diverse] community,” he said. “Our response team - the multicultural community - have been trying to put as much in our first language as possible online ... but we need to be prepared earlier.

“If it was worse than this, we’d have lost lives because of the language barrier.”

The Goulburn River peaked at 12.06 metres at Shepparton on Monday morning, just shy of the 1974 flood level of 12.09 metres. It is expected to remain at the major flood level for another four to five days.

Almost 8,000 properties have been flooded across greater Shepparton since the weekend, while about 4,000 were either isolated or with some levels of inundation on Monday afternoon.

Dozens of roads remained inaccessible on Monday evening including the Shepparton-Mooroopna Causeway, large parts of Kialla and a number of access points to the Goulburn Valley Highway.

In the hard-to-reach townships of Murchison, Tatura, Toolamba and Mooroopna, 6,000 residents were left without power after a substation was inundated.

Betul Tuna, from the ethnic council of greater Shepparton, has spent the past three days ferrying evacuees out of the flood waters and delivering food, medicine and supplies.

She said the lack of culturally appropriate support during the floods would go down as a “learning experience” – just as it did

a “learning experience” – just as it did during Shepparton’s **Covid outbreak** last October when volunteers had to translate crucial health department documents.



▲ Hussam Saraf, a Red Cross volunteer, received two dozen calls from Afghan community members stuck in flood waters requesting assistance on Monday. Photograph: Mike Bowers/The Guardian

“Two years of education just wasn’t enough,” she said, in reference to the rolling pandemic lockdowns. “What’s in place for communication? The systems are still not in place. I’m still waiting for someone to give us a direct number to call for translation.”

No interpreters have been made available for residents to use while making calls of distress – nor are there formal translation services on offer at any of greater Shepparton’s evacuation centres.

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“People on the ground don’t have time to wait hours,” Tuna said. “My uncle was stranded, he called me and I said I’d come with a boat. We don’t have the luxury of

not being on the ground because he’s got nobody else to tell. What would’ve happened?

“Give us a priority number, have a translator on call, it’s a bare minimum in a time-pressing situation.”

For refugee community members with a history of “trauma, floods [and] war”, Tuna said the presence of the Australian defence force and Bushmaster vehicles could also be distressing.

“This right now is traumatic,” she said. “I had a 17-year-old triggered, under the bed, hyperventilating because the last time he saw a person with a soldier’s uniform, that person shot his uncle in front of them.”

The greater Shepparton mayor, Shane Sali, said volunteers had been “amazing”, providing up-to-date bilingual messaging for the town’s multicultural community.

“In the early stage it was about getting a consistent message about what social media platforms and sources to engage with,” he said.

“It wasn’t just a matter of one organisation or a small group of volunteers, you can’t do this on your own. We had to call on multiple community members to help with translation and share important information with the vulnerable.”

Meena Thakuri has found other ways to boost morale.

When Shepparton’s popular St Georges Road food festival – a major showcase of the region’s diverse international cuisine – was cancelled due to flood waters, she decided to distribute her Nepalese treats to volunteers who had been working overnight.

“It was the best way to give back to the struggling community,” she said.



▲ Hussam Saraf, a Red Cross volunteer, received two dozen calls from Afghan community members stuck in flood waters requesting assistance on Monday. Photograph: Mike Bowers/The Guardian