

# Voices from the COVID-19 frontline

Findings and recommendations about how we can minimise COVID-19's impact on Victorians experiencing disadvantage



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## Overview

The Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) sought to understand and unpack how a pandemic can further exacerbate financial and social exclusion of people who face disadvantage.

This insight series and its recommendations have been developed with the aim informing future policy-making, community service sector delivery as well as the public debate whilst illuminating:

- How COVID-19 (C19) is disproportionately impacting disadvantaged communities;
- Ways that communities are utilising their strengths and/or how government could further harness their assets; and
- Insights we didn't expect as well as verification of themes already canvassed in the media.

This report reflects analysis of consultations with 300 BSL frontline staff that were conducted during June-August 2020 as part of our 'COVID-19 Listening Tour'.

## Acknowledgement of Country

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land and waterways on which our organisation operates. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present and emerging.



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Working for an Australia free of poverty

## In this report

We provide an overview of the pandemic experiences of the multicultural communities we work with. In particular, touching on the lack of a safety net for people seeking asylum and messaging about C19 safety or financial supports to those with limited English, the isolation of newly arrived women and the positives which have arisen through the resilience and strength of multicultural communities. We also provide policy, program and practice recommendations to address the issues raised, as well as how they can be better supported in the recovery.

## Reports in this series

This report is one of eight which explore different focal areas and cross-cutting themes. Please refer to the chapter list at the front of this document for links to each report for further reading, including our Background chapter.

## Top 3 findings

**1 People seeking asylum, who are ineligible for neither JobSeeker or JobKeeper, are experiencing some of the most extreme challenges during the pandemic because of their temporary visa status, a lack of social safety net and/or perceived impacts on their long-term residency.**

### Financial stress

*"A lot of my clients are borrowing money off each other - \$30, \$10 whatever - but there's potential for this to blow out of proportion and they could lose that little bit of the social community they have if they can't pay it back. How will they pay this back? Four or five months down the track they owe their friends thousands of dollars."*

**"Many are saying people are several months behind on rent. Others live in share housing and are not on the lease therefore not eligible for rent relief."**

**—Charlotte Chompff, Dandenong**



### Worries about visa status

*"Families on temporary visas fear negative consequences from Immigration Department if they seek help—they fear their children will be taken away from them if they're not coping."*

### Feelings of desperation

**"There's a sense that life is not going to get better. There was a suicide attempt amongst the international students in our program."**

**—Madhuri Maskey, Epping**



### Risky jobs

*"There's also the stress of finding themselves—people seeking asylum especially—having to consider jobs that involve risks because, what are their options? One job had something to do with working in quarantine. I was reluctant to send it to the person, because they would feel compelled to take it."*

### Day to day survival

**"They are heading towards homelessness, (with no income support they couldn't pay off rents and now are in big debts) also some of my clients' mental health wellbeing has been impacted as well. They are more stressed and more anxious than before to make ends meet."**

**—Christie Joseph, Dandenong**



*"There's uncertainty for some of our people, that's really day to day because they don't know whether tomorrow, they're going to be living in that place or whether they'll have something to eat. It increases their anxiety. They don't perform well when an employer calls. Their memory is not there. I've called my clients and said the employer has called them and done the screening but they can't recall it happening. They have more important things to worry about it. The anxiety and stress levels have increased. They can't think straight."*

In our Jobs Victoria Employment Network (JVEN) program, of the 234 jobseekers negatively impacted, 50% are not permanent residents and 111 are on bridging visas. Some key reasons why some are losing jobs is that they can't work from home or the employer has shut down. Some said their job is no longer available and others had reduced hours.

**2 Multicultural families could not access family networks, or experienced increased stress, as international flights were cancelled, and visa processing was delayed. Or conversely, temporary visitors are stranded here, placing an extended financial burden on local families.**

*"Some seniors are on visitor visa (for Indian parents) that are about to expire so there was added pressure to apply for Bridging visas to ensure family could stay. International students are also having these issues."*

**"Another challenge was regarding visas cases that are still being processed by the Federal Government—processing has been postponed. Borders are closed and this is causing stress and mental health issues in family members, as they cannot bring their families in and are not sure when the country will be open again."**



**—Bahati Ferdinand, Epping**

*"We met with the Pasifika community recently and they reported that there are at least 200 people stranded here who may have been visiting for a funeral or wedding now separated from family. Many are staying with friends and family now for five months and are feeling the burden on those families and are moving around quite regularly. The community is doing their best to support people but after five months, they are really struggling to meet the additional financial burden."*

**"We're also hearing from undocumented workers from the Pacific who will not apply for the hardship grants because they require visa information. Any mention of visa creates fear. People are convinced they will be tracked down and hauled into detention."**

**3 The messaging about C19 safety or financial supports is not being conveyed sufficiently to CALD community members. Perceived scrutiny of their pre-C19 work activities is leading to people not applying for JobSeeker**

*"Most of these families were still watching and being in contact with what's happening back home. Community channels, their own Facebook or What's App groups, etc. The C19 message of what's happening in Eritrea, for instance, was different than what's happening here. Parents weren't aware of this. These families are not on email, we connected to them by phone mostly."*

**"Some who were working in cash jobs haven't applied for JobSeeker as they fear they'll be asked about their prior work and how they were surviving before."**



**—Karen Hagen, Epping**

*"Some families don't understand the concession card and don't qualify for JobKeeper and JobSeeker. Communicating with all those different agencies is hard for them. Some got JobSeeker but it took weeks to figure out if they are eligible. They didn't understand the differences between the two programs."*

**"The media is everywhere but they don't understand it or don't access it. One of my clients still can't access the information, they don't speak English. They were coughing all through our meeting and they lived in a C19 hotspot. After I sent her the link in Dari, she said "Thank you, I had no idea."**



**—Janette Witt, Dandenong**

**Other key themes**

**1 Newly arrived women with limited family support networks are experiencing increased vulnerability and risks during the isolation period.**

*"A number of my single mums with high special needs children are having to do the bulk of the care in isolation for kids who are having routines disrupted and experiencing a lot of distress."*

## Case study



### Athula\* – seeking asylum without a safety net

#### Let's hear from BSL service user, Athula

Athula, her husband and two-year-old child arrived via treacherous boat journey and have been seeking asylum since arriving from Sri Lanka in 2013. Whilst they had work rights, it was difficult to find a job and since having two other children, it's become harder to juggle their family budget.

Prior to C19, Athula was working as a house-cleaner up to two days a week. Not being an essential role, she lost her job when the restrictions came in. Even if she was able to continue, she was worried about bringing the virus home to her family – "I got scared because of C19", she told us.

Athula's husband worked irregularly in manufacturing and reflects the insecurity of life as a casual. "If they were busy they would ask him to work. Every day they called him in the morning or texted him at night. In C19, it is not as busy and they don't need him. He's depressed as we have three small children.". Without work and no superannuation to draw on, their financial situation is getting desperate. "We're having to borrow money from friends. We do not have savings or super to draw from. We don't have any savings".

Whilst not knowing how to link into the Sri Lankan community, Athula and her family have gained food packages from her local church. Their three children are aged 2, 5 and 9 and they've had difficulties juggling the expenses of paying rent, bills and food.

Without access to Centrelink income support, they are largely surviving on emergency relief from the Red Cross and brokerage funds that BSL has facilitated to help them cover their rent and food costs. They applied for rental assistance but the application was not approved.

Athula and her family are one of many families people seeking asylum who are living in our community without a safety net.

\* A pseudonym has been used to protect the identity and confidentiality of the person

**"The mental health and domestic violence team had to stretch and extend services due to increased demands."**

*"One mum is in a very vulnerable position. We have quite serious concerns about her levels of isolation and her community connections, due to her number of children, and she's having a baby. Her communication with the tutor completely dropped out. There was an issue with her phone, when someone went to her house her husband didn't want the tutor to speak to his wife. He was quite controlling."*

#### **2 Silver linings – community divisions overcome, established communities having the infrastructure to offer virtual support as well as helping newly arrived members and religious organisations entering the 21st century.**

**"I found about a Somalian Mother's Group in North Melbourne who have organised tutoring. Someone is helping my high school child and my daughter for one hour a week with two 30 minute sessions. I want my son to be able to get into year 12. The Somalian Mother's What's App has also helped her stay aware of the latest C19 news as there's regular government updates and discussions about coping strategies for teenagers and young kids. "It is useful for our community as they talk about issues for families, they help each other. A lot of families are from NZ and some of them who can't work and don't have funding and helping find out about how they can access money, housing or food or mental health help."**

**– "Fay", Somali community member, Fitzroy**

*"I see two good things to arise from the pandemic in multicultural communities – firstly, in communities that were previously divided, there is now unity and those divisions have been put aside as they step up and support their community collectively. Secondly, established communities that have the resources – like the Indian and Afghani – are helping the more newly arrived who may be seeking asylum and/or international students. Community spirit is thriving on this front."*

**"This has been the opportunity for religious institutions to step into the modern age and go online. I've seen masses and services delivered by websites and social media with up to 400 people logged on. They will hopefully reach new generations and blossom."**

## Recommendations

### Leveraging existing resources:

- **The Federal Government should provide an amnesty to encourage people to come forward for JobSeeker** regardless of what they were doing prior to C19, given aforementioned finding that those working in cash jobs fear they'll be asked about their prior earning capacity.
- **In light of reduced migration in coming years, the Federal Government should dedicate resources to fast-track the refugee visa applications of people seeking asylum already in our country.** This would simultaneously benefit our economy and society, given we are under-utilising their skills and talents, and alleviate the poverty these adults and children are living in.

### New funding:

- **Ensure community translations about C19 and/or financial supports are complemented and conveyed via community engagement strategies.** There are some communities who cannot read in their own language so translations aren't always effective as this [article about the Afghani community attests](#). This should involve creating a rapid response team of community leaders (all ages, cultural backgrounds, genders, and within LGAs and housing estates with high CALD populations) who:
  - Map how information flows into different communities
  - Are trained in online communications and become the point person for their community
  - Tap into and harness reliance on community WhatsApp groups, as per earlier quote from "Fay";

- Establish those families not engaged without digital tools or access who could benefit from approaches similar to "phone tree" methods popular in the 1970s era community organising

- Provide training in utilising digital communications for future service delivery inclusion

- **Ease the eligibility requirements for both Commonwealth support and access to Federal and State Extreme Hardship grants** so that families and individuals who are experiencing extreme hardship can access regular income support to care for their families with dignity, regardless of their visa status.
- Invest in broadband and telehealth technology access so that **every Australian has access to the internet** which they can utilise for remote service delivery in times of crisis, such as a pandemic and/or bushfires.

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## Further reading

Visit [bsl.org.au/covid-19/voices-from-the-frontline/](https://bsl.org.au/covid-19/voices-from-the-frontline/) to continue reading.

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence is a social justice organisation working alongside people experiencing disadvantage.

Our mission is to pursue lasting change; to create a more compassionate and just society where everyone can thrive.

To learn more please visit [bsl.org.au](https://bsl.org.au)



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