



# **Voices from the COVID-19 frontline**

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



**Brotherhood  
of St Laurence**

Working for an Australia free of poverty

# Acknowledgements

This project had oversight from **Lucia Boxelaar** (Director, Community Programs) and Professor **Shelley Mallett** (Director, Research & Policy Centre). It was led by **Hutch Hussein** (Senior Manager, C19 Policy & Programs Taskforce), who jointly conducted and analysed consultations and interviews with staff and participants, with **Seuwandi Wickramasinghe** (Senior Research Officer), **Lisa Conley** (Research Fellow) and **Naser Fekrat** (Research Officer), with administrative support from **Inae Araujo Braz** (Administrative Assistant). A herculean team effort mostly conducted under C19 Stage 4 lockdown restrictions.



**“We’re all in  
the same storm,  
but in different  
boats”**



# Foreword



**Many of the threads of our social fabric have been stretched and torn by this virus. Individuals, families and communities experiencing disadvantage have borne the heaviest burden of the COVID-19 (C19) pandemic and its accompanying isolation restrictions on any measure of social, health and economic impact. Through our establishment of a COVID-19 Listening Tour, the Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) sought to learn from our staff and participants about the pandemic's impacts. We wanted to know both the negative impacts as well as the positive ways in which communities harnessed their strengths and resilience. We've also complemented this with the direct voices of the people who receive BSL services or programs who, through their firsthand accounts, illustrate the key themes.**

Through this report, we sought to understand and unpack how a pandemic can further exacerbate financial and social exclusion of people who face disadvantage. In the last financial year, 30,100 individuals experiencing disadvantage participated directly in programs run by BSL and/or our partners. As a social justice organisation working to address poverty and disadvantage

in Australia, bringing our practice wisdom and research insights, we have sought to amplify their voices. It's our contribution to the public debate. Our contribution to ensuring we learn the lessons and don't leave people behind in the recovery. This insight series and its recommendations aim to inform future policy-making, community service sector delivery, as well as the public debate whilst illuminating:

- How 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.

I want to thank all the staff and participants who shared their valuable stories and experiences. Apart from it being timely feedback for our own organisation, we hope that this report offers insights to decision-makers and the broader community to help us all collectively improve participation, practices as well as our policy responses, ensuring we make our society a more equal one in the recovery process.

**Conny Lenneberg**  
Executive Director

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This report is available as individual chapters from our website:  
<https://www.bsl.org.au/covid-19/voices-from-the-frontline/>

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# **Chapter 1 – Background**

## Aims of the Listening Tour

This Listening Tour is a two-part, mixed-methods qualitative data collection project. BSL services have been simultaneously engaging with the frontline impact of this pandemic whilst adapting and continuing service delivery to support communities since the pandemic began. The findings will be shared within BSL programs and within the community sector, as well as various decision makers to inform meaningful improvements in people's lives.

The purpose of the BSL staff interviews was to include learnings about their participant engagement and needs; the practices of service delivery during C19, and the issues that require further policy advocacy. While these findings about community members must be understood as being mediated through their caseworkers, they provide important insights. Specifically, we aimed to:

- learn how BSL service participants are faring during C19
- learn aspects of any practice innovations and adaptations that we would like to maintain at BSL to assist accessibility or address other barriers
- inform the sector and government about practice challenges and innovations &
- document this historic time in the community sector and prepare ourselves for future crises of this nature

The purpose of the one-on-one interviews with people who use BSL services was to learn about their experiences during C19 to inform and powerfully convey our advocacy. Subject to funding and resources, two rounds of follow-up interviews may be carried out with the same participants to track any changes to their circumstances. Our aims were to put a human face to impacts and challenges of C19 on different population groups.

## Methodology

**First**, from June–July 2020, BSL staff members were interviewed in small groups over video conferencing apps. A SurveyMonkey survey was also created to capture data from those unable to join the group interviews. **Second**, in mid-August, people who utilise BSL services or programs were interviewed individually to collect case studies.

### Recruitment: Part 1—Interviews with BSL Program Staff

In mid-June 2020, BSL service delivery staff were invited to participate in semi-structured group interview sessions over video conferencing. Interview questions were designed to allow the interviewees to tell share observations their participants had shared and when needed, the researcher asked for more detail.

In total, 300 BSL staff who work with jobseekers, families, young people, people with disability, multicultural communities, and in aged care attended the virtual sessions. The largest group included 45 staff members and the smallest was one single individual interview. It is important to note that even though 300 staff were consulted, not every single person spoke up during the group interviews. Often in each session several people responded to the questions while others were quiet. Staff were also informed they could respond to the list of questions by email if they preferred. One group sent the researchers the minutes from their meeting as it was relevant to the discussions. All staff were also given the opportunity to complete an online SurveyMonkey survey if they could not or chose not to join the video interviews – five staff completed the survey.

Each semi-structured interview with BSL staff lasted up to one-hour, with a few lasting between 15–30 minutes as staff were understandably pressed for time. Some group interviews were conducted as part of an existing standing meeting to accommodate everyone's schedules. BSL staff members, ranging from managers to front line staff in the following programs (shown in Table 1 opposite) participated.

**Table 1** BSL Services and programs by population segment served

Population segment served	Programs and services	Communities served
<b>Young people</b>	Transitions to Work (TtW); Education First Youth Foyers (EFYF); RESET program, David Scott School	Broadmeadows; Frankston; Mornington Peninsula; (various locations around Australia through the TtW National Community of Practice)
<b>Parents</b>	Connie Benn; HIPPY; Parents groups; Parents Next	Broadmeadows; Craigieburn, Dandenong, Epping, Fitzroy; Frankston; Inner Melbourne; Jindi; Pakenham; North Melbourne; Reservoir; Sunbury
<b>Aged care</b>	Aged care in either homecare, respite or residential setting	Across Victoria
<b>Multicultural communities</b> newly arrived migrants or refugees, or people seeking asylum	Various programs, in particular through the Multicultural Communities' Team (MCT): Given the Chance and family programs	Dandenong; Epping; Flemington; Inner Melbourne
<b>People with disability</b>	NDIS Local Area Coordination (LAC); NDIS Early Childhood Education Intervention (NDIS)	Bayside Peninsula; Brimbank Melton; Hume Moreland; North East Melbourne; Western Melbourne
<b>Jobseekers</b>	Jobs Victoria Employment Network (JVEN); Given the Chance (GTC); Centre for Work and Learning (CWL); Transitions to Work (TtW);	Dandenong; Epping; Flemington; Inner Melbourne
<b>General public</b> seeking money management help; small business training and mentoring for CALD communities	Financial Inclusion services: SaverPlus, Money Minded; Stepping Stones to Small Business	Statewide: Stepping Stones participants concentrated from Banyule; Greater Dandenong; Hume; Moonee Valley; Moreland; Whittlesea; Wyndham

### Analysis: Part 1

As this was a nimble analysis to provide time-sensitive findings to influence government and the service sector, researchers utilised the rigorous and accelerated data reduction (RADaR) technique (Watkins, 2017). This entailed researchers checking all interview notes against their corresponding video files for accuracy and then organising and coding the findings through a data table. The coding matrix was created by researchers first talking through the key findings across participants, practice, and policy, which

mirrored the main foci of each interview. These were the main sections of the data table. These sections were then divided into subsections which catalogued the positive and negative experiences to each, the enablers and disablers of service delivery, and the findings around Jobseeker and Jobkeeper stimulus impacts. Insights from the researchers and stand-out or surprising quotes were also documented in each subsection of the coding matrix. This was an efficient way to complete the analysis, as NVivo was not available.

## **Recruitment: Part 2—Individual interviews with people who utilise BSL services/ programs for case studies**

This part of the project received approval from BSL's Ethics Committee. After the group interviews were completed and analysed, researchers began recruiting five people who are BSL service users. BSL staff members were sent an email template with the Plain Language Statement that asked if they could refer individuals to the researchers who fit specific profiles. These profiles were selected based on multiplier of challenges surrounding C19. Our staff interviews revealed five distinct profiles who were experiencing distinct impacts to their lives under C19—people seeking asylum, family who had benefited from the increased JobSeeker rate, people with disability, single mothers, and unemployed young person (aged 15-24). The rationale for reaching out to these differently impacted individuals was multifaceted – firstly, to learn the direct lived experiences and complexities of people who utilise BSL services or programs; secondly to better learn about the systems/supports that improves their lives, and lastly to lift up examples of community supports and strengths.

Those interested in participating in the one-on-one interviews were sent a consent form to review which they could either sign and return by email, or we offered to record verbal consent during the virtual interview. Interviewees were told that interviews would be a recorded video chat using Zoom, owing to social distancing restrictions in Victoria, and also so that we could consider usage for future digital storytelling. The phone interview was also given as an option. Participants were provided with options to have their image/voice included in BSL digital materials (reports, social media, and website) or to opt out of sharing their image/voice and keep their identity anonymous. Interview participants were asked to sign releases per the Brotherhood's Media and Communications policy. All interview participants were given a gift card as an honorarium in recognition of their contribution.

## **Analysis: Part 2**

Researchers transcribed the interviews and constructed case studies from the interviewees' responses. Each case study was shared with the participant to check for accuracy and approval before inclusion in this report. Where relevant, all identifying data was removed and pseudonyms were used upon request.



## **Chapter 2 - Cross-cutting insights**

## In this chapter

We provide an overview of the five common themes uncovered across all our services and make recommendations, where relevant, based on the;

- different experiences of lockdown and the restrictions,
- need to distinguish between hopelessness and mental health,
- uneven impact of the digital divide,
- importance of communicating C19 and stimulus enrolment information; and
- how time operates differently during the pandemic for various people.



**“The point is not that everybody is equally vulnerable.**

**This crisis is not the great leveller some claim – poor people will become poorer, those with insecure work will become less secure, those already sick will suffer most. Like every crisis, the virus simply makes visible what was already true.”**

**– Sean Kelly, *The Age*, 8 April 2020**

## Top 5 findings across all ages

**1 Lockdown and the isolation restrictions are harder without resources, social networks, good mental health and positive relationships.**

### Lockdown through different eyes

*“For people without smartphones and access to the internet, who are used to socialising purely by seeing family in person are struggling.”*

*“One family said there were three generations in the one house. About 18 people living together as others had lost jobs and were being supported.”*

### Triggering trauma, mental health & family violence

*“Most clients with mental health conditions, trauma or experiencing family violence, had their anxiety levels raised and the work was towards easing their anxiety, so they could be available for their children.”*

*“For people of refugee backgrounds, the supermarket rations and lockdown are triggering past experiences in refugee camps or authoritarian regimes back home.”*

**– Joseph Youhana, Epping**



*“C19 has strained mental health issues due to confinement and increased family violence scenarios.”*

*“People are telling us about increased depression and anxiety, specifically OCD and social anxiety.”*

A clear delineation surprised us midway through the consultations. Whilst for most Victorians, the lockdown and restrictions were an inconvenience, for the disadvantaged communities we work with, it felt traumatic. Largely because it involved being in your own head and isolated in your own small home. For those living with trauma, poor mental health and family violence, life got harder. Without iPads to occupy kids, no Netflix subscription to

keep amused and no video-enabled devices to stay connected with family and friends, they felt lonelier, more stressed and anxious. With many in jobs that can't be worked from home, not being able to afford to isolate for testing also quickly surfaced. Suddenly the divide became clear. Whilst staying at home was hard, at least most had the luxury of resources, social networks, good mental health and positive relationships. This was best summed up by one respondent who said, **"we're all in the same storm, but we're all in different boats"**.

Echoing Sean Kelly's point that like every crisis, the virus simply makes visible what was already true. It has laid bare our society's inequalities and how being able to stay safe is a luxury in a pandemic.

## 2 **There was a widespread sense of hopelessness related to external conditions beyond people's control**

### For the unemployed

***"It's not only the increased social isolation and that they can't go to work but our jobseekers can see that there aren't any jobs. Their previous lack of hope is exacerbated by C19."***

**– Skye Pendleton, Frankston**



### For the unemployed without a safety net

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

***"There's uncertainty for some of our people, that's really day to day because they don't know whether they're going to be living in that place tomorrow 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."***

### For young people

***"There are not enough mental health supports available to young people. We can have a young person experiencing significant mental health issues but when you ring the Youth Services, it is an 8-12 week wait for an intake appointment. That's not to be serviced, that's just the screening appointment to understand the needs of the young person. They don't want to ring the 1300 numbers—they want and need personalised support."***

Mental health issues can be experienced by individuals at any point in life and be exacerbated by a person's surroundings. However, feelings of hopelessness can be experienced by individuals who do not typically suffer from clinically diagnosed mental health issues. Thus, the sense of hopelessness should not be pathologised or located within an individual to resolve. The sense of hopelessness being felt now is a society-wide issue; mostly dependent upon external conditions beyond people's control. People are expressing hopelessness, demotivation, and concern for their future aspirations due to the context we're in which includes historic unemployment rates and a virus whose symptoms can range from mild to life-ending. The following situations are currently being faced by some of the people we work with and would understandably result in the feelings of hopelessness:

- 1 People who found it difficult to find employment before C19 might feel less hope about finding a job now, when they are now competing against more experienced, newly unemployed people.
- 2 People are experiencing a delay in bringing family from overseas to Australia, perhaps indefinitely due to border shutdowns and delayed visa processing. This delayed reunification represents an indefinite delay in having their support networks around them. For those newly arrived, this may also represent a delay in their own settlement in Australia, in addition to further delays to years' worth of visa applications and the investment of thousands of dollars.

- 3 People seeking asylum and those on temporary migrant visas have been excluded from the C19 stimulus efforts of Jobkeeper and Jobseeker given their temporary visa status. This particularly hurts people without reserves of savings and/or support networks. This has created desperation and we are already receiving reports that this is pushing some people into dangerous, illegal, or unsafe cash-in-hand work to survive.
- 4 Young people who were only beginning their journey into the job market are seeing most entry-level jobs become unavailable to them as the service economy stalls amidst lockdowns.

### **Distinguishing between mental health issues and the sense of hopelessness – why does it matter?**

It demands a completely different response. Mental health issues can be met with increased supports such as free, or low-cost, online counselling sessions and expanding the number of mental health sessions covered by Medicare. The kind of hopelessness we heard about, on the other hand, will require a community response to enable people to feel supported both emotionally and physically. In ways that haven't been seen for Australian families in generations, people are now experiencing the responsibility of being the sole educator, caretaker, and socialising source for their families. They are coping with this while experiencing economic stressors and prolonged lockdown conditions which limit their movement. Added to this is the uncertainty around the length of time these mandates will last. Many parents do not have their typical extended families or community supports during isolation to share the responsibilities of this massive and important undertaking. The word "overwhelmed" was a common refrain. In taking this nuanced understanding of how people are coping, we can better learn how aspirations are impacted, how disadvantage can be amplified in times of crisis, and how we can improve practice or service delivery to better meet the needs of those we serve.

### **3 The digital divide is unevenly impacting low income families, people with disabilities and older people, limiting their ability to engage in services and socialising.**

#### Low income families

***"Two years ago we ran some stats on what our participants were saving for—over 70% were saving for a device. Most had only one device or zero. Lately 80% have been saving for a computer."***

*"Some families had one device between a family of four. If it breaks, that's it, they've got no device."*

#### For people with disabilities

***"People are not able to receive virtual video services as they lack smartphones. They're on basic phones with limited data. We can't see virtual services as a cheap way forward. The risk in government expecting all services to be digitised is that it exacerbates exclusion."***



**– Nite Fuamatu, Footscray**

#### For people in our aged care programs

*"For those using technology it is much easier to do online shopping and telehealth with GP, they're managing much better. Those not using technology and no family help are more isolated."*

***"Internet access is definitely a necessity and more work to support minority groups to have this access is required."***

*"Not many are using technology for telehealth. Two to three percent maybe. The bulk of participants have personal circumstances that keep them from using technologies—lot of cognitive decline, visual and hearing deficits. Wherever possible you're trying to get technology in there but it's not a solution for everyone."*

The key arising issues involved people lacking:

- 1 Digital tools** – many had basic phones without video capability or the data allowances for video chats
- 2 Digital access** – many lacked Wi-Fi
- 3 Digital skills and confidence** – many lacked the ability to navigate their digital tools beyond phone use and/or lacked ICT support if they didn't live with others.

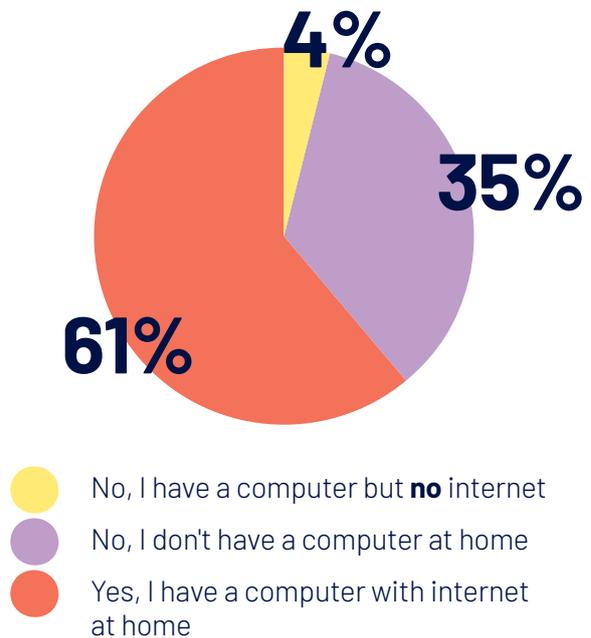
Relying solely on digital platforms for service delivery will increase exclusion and perpetuate disadvantage. Most participants had difficulty accessing the technologies needed for remote service delivery, at least initially. This includes laptops, iPhones, iPads, a scanner/printer, and/or Wi-Fi access. Those who did have the technology to stay in touch with BSL staff often had limited skills to work in a completely remote situation and some found the learning curve steep. The majority of staff reported having to:

- spend extra time helping people access grants for technology or talking them through setting up their video conferencing applications.
- help people complete application forms or documents through time-intensive processes that included sending photos of forms back and forth with the service user, in lieu of being able to meet in person.
- buy phones and data plans for the young people they work with to stay connected. Staff in youth services also reported high engagement rates of 85-90%, which could partly be explained by this very action.

As evidenced by ABS (2018) data that showed 1.1 million (28.5%) people with disability did not use the internet and over 250,000 people with disability lacked confidence or knowledge to use the internet, digital tools and confidence. This was reinforced locally in one digital access survey conducted by our Jobs Victoria Employment Network (JVEN), of the 302 jobseekers, 35% (105) indicated they had no access to a computer at home, and of those with access, 4% (12) had no internet. Naturally, in a virtual world, this will impact their jobseeking skills.

**Figure 1** Do you have a computer with internet at home?

Total respondents = 302



All staff reported that the people using their services benefitted from more regular phone calls or text messaging as the primary way of keeping in touch. This allowed BSL service users to stay connected but removed the pressures some associated with video chats—being concerned about how they themselves, or their rooms, looked on camera.

**4 C19 information and translations weren't reaching CALD communities, whilst students and aged care residents and staff were confused**

**For those who can't work from home, can't afford to miss casual work or don't have strong English, the need for proactive community engagement is necessary**

*"People are unaware of the need to get tested or they are but worried they'll miss shifts. I encouraged a couple yesterday to get tested. They were going back to shifts today. I told them to get a mask and gloves and reminded them they're going back to family. They hadn't thought about how it could impact their extended family."*

**“Some people were scared that if they go get tested, they would lose their job if they were positive.”**

*“One man assumed that since his boss told him to go home and get tested, that he lost his job. But he hadn’t.”*

**“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 but they were in a hotspot. After I sent her the link in Dari, she said ‘Thank you, I had no idea’.”**

**– Janette Witt, Dandenong**



*“Some families don’t understand the concession card and aren’t qualified 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.”*

### Recognise, tap into and harness reliance on community WhatsApp groups

**“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 WhatsApp 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**



### For aged care workers and those in aged care themselves

*“I’ve had some clients who feel like they’re going to be treated as second rate if they get into hospital because they’re so old. That they won’t be prioritised, that younger people will be. So they’re taking extra precautions like washing their stuff. They feel like they’re going to be left to die I think. A lot of that is paranoia and anxiety but...”*

**“[We need] greater clarity and direction on residents who test positive and the capacity of the hospital given comorbidities.”**

*“It’s been a changing climate around PPE. The requirements keep changing. Initially the advice was not to use it. It was hard because clients wanted us to use it but there weren’t stocks and the Department didn’t give us grounds to use. But with the escalating situation in the last week PPE has become mandatory. So that’s what’s been challenging, people wanted us to wear masks at the start and we couldn’t because we didn’t have the supply. And there also wasn’t the grounds.”*

The rapid pace of C19 research has complicated communication strategies for health bodies and governments around the world. The pace at which we have learned about this novel virus made it difficult to keep everyone informed with the same depth of understanding and, as a result, scepticism developed. For those familiar with science and the scientific method, the evolution of C19 knowledge was to be expected and the changing of recommendations made logical sense. However, for those who are less familiar with science and the trajectory of discovery, the fact that recommendations keep changing, undermined their belief that scientists can be trusted. When this was filtered through the current, often polarised, social media and news information ecosystem, misinformation and disinformation began to spread faster than the virus and replace well-communicated C19 evidence.

Staff also reported that multicultural communities have had trouble understanding the ever-changing health and lockdown information if English was not their primary language. While Australia’s first case of C19 was recorded January 2020, it was mid-August 2020 when the Victorian Government went beyond translations and announced

\$14 million in funding to reach culturally and linguistically diverse communities with health messaging. Despite government efforts, health communications seem to require longer periods of time for messages to ripple through communities through both official and unofficial translators. The messages about C19 health and safety must also contend with the toxic elements of the information ecosystem such as conspiracy theories and disinformation (Bruns, Harrington, Halcombe, 2020).

### **5 Time is operating differently during the pandemic - increasing the urgency, going slow or just feeling oppressive.**

During the pandemic we have noticed that the concept of time is operating differently for various demographics. For the people BSL works with, time has either:

- increased a sense of urgency;
- felt like it is standing still or dragging on painfully slowly; or
- felt oppressive in the face of challenges.

When creating policies to address the needs of various demographics, we recommend the following impacts are considered.

- 1** For older people, especially those in aged care, there is an increased sense of urgency from feeling they must make the most of their remaining time of earth to see their loved ones. This results from their inability to see their families or friends when physical distancing and isolation measures have been put in place. Grandparents feel they are missing pivotal times of their grandchildren's lives. Those who are sick worry they might not see family in person again before they die. Unlike those younger generations, older people feel they cannot "make this time up later." This is negatively impacting their mental health.
- 2** For younger people, the time spent in lockdown has seemingly put their lives on hold. It has taken away their opportunities to start their lives. This has negatively impacted their ability to form or grow new personal relationships, to get a foothold in the labour market, or to live independently.

**3** For families, especially single parents, time is dragging on slowly while the isolation mandates increased feelings of deep overwhelm. Parents who were home-schooling children while working from home or looking for employment reported being able to manage in the first lockdown period. As time passed and the pandemic worsened, families have reported an inability to deal with the stressors. Many have become more relaxed with home-schooling and typical rules for their children in response to the overloads they are experiencing which seem to feel multiplied over time.

**4** For the most vulnerable populations, like those people seeking asylum, time might best be described as a prison. For those who have little safety net and are unable to work, each passing week drives them deeper into poverty and desperation. Visa applications might be on hold as the agencies experience delays. People who are not permitted to work because of their visa status, but who are unable to leave Australia, are facing homelessness, food shortages, and intense hopelessness.

## **Recommendations**

### **Addressing mental health and hopelessness**

#### **Leveraging existing resources:**

- 1** Increase awareness and destigmatise the existing *Better Mental Health Care* plans as *C19 Recovery Plans* for people to access bulk-billed counselling sessions
- 2** Encourage Local Government Community Capacity Building staff and/or redirected staff to use their platforms to facilitate local peer-to-peer support groups that enable people to:
  - Come together and share common interests to foster community connectedness
  - Share skills they've learned to manage their own anxiety and depression (those who had existing mental health issues and/or experienced isolation, were reportedly in some ways, better prepared for this pandemic which mandates isolation and the loss of in-person socialising)

- 3 Encourage all programs should to embed health, well-being and social connection. In particular youth-tailored employment services should utilise a “capabilities approach” to embed these as key components. See our previous work on this here (p.19)
- 4 Leverage any opportunity to increase the ability for people to feel “we’re all in this together” even if we are facing various challenges. Share messaging about “Getting real during C19” and set expectations that everyone will be less productive and need more mental rest time during this very trying time.

#### New funding:

- 5 Provide free or low-cost, online counselling sessions to those ineligible for Medicare.
- 6 Removing the limit on mental health sessions per calendar year under Medicare for all Australians, replacing current measure for Victorians in Stage 4, for whom the number of mental health sessions available has been doubled from 10 to 20.

### Addressing the digital divide

#### Leveraging existing resources:

- 7 Ensure government and/or service recipients are given the option to provide verbal consent so people do not need to access a printer/ scanner or require smartphone capabilities
- 8 Change requirements in some government-supported programs to allow families to have phone calls or video chats after C19 passes, rather than insisting on in office presence.

#### New funding:

- 9 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
- 10 Reexamine the infrastructure for medical prescription delivery services for those who have limited access to the Internet.

### Addressing communication issues

#### Leveraging existing resources:

- 11 Ensure community translations about C19 and/or financial supports are complemented and conveyed via community engagement strategies. 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



## **Chapter 3 – Employment & economic security**

## In this chapter

We provide an overview of the experiences of people in our employment, women's small business and financial inclusion programs<sup>1</sup> who we work with. In particular, we examine findings relating to people seeking asylum without a safety net, the impact of the increased JobSeeker rate (as well as adding nuance to the question about whether it acted as a disincentive), newly unemployed people who turned for support with budgeting, how women's financial independence has been affected by additional caring responsibilities, and the long-term solutions young people will need. We also share the stories of two of our participants – Athula and a couple Mohamed and Zara – as well as analyse some of our quantitative data around insecure work.

### **The intersection of insecure work and disadvantage with the virus is devastating and exposing our social fabric's torn threads.**

We conclude with policy, program and practice recommendations to address the issues raised as well as how they can be better supported in the recovery.

## Top 3 findings

The Federal Government's unnecessary exclusion of temporary visa holders accessing C19 income supports and the State Government's necessary industry shutdowns make for a cruel combination which is pushing people seeking asylum into poverty. **Comparing the six-month period of March to August in 2019 and 2020, there was a 5417% increase in referrals to support services, from 6 to 331.** The majority of referrals related to financial support and food relief support, as well as needing access to technology to engage with the service and seek employment opportunities online.

**1 People seeking asylum are predominantly in industries that have been shut down, like hospitality and retail, in insecure work and/or in roles that can't be worked from home. They're in a desperate situation of taking any job available. Coupled with the lack of a safety net, this is representing a journey "from joblessness to homelessness" as they weigh the risks of employment against the threat of catching C19. Without a safety net that allows them to be housed, they're focusing on survival and finding it difficult to concentrate on job-hunting. For the children in these families, this a highly stressed environment of deprivation that adds to the existing trauma and emotional and psychological distress of these families.**

*"There's day-to-day uncertainty for some of our people, 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."*

**"They're desperate. They're exposing themselves and working for cash-in-hand. Trying their best to survive. We don't know if they are protected from C19. They tell us they're working cash-in-hand with no conditions and whatever. A lot of my people are desperate. You don't know what they're being exposed to, or how they're being exploited."**

**– Paula Diaz, Dandenong**



<sup>1</sup> This summary compiles findings from group interviews with staff who work with the following programs Jobs Victoria Employment Network (JVEN), Given the Chance (GTC), Centre for Work & Learning (CWL), Stepping Stones to Small Business, Saver Plus, MoneyMinded and Community Safety and Information Service (CSIS) across inner Melbourne, Epping, Dandenong, and Flemington. Nearly all have a significant proportion of participants who are have refugee background and/or people seeking asylum, in line with the surrounding community demographics. In addition, the Flemington JVEN site and the CWLs have a focus on public housing residents. These programs receive a combination of federal, state and philanthropic funding.

*"The housing situation is dire - they need to pay their rent first. If their housing is secure, they are mentally stable and then they perform better when we send them to employment opportunities. With the housing stress, they can't make good decisions—can't differentiate between the right and the wrong decisions. They're going from joblessness to homelessness."*

***"With parents focused on survival, sourcing emergency relief and food daily, the kids in the house are picking upon the anxiety and we're worried this is exacerbating their existing trauma."***

**For those who can't work from home, can't afford to miss casual work or don't have strong English, the need for proactive community engagement is necessary**

*"People are unaware of the need to get tested or they are but worried they'll miss shifts. I encouraged a couple yesterday to get tested. They were going back to shifts today. I told them to get a mask and gloves and reminded them they're going back to family. They hadn't thought about how it could impact their extended family."*

***"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, but they were in a hotspot. After I sent her the link in Dari, she said 'Thank you, I had no idea'."***

**—Janette Witt, Dandenong**

*"Some people were scared that if they go get tested, they would lose their job if they were positive."*

***"One man assumed that since his boss told him to go home and get tested, that he lost his job. But he hadn't."***

In one of our employment services, the [Jobs Victoria Employment Network \(JVEN\)](#), 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.

## Case study



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

#### **Let's hear from a BSL service user**

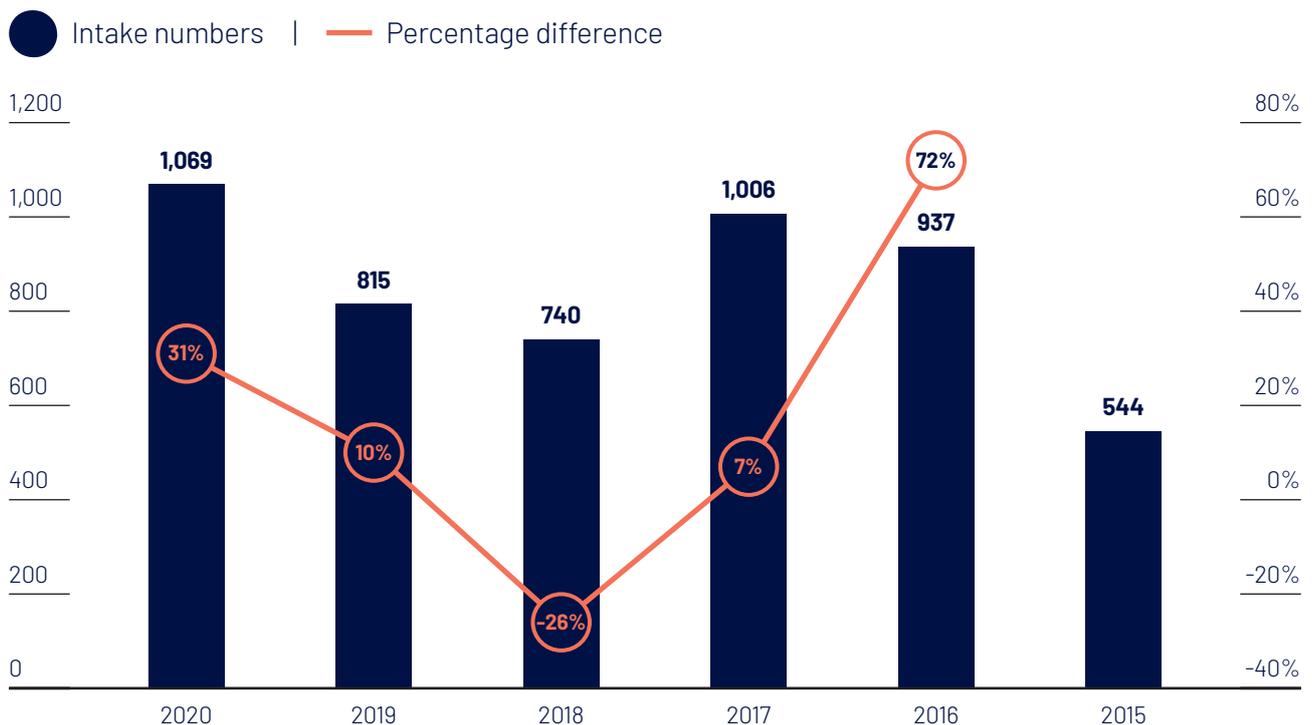
Athula, her husband and two-year-old child arrived via a treacherous boat journey and have been seeking asylum since arriving from Sri Lanka in 2013. Whilst they had work rights, it was difficult to find a job and since having two other children, it's become harder to juggle their family budget. Prior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

**Figure 2** SaverPlus – Intake Numbers by Quarter 1 (Jul-Sept) of people seeking budgeting support over the past 6 financial years



**2** First-time recipients of services and/or social security are experiencing shame and guilt about asking for help from services, with debt, borrowing money from family or friends and living week to week their main drivers.

*“There is a huge new cohort of people who have never experienced the welfare system - this is first time they have had to ask for help. Debt, borrowing money from family or friends and living week to week were the drivers behind joining our Saver Plus program.”*

– John Davis, Fitzroy



*“They shared that they don’t talk about money with their friends as their social circle are in different situations. Equally, they found it confronting talking about money and seeking help from services.”*

*“The feeling of shame or guilt was directly correlated to their circumstance - those with children felt ashamed, those without felt guilty. This feeling of shame came from their perception of themselves as a parent in comparison to others, they felt that they should be able to do this and ashamed when they couldn’t.”*

Between June and August 2020, BSL’s Saver Plus program saw a 19% increase in both enquiries (333 people) as well as participants recruited (137). As **Figure 2 above** shows, our July-September 2020 quarter intake (1,069) is our largest in six years – a 31% increase from last year. As reflected above, many have never experienced the welfare system and/or utilised social services. This correlates with recent Roy Morgan research commissioned by Good Shepherd which found that C19’s economic impact has created a new group of economically vulnerable people, with young people, recent migrants and women among those hardest hit.

**3** The increased JobSeeker rate is not only pulling people out of poverty and giving them the ability to eat properly and pay bills on time, but it's also reducing parental stress levels, as well as financial and social exclusion for both adults and young people by helping them to avoid debt and be more job-ready in future. The longer-term benefit of this reduction in parental anxiety will be parents being more emotionally and psychologically available to their children.

Benefits for families:

- Eating good food; not having to worry about having enough money for food
- Paying rent on time and avoid debt
- Covering and not needing to delay kids' expenses
- Saving up to meet higher bills and costs, owing to isolation during C19
- Being able to socialise to reduce their isolation

"People are really happy that food is one less thing that they had to worry about. Families tell us the extra money is helping them buy healthier food. One family shared that previously there was only three or four days of the week they'd have all their meals. They said, 'Now there's enough for everyone to have breakfast. We never used to be able eat snacks in between meals...We can also keep up with our rent and pay the bills. I'm incredibly anxious about reverting to the original payment."

**"In our Saver Plus program, we've noticed an increase in monthly deposits since the increased supplement. People report the increased amount towards emergency fund or saving up to get things like a more reliable car."**

—Lynn Jacob, Craigieburn



"Families have shared that given the C19 restrictions, everyone staying home has impacted their costs. One family said: 'Everything is on more – the lights, heater, TV, internet, water, everything. The increased money is helping cover the increased bills as well as shopping. Everyone is also eating more. Feeding constantly hungry teenagers is expensive. It's definitely helped cover our higher grocery bills."

**"It's also helped reduce isolation – one single mum said: 'When the restrictions were eased, we could afford to go out with other families. It's definitely helped us feel less isolated'."**

Benefits for Young People:

- Saving up for a car to help with employability
- Being able to save up for a bond for a new rental to escape family violence
- More easily cover food, rent and other basics
- Avoiding debt
- Data for phone to keep making/receiving calls relating to jobs

"A large percentage of our young people received the supplement. Some are expectant parents, some are putting money away to buy a car, some young people living in a family violence situation are saving up for a bond to lease their own property. Some are buying things they've never been able to afford."

**"The main thing has been able to start saving for a car, even though it's been slow and it will take me a while to get there. I know that having wheels will make it easier to get a job as some jobs say you need access to a reliable car, or if I have clients when I start personal training, I have to be able to get to them. It'll even be good just to get to more interviews. I've also used the extra money to buy some second-hand gym equipment to help me start thinking about my personal training business."**

—"Gabriel", 21, Broadmeadows

"One young person told us that they saved up and bought themselves a laptop because they couldn't go to the library anymore to do more job-searching."

- Reduced pressure
- Provided certainty

"It's taken the pressure off young people. Like all of us in this strange reality right now, it helps them know they're going to be okay – at least in the short term. It's scary to think what will happen at the end of December."

**"We've had young people that have just been managing who are only now being able to buy the bare necessities that everyone takes for granted. It definitely needs to be raised."**

## Case study



### Benefitting from the increased JobSeeker rate

#### Let's hear from Mohamed\* & Zara\*

Both Mohamed and Zara are qualified pharmacists. They came with their 3-year old for a better life under our refugee program from Iraq and live in Melbourne's outer northern suburbs. Their qualifications weren't recognised so they both undertook an Occupational English Course and have been seeking jobs. During this, Zara had their second child last December.

To widen his career options, Mohamed started an Aged Care Course. With four days left to finish his 120 hours of an aged care placement, C19 hit the sector and he couldn't conclude his qualification. "So there goes that back-up career option," said Mohamed.

The family was already struggling clothing their 3-year old and meeting family expenses on their Newstart income. "His clothes and shoes cost more, need to be bought more regularly and don't last as long as mine and my wife's" said Mohamed. The C19 supplement has been essential as they've navigated the enormous costs involved in having a 7-month-old newborn. "We're having to spend \$25 for a tin of formula every few days and \$60 for a boxes of nappies every week. The money does not stretch far with a 3-year old to raise as well. The new rate was allowing us to budget properly and do weekly shopping. It meant we were able to eat well and not have to buy just what we could afford each day. Post October, we will have to go back to going out each day and put our family at risk of contracting C19. It's not enough to survive on with a young baby. I would do any job, I've even applied for a pharmacy assistant job.

I want to provide for my family. When we got pregnant last March, I wasn't expecting to bring our new son into world where I wouldn't have a job. I want my kids to see me working. I feel great pressure to provide for my family and I want to be earning a living and giving back to this country that's given me this opportunity. My wife and I both have pharmacy skills we want to bring to our community."

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

## Other key themes

**1 Women's financial independence has been affected by additional caring responsibilities due to home-schooling, in particular. This manifested in reducing their hours, stalling job-searching or putting their small businesses on hold. This was further exacerbated with any existing elder care responsibilities – they ceased childcare given health concerns for the older person with comorbidities.**

*"For my participants who are exploring employment, much of this has been put on hold due to C19 shutting down industries or their kids' school."*

*"Many people, especially in CALD communities, have elders living with them and thus can't take the risks of their children bringing C19 home from childcare. But if their job can't be worked from home, they're having to take that risk."*

*"When free childcare ended, many children were in care less, so often the mother ceased work, due to both cost and health concerns. In one family, they both lost jobs in hospitality. The mum isn't looking due to home-schooling and the dad is retraining now."*

### Some data from our small business program for women of refugee backgrounds

*"Stepping Stones to Small Business"*



**13%**

**started a business during C19 to generate flexible income**



**73%**

**chose a small business because of the flexibility it afforded them**



**37%**

**increase in the number of women looking for work**



**54%**

**put their businesses on hold, until post C19, due to lockdown and increased care commitments**

**2 ParentsNext participants appreciated not having the burden of jeopardising their payments if they did not meet the requirements of activity plans. Parents did not have to worry about payments being suspended, allowing them the time and emotional energy to focus on children learning from home, caring for children not in childcare and not being fearful about leaving the house to attend required activities and risk C19 infection.**

*"People didn't have to struggle and worry about not being paid during this crisis. The last thing you want is people to have payment suspensions."*

*"They were relieved they could put their goals on hold as they had no respite and a high care burden without family support due to lockdown."*

*"It's been good that the priority has been on referrals and focusing on participant wellbeing."*

*"People have appreciated us being able to have friendlier conversations with them and those more isolated have appreciated having someone to talk to during lockdown."*

**3 Young people will need long-term solutions to prevent lasting damage to their employment and training trajectories.**

*"Now more than ever we need to look at how to support young people for education and employment because they're going to be hit the hardest."*

*"Young people are often unaware about career pathways, so it's not just about finding any job, but about showing a young person the entry point and the career trajectory that this can put them on a pathway towards. It's also about working with a broad range of stakeholders to ensure that skills and training aligns with employment opportunities in areas of high demand."*

*– Courtney Green, Broadmeadows*



*"People get opportunistic bits of employment... and young people might do anything to get the money and experiences, but it falls away really quickly and then you're left really disadvantaged in the job market longer-term. And young people are already disadvantaged in the job market because of lack of experience. There needs to be a real combination of experience and training and then how the government supports people to have an adequate income while they're training and not pushing them into short term or low skilled jobs. That's the really big policy piece here."*

**4 Silver linings – Working for Victoria has created opportunities and provided hope at a time of great despair**

*"The State Government's Working for Victoria (WFV) initiative has also seen a number of our participants get jobs which has been a tremendously positive experience for our participants."*

*"WFV is a beacon of hope! There are new jobs everyday."*

*"For a small number, the Working for Victoria initiative has created roles they have successfully accessed, which previously would have been out of their reach."*

## What did our quantitative data tell us?

### Populations experiencing disadvantage can have double the national average of “insecure work”, placing them at greater risk of being unable to quarantine during a pandemic

Much has been said by unions, politicians and the media about the role of insecure work in spreading the virus, given people lack the financial means to afford to quarantine whilst awaiting test results and/or C19 recovery. Here, we share a snapshot of our quantitative data, analysing people engaged in our Jobs Victoria Employment Network (JVEN) program, which operates across the low-socio-economic regions of Dandenong, Epping and Flemington (public housing). Firstly, we look at the 189 people who currently have a job. Of these:

- 44% were temporary visa holders, whilst 56% were permanent residents
- Of these, as you can see from **Figure 3 opposite**, 44% didn't have access to sick leave in casual jobs, whilst 50% did. Two people had two jobs where one job is contract and the other which is casual. **This cohort has more than double the rate of casual employment when compared to the general population, where according to the last ABS data, 24% of all employees are in casual roles** (August 2019).
- As you can see from **Figure 4 opposite** they are employed in a cross-section of industries, with the top three being healthcare (20%), manufacturing (13%) and administration (13%). Unfortunately, we couldn't confirm how many had roles that could be worked from home.

### Is it true that JobKeeper and the increased JobSeeker rate have acted as a disincentive to work?

As much as the media and some employers would like to have us believe it's a simple yes, the answer is more nuanced than that and needs to be understood in the context of C19 and the types of jobs people experiencing disadvantage are often in.

**Things that point to a qualified yes?** In our Jobs Victoria Employment Network, during March–August 2020,

- We had only 185 new registrations, compared to 406 in the previous year, a 54% (221 people) drop.
- When our team conducted well-being checks with all registered participants, of those that indicated that they were currently pausing their job-seeking activities, the reasons provided were:
  - 1 Fears of contracting C19 in a work environment
  - 2 Concerns for their own health and/or for that of family who lived with them
  - 3 Pressures of educating children at home, especially for mothers

Feedback indicated that JobKeeper and the increased JobSeeker payments had allowed them to make these choices.

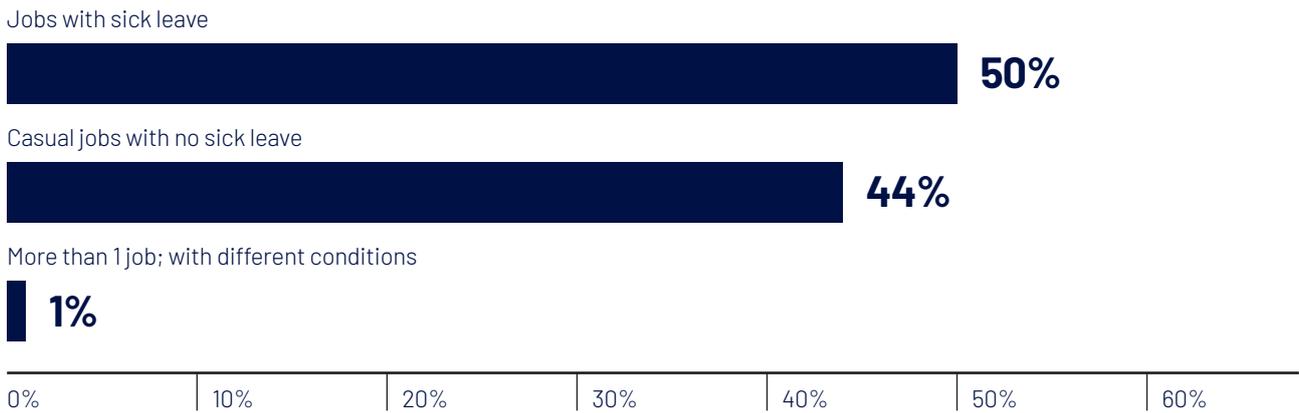
**Things that point to a qualified no?** During the same period, we had

- 65 participants, who had previously been supported through the service, return for support to re-enter the job market. Of these:
  - 78% (51) had been stood down or lost their jobs;
  - 22% (14) had their hours or shifts reduced due to C19
- 64% were people seeking asylum on bridging visas, SHEVs, and TPVs, who were not eligible for JobKeeper or Jobseeker and had no financial safety net.
- **36% were eligible for and/or receiving JobSeeker or JobKeeper**

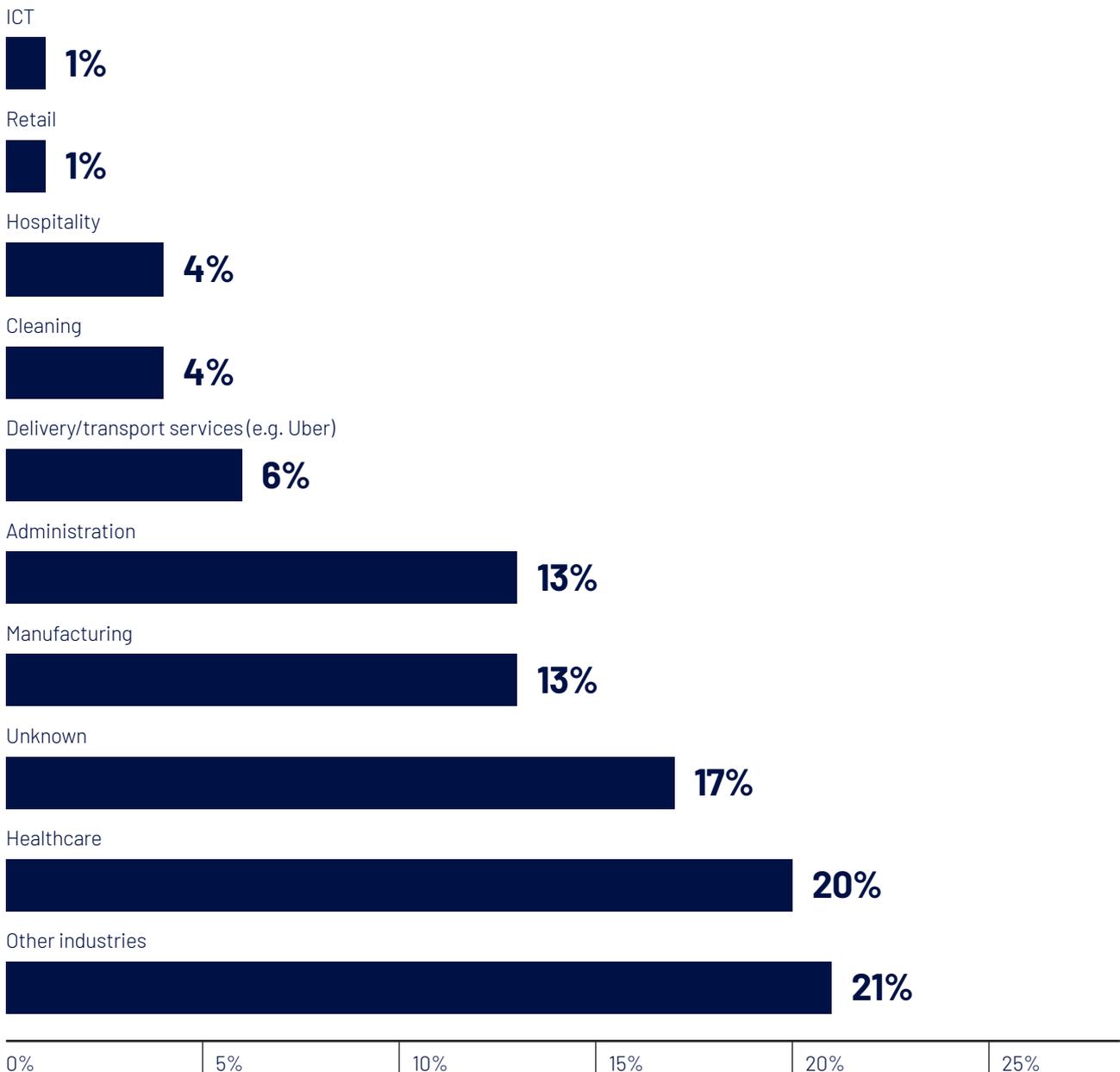
Hence, whilst a safety net enables people to have the choice to re-engage, during a pandemic this may be grounded in

- concerns relating to they themselves and/or extended family living with them being in at-risk categories
- carrying the burden of unpaid care and teaching of children; and/or
- having skills and experience related to jobs that cannot be performed at home and/or without sick leave provisions, meaning they are in financially precarious positions without security of income.

**Figure 3** Casual vs contract roles with sick leave



**Figure 4** Breakdown of Industries currently employing BSL JVEN jobseekers



## Recommendations

### Leveraging existing resources:

- 1 The Federal Government should provide an amnesty to encourage people to come forward for JobSeeker**, given aforementioned finding that those working in cash jobs fear they'll be asked about their prior earning capacity.
- 2 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:

- 3 Expanding JobSeeker eligibility to people on temporary visas, such as people seeking asylum**, will ensure people have a safety net and reduce public health concern of putting themselves at risk in putting themselves in vulnerable employment situations.
- 4 Increase the permanent base rate of JobSeeker.** People in our programs were utilising the Jobseeker supplement to finally get ahead and were putting the funds toward needed cars, rent, childcare supplies, and laptops or iPads to stay connected with services and social networks.

- 5 Providing paid pandemic leave for those without sick leave entitlements.** This will provide the necessary incentive for workers to stay home and reduce workplace and hence community transmission.
- 6 Ensure a focus on increasing the workforce participation of women and youth** given disproportionate impact of job losses.

Further themes as well as recommendations on this topic are detailed in other research, such as the joint BSL-Nous Group report, [COVID-19 Insight Series on Mature Age low-income people](#), which looks at those too old to work and too young to retire, as well as [Trampolines not Traps Report](#) focusing on single mothers.



# Chapter 4 - Families & home-schooling

## In this chapter

We share key findings of the pandemic's impact on the children and families we work with<sup>2</sup>, in particular, their experiences with and impact arising from the pressures of home-schooling. We also provide policy, program and practice recommendations to address the issues raised, as well as how families and children can be better supported in the recovery.

## Top 4 findings

**1** **Whilst we knew that families would be experiencing overwhelming stress related to housing or financial instability, childcare and health concerns, that this has the potential to exacerbate financial debt, homelessness and social and economic exclusion more generally is concerning. Particularly when stimulus supports such as rental relief and JobSeeker and JobKeeper cease.**

*"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 people are several months behind on rent and need more supports in addition to rental assistance."*

## Home-schooling

**2a** **Whilst we knew that many families, especially those without formal education or who lack access to appropriate technologies, would find assisting their children's home-schooling difficult, what was concerning was the effect of stress and increased responsibilities strained the parent-child relationship. The sudden expectation to motivate learning decreased confidence in parents and this has caused friction, leading to a focus on repairing relationships.**

*"Families were panicking about home-schooling because they didn't have devices and didn't think the government would provide a laptop or iPad. They either went into debt or drew down on savings and bought them, so their kids had access. But this caused hardship for them. I told them to contact the school. Some waited for schools to provide devices. The parents didn't trust the school or government and they didn't want their kids excluded."*

*"Online learning was a real challenge. Parents from CALD backgrounds, who struggle themselves with English, were put in the situation of having to teach their children, and they didn't have the skills or know-how to do that, so that was a lot of added pressure. Pressure which has caused many parents to have a lack of confidence in parenting, so all the work we've done has been undone in some ways. There's been a severe breakdown in communication with their children. There's a lot of repair work that needs to be done."*

<sup>2</sup> Through our family services program, BSL works with families with children up to the age of 17. This includes integrated family services like the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) which aims to empower parents and carers to be their children's first teacher in their homes, and the Parents Next program which helps parents receiving the Parenting Payment prepare to re-enter the workforce as their child reaches school age. It also includes the Connie Benn Centre, the BSL Multicultural Team, and parent groups that operate in BSL offices in Jindi and Epping. These programs help parents and families to access education and employment and engage with workplace and skill building. They also offer English language courses and engage families when there are issues with a child's safety, wellbeing or development. Staff from these programs represent the communities of HIPPY North Melbourne, HIPPY Frankston North, HIPPY Dallas Broadmeadows, HIPPY Fitzroy, and Parents Next from Broadmeadows, Craigieburn, Dandenong, Epping, Fitzroy, Frankston North, Pakenham, and Reservoir.

**2b Home-schooling children with a disability was largely overwhelming for parents, although some gained insights into both the learning support and intervention support their children require. High anxiety also arose when there was school refusal when restrictions ceased and concern about learning gaps and the need to facilitate a transition for those with behavioral problems. The carer burden was exhausting and meant job-seeking was put on hold and their own work and mental health was impacted.**

*"Lots of parents found it so difficult because needed intense support, given their children had classroom assistance and/or an aide at school. They have never witnessed their children learning. It is difficult for them to home school their children as they have never done before. Many needed one on one support, watching them the entire time."*

**"We had reports of significant carer burden, especially for those doing home-schooling on top of caring for children with disability. Aboriginal NDIS participants who were exploring employment indicated much of this has been put on hold due to C19."**



**– Kendall English-Lane, Preston**

*"The second round of home-schooling was wearing. Parents are very stressed, with many struggling to do their jobs with some having to reduce hours. Even the extra week of school holidays was very stressful. Especially for kids with special needs who have trouble managing themselves."*

**"There's high anxiety where children are refusing to go back to school..... There needs to be consideration of enabling environments and proper planning to facilitate children's (with behavioural problems) transition back to school."**

*"There's concern that the learning gaps will increase and grow over time for kids who disengage."*

## Case study



### Virtual parent coaching to help with home-schooling

#### Now, let's hear from Fay\*, a BSL service user

As a single mother with four children, three of whom are teenagers and one who is six years old, Fay is juggling all their different needs as well as a new full-time job she's doing remotely. Prior to C19, Fay worked casually supporting her local Council's playgroups. As a result of these programs being suspended during C19 and her role being casual, she was ineligible for JobKeeper.

Fay arrived from Somalia, via a Kenyan refugee camp, 23 years ago. She didn't have any formal schooling beyond grade five back home, so the notion of suddenly teaching her grade one daughter how to read, whilst also navigating all the websites the school was sending, was intimidating. During Stage 3, she sent her daughter to school because she could not do home-schooling. When she heard that BSL was establishing a Family Learning Program (FLP) to help parents like her navigate home-schooling, she was happy. The FLP which provides virtual support to help parents navigate school tasks, also helps improve digital navigation skills for parents.

"The learning program was very helpful, the communication was very understandable. I learned to be comfortable, and not be stressed that I wasn't doing enough. They helped me realise that I am their first teacher on so many things". They told us we don't need to worry about it and to try our best. The team helped ensure I got an iPad from my daughter's school and alerted me to an online Homework Group – everyone's making online groups these days. 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. I want my son to be able to get into year 12".

Together with her new job, where she's also been able to increase her digital skills, her confidence in helping her children with their schoolwork has improved. "I am more comfortable with technology now, not expert. I get IT training once a week and need more training for programs like PowerPoint, Excel and Word. It's made me think I might go back to part time study".

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

**3** There are increased fears and uncertainties regarding the welfare of vulnerable children during the pandemic, given they are being sighted less by professionals. We were especially concerned to hear that families on temporary visas thought that if they sought help, that this would reflect negatively on their applications for permanent residency, and so they had been coping alone.

*"There's never been a time where there are 'less eyes' on vulnerable children. Many consultations are via phone due to the lack of digital devices. The maternal and child health nurse is not seeing them, family services staff are not seeing them and they're not going to any playgroups."*

*"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."*

## Other key themes

**1** Women – particularly single mothers, those in family violence relationships, with special needs children, large families – are experiencing increased vulnerability, isolation and risks during lockdown without the ability to convey things directly to services.

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

*"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** Many families could not access technologies needed for remote service delivery and home schooling or telehealth needs.

*"Two years ago we ran some stats on what our participants were saving for—over 70% were saving for a device. Most had only one device or zero. Lately 80% have been saving for a computer."*

*"Some families had one device between a family of four. If the charger breaks, that's it, they've got no device."*

**3** Services have been flexible and adapted to the needs of families and communities – meeting later in the evening when their young children are in bed.

*"We've had high levels of continuous engagement... One tutor was holding group telephone calls at 9pm with parents because that was the only time their home was quiet, and they wanted to use that time to support their kids. Even though they'd been helping their older children with schoolwork all day. We didn't encourage that, but it shows the level of commitment and that even a pandemic couldn't put them off."*

*"Not having face to face has given us flexibility to do appointments late in the afternoon. During Ramadan, people don't pick up the phone in the morning because they're sleeping, or they were cooking. It gives them more opportunities to get in touch when they are available."*

*"These families we work with are amazingly resilient. There was a lot of panic during the heightened pandemic periods, but they pulled through and were supportive of each other. They see their community members as family members... Moving forward in the 'new-normal' we have to continue to be flexible and versatile in our work... We walk beside our families; we don't drag them along with us. This is a testament to the approach we take. It's been a massive learning curve."*

— Rennie Ervinawati, Mernda



## Recommendations

### Leveraging existing resources:

- 1 Government messaging needs to be clearer** about how people can receive C19 supplements and from which Department.
- Change requirements in some government-supported programs to **allow families to have phone calls or video chats after C19 passes**, rather than insisting on in office presence.

### New funding:

- 3 Resource kindergartens and schools to undertake community engagement work with families** to lift student outcomes and re-engage students with learning, ensuring cultural brokers are utilised with multicultural and Indigenous communities. (As we go to press, we welcome the Victorian Government's \$8.6 million for Family Engagement Initiatives, to support schools on this front with an additional 16 Koorie Engagement Support Officers and 60 additional bicultural workers, as a good start).

- 4 Provide access to a tutoring fund and/or catch up programs in schools** to allow for working with kids in small groups to bring them up to their required level and get their confidence back up. Particularly important for kids with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. (As we go to press, we acknowledge the Victorian Government's \$209.6 million for every government school to attract and employ 3500 tutors across the 2021 school year).

- 5 Invest in broadband and telehealth technology access so that every Australian has access to the internet** which they can utilise for home-schooling and remote service delivery in times of crisis, such as a pandemic and/or bushfires.

Further themes, as well as recommendations from other BSL research on this topic, is detailed in our [Children and Young People on the Edge of Care, Out of Home and Alone](#).



## **Chapter 5 – Young people**

## In this chapter

We provide an overview of the experiences of young people<sup>3</sup> during the pandemic, in particular the impacts on their education, training and employment pathways including hearing from one of our youth participants Gabriel\* about the impact of the Coronavirus supplement on his Youth Allowance. 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.

## Top 3 findings

### 1 Young people will need long-term solutions to prevent lasting damage to their employment and training trajectories.

*“Now more than ever we need to look at how to support young people for education and employment because they’re going to be hit the hardest.”*

**“Young people are often unaware about career pathways, so it’s not just about finding any job, but about showing a young person the entry point and the career trajectory that this can put them on a pathway towards. It’s also about working with a broad range of stakeholders to ensure that skills and training aligns with employment opportunities in areas of high demand.”**

– Courtney Green, Broadmeadows



*“People get opportunistic bits of employment... and young people might do anything to get the money and experiences, but it falls away really quickly and then you’re left really disadvantaged in the job market longer-term. And young people are already disadvantaged in the job market because of lack of experience. There needs to be a real combination of experience and training and then how the government supports people to have an adequate income while they’re training and not pushing them into short term or low skilled jobs. That’s the really big policy piece here.”*

### 2 Engagement rates in our employment readiness services have remained high, as young people increase their engagement in education and training, with many exhibiting a deep need for social connection, guidance and support to navigate the changing world. However, some of our disengaged students have struggled to maintain focus in an online environment.

*“We’re still seeing about 85-90% engagement with our employment participants currently. Young people ring our staff back every day if they miss their calls, because they really want to have conversations.”*

**“The really high engagement for our newly arrived young participants is around social connection, going to English classes, and the health and wellbeing side of things.”**

*“Understandably, the motivations and aspirations of young people are challenged in the current climate. Furthermore, many are struggling with the online learning environment.”*

**3** Through our Youth Services programs, BSL works with young people aged 15-24 in programs like the Education First Youth Foyers (EFYF), Transition to Work (TtW), the David Scott school (DSS). These programs help young people stay connected, or reconnect with schooling, help young people prepare for and find jobs, and helps them build and utilise social capital within their communities. The young people served by these programs might be living at home with parents, in out-of-home care, might live in our youth foyer housing, or might be engaged in non-traditional schooling. Staff from these programs directly represented the communities of Broadmeadows, Frankston, and the Mornington Peninsula. Indirectly, communities across Australia are also represented through feedback from the TtW National Communities of Practice (CoP). The young people who utilise the services and programs of BSL often have overlapping characteristics of being school-aged, being a jobseeker, or transitioning into independent living—all of which are activities that have been made more difficult with the pandemic and ensuing lockdown.



## Gabriel\* – young, unemployed & being a jobseeker during C19

Gabriel is 21 and lives in Broadmeadows.

After leaving school in Year 11, he's completed various short courses, but struggled to get a job.

He started a Certificate III in Food Processing Apprenticeship, but it wasn't for him. Then he thought he wanted to pursue a career in the performing arts, as he was into music and dancing, but he's since decided to focus on becoming a professional boxer, as well as run a personal training business.

Over the past four years of being unemployed, he's lost count of the number of jobs he's applied for. "It's definitely over 500. It's hard to find entry-level jobs. I've had interviews, but nothing.... I get told I don't fit the criteria for some reason. Often I think it's because of where I live or because of how I've filled out the application. Based on my chats with my mates, I think it's more about your connections. I don't have the networks. I know it's tough with not many jobs out there right now, but I'm still going to keep eyes on the prize. I can't just sit there and say, 'Oh yeah, they got the job and I didn't. I want to work and I'll keep trying'.

At the start of C19, Gabriel was living with relatives and the C19 supplement to his Youth Allowance helped him contribute to the rent as well as other necessities. "Being able to cover food easier has given me a breather. Before the supplement, it was just enough for food for the two weeks and paying rent. No room for saving. Everything was a necessity, but it was the necessity things that I was stressing about". Gabriel has been persistent in using any money towards saving up for a car. "Even though it's been slow and it will take me a while to get there, I know that having wheels will make it easier to get a job as some jobs say you need access to a reliable car or if I have personal training clients, I have to be able to get to them".

Gabriel is part of BSL's Transition to Work program. "Ed, my caseworker, has been helping me look for work. He's been letting me know about job opportunities like Working for Victoria that I've registered for. I got to a second stage interview, but then the Stage 4 restrictions came in and they put the customer service job I applied for on hold....Ed is a great advocate with jobs and reassures me that I'm doing all the things that I can do but there's just nothing out there. So I'm focusing on things that will help me get to where I can get to. I might be taking an alternative route, but I'm going to get to my goal. We all have our struggles, but I've found my way out. I want to make something out of myself because I'm getting older and one day I want to get my own house eventually, and that sort of stuff". Gabriel's Certificate IV Personal Training course was initially postponed due to C19 but will now be going ahead online. He's looking forward to being able to run gym classes and boot camps. Watch out world!

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

**"We've spoken to lots of other providers in the regions and their engagement is low. It comes back to our model and how we engage with young people. We're a voluntary program, they don't have to engage with us, but they actually see real value in the relationship they're building with their coach. You have to shift the way you're working. You can't just always be nuts and bolts- you have to look at the whole picture and say this is what this young person is needing today."**

—Rebecca Willmott, Frankston



**3 The Coronavirus Supplement for Youth Allowance is not only pulling people out of poverty and giving them the ability to eat properly and pay bills on time, but it's also reducing financial and social exclusion by helping young people avoid debt and be more job-ready in future. Those ineligible for JobKeeper or Youth Allowance, sought support and referrals for life's basics.**

*"We've had young people that have just been managing who are only now being able to buy the bare necessities that everyone takes for granted."*

**"A large percentage of our young people received the supplement. Some are expectant parents, some are putting money away to buy a car, some young people living in a family violence situation are saving up for a bond to lease their own property."**

—Adriano Gioia, Frankston



*"One young person told us that they saved up and bought themselves a laptop because they couldn't go to the library anymore to do more job-searching."*

**"Homelessness, food, and mental health referrals were the top three requests. And technology – so phones, phone credits and referring them to where they could get food vouchers."**

—Emina Sivic, Broadmeadows



*"We have a large cohort that aren't eligible for any support at all. We link them in with services in the local area. We buy them Coles vouchers so they can buy food and other needs. Another thing that takes time is that we reapply with them for benefits. It could take up to 20 hours for one young person to apply."*

## Other key themes

**1 Lacking access to technology and face-to-face interaction, has negatively impacted young people's schooling, especially those who are newly arrived to Australia.**

*"A lot of people are really struggling with online learning, and some have unfortunately dropped out of school because of that."*

**"Young people study or work part-time before they move into full-time work, but all the study options were moved online. For a lot of young people transitioning to that was a real process. There were issues with connectivity, but they're also used to having face to face. They haven't chosen to study online, if you haven't chosen that, it makes it tricky."**

—Stacey Miller, Frankston



**2 Young people are experiencing long wait periods for mental health supports. It's also impacting on their sense of worthiness and eventual desire to get help.**

*"There are not enough mental health supports available to young people. We can have a young person experiencing significant mental health issues but when you ring the Youth Services, it is an 8-12 week wait for an intake appointment. That's not to be serviced, that's just the screening appointment to understand the needs of the young person. They don't want to ring the 1300 numbers—they want and need personalised support."*

*“Long waiting lists for mental health services is a huge issue for young people in the Frankston area. It causes distress from a pragmatic standpoint but also indicates to them that they are not of value in their community or not ‘worthy’. The result is that they give up trying and resist attempting to get help.”*

— Jodie Long, Frankston



## Recommendations

### Leveraging existing resources:

- 1 Programs and services working with young people experiencing disadvantage are encouraged to utilise capabilities informed practice approaches such as Advantaged Thinking** to ensure young people have access to the necessary opportunities, resources and networks required to establish meaningful and sustainable livelihoods
- 2 Federal and state governments need to develop strong employment pathways** with long term outcomes for young people by creating connections between employers, TAFEs, and young people to provide skilled pathways to work that can meet both the short and long term needs of employers, communities and young people. Further work is being done by the [National Youth Employment Body](#) that BSL convenes.
- 3 Government can play an active role in job creation.** This includes expanding entry level positions as part of social procurement hiring policies; redistributing funding to communities to build digital or physical infrastructure; and advocating for investment in the trialling of adaptive models for local training system responsiveness.

### New funding:

- 4 Provide young people with flexible income support** that does not penalise them as they move between unemployment, education, training and work.
- 5 Ensure JobKeeper is expanded to include those in casual employment** given the disproportionate impact on young people
- 6 Improve access to youth specialist employment services such as Transition to Work.** This should include:
  - ensuring that all young people who are experiencing disadvantage are eligible for rapid engagement with specialist youth employment services such as Transition to Work.
  - investment in community-led solutions which address local youth unemployment
  - funding to support business-led Community Investment Committees that marshal government and community resources which directly link supply and demand so as to improve employment and benefit whole communities.

[More details here.](#)

Our website also features a [COVID-19 snapshot video](#) to deepen understanding of what’s happening now for young people across Australia. This video also features Employer Champions working locally and nationally with Transition to Work providers to harness the community effort and create pathways to employment for young people.

Further themes as well as recommendations are detailed in our [Children and Young People on the Edge of Care, Out of Home and Alone.](#)



## **Chapter 6 – Multicultural communities**

## In this chapter

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.

## 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 WhatsApp 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**



## Case study



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

**Let's hear from BSL service user, Athula, in case you didn't meet her in Chapter 3**

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

## 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."*

*"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 WhatsApp 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:

- 1 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.
- 2 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:

- 3 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
- 4 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.
- 5 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.



## **Chapter 7 – People with disability**

## In this chapter

We provide an overview of the experiences of people with disability we work with during the pandemic, touching on how the digital divide impacted on their ability to engage in virtual services, isolation arising from lockdown restrictions, difficulties of home-schooling children and the positive developments arising from more inclusive employment options that opened up as everyone began working from home. 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.

## Top 4 findings

**1** **Whilst some people with disability appreciated not needing to come into the office, those lacking technology or the skills to use it, experienced greater isolation and delays to services given barriers to virtually engaging. Any future digitisation of government services needs to ensure it doesn't exacerbate exclusion.**

*"We had feedback from some participants with autism or intellectual disabilities that it is easier to not have to maintain eye contact via a phone meeting or have time to consider a response and respond via email."*

—Lauren McAlpine, Footscray



*"Opportunities for non-face to face meetings has had positive impacts for many participants. Some experience shame at not being able to make meetings on time and so, they disengage."*

Reports on the digital divide are reinforced by ABS data from 2018 which shows that 1.1 million (28.5%) people with disability did not use the Internet. Over 250,000 people with disability lacked confidence or knowledge to use the Internet.

*"Face to face interaction takes away the need for 1000 words."*

—Carl Thompson, Greensborough



*"We can't see people via their devices as the people we work with lack smartphones. They're on basic phones with limited data. We can't see virtual services as a cheap way forward. It's a warning for digitising all government funded services as it exacerbates exclusion."*

*"This period has really highlighted the impact of no internet access on people with disabilities navigating the NDIS. For example, I had someone who wanted visual information to show their brother, the participant, to ensure he could make an informed decision and feel included. They could not come to office and they could not use email at all, and it prolonged the planning process and put them at a disadvantage. Normally they could come to the office, pick documents up and meet me briefly. I think it's really showing how crucial it is to have access to the internet."*

*"Internet access is definitely a necessity and more work to support minority groups to have this access is required."*

**2** **C19 has made isolation, something common for many of our participants with a disability, a universal feeling. However, the isolation of lockdown triggered a variety of responses – people now comfortable to concede they're lonely and seek help to address loneliness, to Aboriginal participants for whom it triggered trauma to those who felt suicidal. There was an increased need for mental health supports, particularly as usual well-being outlets like day programs ceased.**

*"C19 has been the ice-breaker – something we now all have in common. It's also lifted the lid on loneliness and isolation. People have now got permission to talk about it because we're all feeling isolated. We always knew it, now we definitely now it."*

*"C19 has exacerbated the emotional toll of caring for children with a disability. One participant had an acute mental health episode, referred to services. Isolation is challenging for parents who have children with behavioural issues who don't feel they can go out."*

"We had an increase in people saying they might want to hurt themselves or were having suicidal thoughts. Through the telephone, people shared much more openly; they are not intimidated in front of you. We did our best to link them into mental health services. There is a massive gap in services for children under 18 in the area but over 18 is not too bad."

**"Aboriginal participants are seeking mental health and carer supports, are managing increased bills due to being at home all the time, keeping connected to family and culture.**

**There are high levels of anxiety around seeing family. This is triggering trauma, feelings of abandonment."**

**– Kendall English-Lane, Preston**



"Most people's well-being declined, given day programs and respite have ceased leading to isolation."

**3 Home-schooling children with a disability was largely overwhelming for parents, although some gained insights into the level of support they require. High anxiety also arose when there was school refusal when restrictions ceased and concern about learning gaps and the need to facilitate a transition for those with behavioral problems. The carer burden was exhausting and meant job-seeking was put on hold and their own work impacted.**

"Lots of parents found it so difficult because needed intense support, given their children had classroom assistance and/or an aide at school. They have never witnessed their children learning. It is difficult for them to home school their children as they have never done before. Many needed one on one support, watching them the entire time."

**"We had reports of significant carer burden, especially for those doing home-schooling on top of caring for children with disability. Many NDIS participants who were exploring employment indicated much of this has been put on hold due to C19."**

**– Catherine Neil, Greensborough**



"The second round of home-schooling was wearing. Parents are very stressed, with many struggling to do their jobs with some having to reduce hours. Even the extra week of school holidays was very stressful. Especially for kids with special needs who have trouble managing themselves."

**"There's high anxiety where children are refusing to go back to school... There needs to be consideration of enabling environments and proper planning to facilitate children's (with behavioural problems) transition back to school."**

"There's concern that the learning gaps will increase and grow over time for kids who disengage."

**4 More inclusive employment – the flexibility to work from home or have disabilities accommodated – has jumped light years ahead for people with disability. Now that everyone is having to work from home, accommodations are being made for employees.**

"People with disability have been able to get jobs that allow them to work from home and address their barriers which were previously not accepted."

**"Whether it's the man with a hearing impairment who was struggling with all the background noise in his workplace or the woman who can't sit down all day, everyone's needs are being accommodated now that working from home has been forced on every employer and mandated for every employee."**

**– Adam Huismann, Sunshine**





## Tina on workplace accommodations for people with disability during C19

### Now, let's hear from a BSL service user

Tina has lived on the Mornington Peninsula for nearly 15 years with her family. In the early years, her hearing impairment was minimal, so she could cope very well with the hearing aids she'd had since she was 10. Tina always wanted to be a nurse. She used to dress up and put bandages on her parents and take their temperature. However, she got a rude shock from her high school career adviser. "She told me that no hospital would take me with my deafness, as I could be a hindrance to patients getting their care and that I wouldn't hear things like alarm bells. devastated".

This led Tina to take an office job, but she hated it. After a couple of weeks, she contacted the nursing board and asked them if her deafness would be a problem. They told her that they didn't discriminate and welcomed her application. Tina has gone onto work as a nurse over the past 30 years, proving her career adviser wrong. She's brought that experience into her current role overseeing quality, risk management and patient safety for a public healthcare provider.

Throughout her life, Tina has carried a lot of shame about her disability, reluctant to tell anyone about her hearing impairment. "After lots of advice and support from my husband and kids, I started to tell people about my disability. I was surprised how many were supportive. Now, I shout it from the rooftops! I wear a badge out and at work that says, 'I'm deaf and I lip read'".

However, when C19 hit, it had a massive impact on Tina's work. During the first lockdown, when meetings moved to video conferencing, but the bandwidth didn't allow so many users at once, the switch to audio only meetings became an issue due to Tina's deafness. "Not being able to lip-read was dreadful. Not being able to stream my phone calls to both hearing aids, I also couldn't make out 80% of the dialogue and had to ask colleagues to reiterate what had been said.



My confidence plummeted as I didn't want to be involved in meetings and would make up excuses to miss a meeting (or not answer a phone call). Luckily, many staff were more than happy to do the shorter review meetings by email, which was helpful, but I again felt I couldn't do my job and was being carried by my colleagues, which further dented my confidence. My colleagues saw this and did everything possible to help me do my job. They (and the organisation) have been amazingly supportive".

Tina has always been able to work from home if she needed to, but was asked to consider doing so more often when the second lockdown was mandated. "Working from home was never an issue pre-C19, but the preference was to have the team onsite. When we moved to working from home more, I spoke to the relevant people about my struggles with the WebEx video-conferencing system. They told me that they were trialing MS Teams and this might work better for me, given it had closed captions. We now use this for most meetings and I have found it to be so much better. I am always being asked if there is anything else that the organisation can do to accommodate my deafness and to make me feel more comfortable. In meetings, I'm asked prior if it's ok to share that I am deaf and lip read, and participants are also asked to turn on their video when talking so that I can lip read. Everyone is always happy to do this".

Tina thinks that C19's silver lining could be greater workplace flexibility and organisations being more aware of how to support staff with disabilities. "I see this as a positive move for the flexibility of workforces, for thriving economies and happy, efficient staff. But will organisations continue to embrace this concept after this pandemic? Hopefully, we can continue to learn from and build on this for the future." She also sees a role for governments. "I think that many employers do not know of government schemes that assist both the employer and employee. There should be so much more advertising to organisations of the many things available to support employees with disabilities".

## Other key themes

**1** **Lack of clarity or inconsistent information was common on a number of fronts – from the laptop provision for kids with a disability, to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for disability workers.**

*“There was confusion as whether students with a disability would have their home-schooling devices covered by their NDIS funding and/or the Victorian Department of Education. It caused a lot of stress and delays.”*

*“There were inconsistency practices in disability services and their service formats and safety precautions depending on who they were funded by. The confusion on the rules, for example on the use of PPE, coupled with limited equipment, meant some people withdraw from services earlier and this impacted their mental health.”*

## Recommendations

### Leveraging existing resources:

- 1** To minimise the chance of exacerbating inequalities and disadvantage, **in-person contact needs to remain an option during the digitisation of government services**, given the digital divide is pronounced for people with disabilities
- 2** To minimise people feeling unsafe and unnecessarily withdrawing services, **ensure consistency of PPE messaging to ensure people have the choice** to remain engaged with services.
- 3** Where people receive funding from the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA), **communication needs to be clear about who has carriage to meet educational needs** e.g. laptop provision.

### New funding:

- 4** **Provide access to a tutoring fund and/or catch up programs in schools** to allow for working with kids in small groups to bring them up to their required level and get their confidence back up. Particularly important for kids with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. (As we go to press, we acknowledge the Victorian Government’s \$209.6 million for every government school to attract and employ 3,500 tutors across the 2021 school year).

Further themes as well as recommendations are detailed in our [COVID-19 Insight Series on People with a Disability](#).



## **Chapter 8 – Older people & aged care**

## In this chapter

We provide an overview of the experiences of older people and those in aged care who we work with. In particular, we touch on the impact of C19 on carers as elderly patients were released from hospital, how some struggled accessing virtual support whilst others thrived on it and the anxiety C19 provoked for older people and its follow on impacts we need to be aware of.

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.

## Top 3 findings

### 1 Hospitals released older patients before lockdowns to avoid trapping them in lock-downs, but this increased stress on carers.

*“Carers are really exhausted. I have three I’m really concerned about. One of them, her husband was in hospital and they rang her and said ‘We’re not really ready to discharge him, but we’re going to implement a lockdown and that will be bad news for him. We want to discharge him home before he’s actually ready’.”*

*“One man is near end-of-life stage and it’s come on suddenly. He was discharged from hospital into a respite facility. Since he came from hospital they’ve isolated him for two weeks. He’s in quite a lot of pain. He hasn’t seen the doctor. I understand the care staff only go in there when they really need to because they have to wear PPE, so I get that, but he’s just languishing in respite... He gets calls every day from his family, but because of his hearing and his sight, he can’t use an iPad to see them.”*

### 2 Technology for remote help is not useful for older people with cognitive, vision, or hearing problems. Virtual support is not a solution for everyone.

*“Technology is making online shopping and telehealth with a GP easier and those who can are managing lockdown much better. But those who can’t use technology to contact family are feeling more isolated.”*

*“Not many using virtual devices. Two to three percent maybe. The bulk have personal circumstances that keep them from using technologies – lot of cognitive decline, visual and hearing deficits. Wherever possible you’re trying to get technology in there, but it’s not a solution for everyone.”*

*– Nicole Richards, Fitzroy*



### 3 Older people are experiencing a particular anxiety around C19 due to their risks—this encompasses everything from postponing preventative healthcare appointments to worrying about becoming a low priority in the hospital system if it becomes overwhelmed. Furthermore, the lockdown disruptions to older people’s relationships feels difficult given some feel that don’t have long to live. There’s a concern that we’ll need to prepare the sector and medical community for many missed chronic health implications in two to three years that couldn’t be prevented during C19.

*They’re not getting the same level of monitoring. Some chronic things like diabetes and heart failure, those longer-term health impacts that are happening, so it’s not acute but you have it going forward. If someone’s blood sugars are out of control, you’ll likely see vascular issues in two to three years times. There’s a lot of things we won’t really see for a couple of years- the impact on the population.”*

*“One person has 13 kids who wants to visit all the time. Families still want to come in. There’s very few virtual visits, people really want to see their family in person.”*

**"I've had some clients who feel like they're going to be treated as second rate if they get into hospital because they're so old. That they won't be prioritised, that younger people will be. So they're taking extra precautions like washing their stuff. They feel like they're going to be left to die I think..."**

**– Noura Elbadri, Sunshine**



*"They want to see their grandkids and family while they can but they realise that due to age or health, that they might not be around for years to come. It adds an urgency to the situation of isolation that younger generations aren't facing themselves because they feel they can make up that lost time."*

## Other key themes

**1** **Some older residents can't access their religious communities online and are feeling a loss to their spirituality which heightens existing isolation and diminishes coping skills.**

**"Another thing is the spiritual needs, if they use technology they can watch mass or other things. But the majority can't. One client used to go to church daily, now she can only go a few times a week to be safe. That also impacts on their wellbeing. Negatively, for some."**

**– Gosia Kaczocha, Sunshine**



**2** **Community aged care staff and participants received mixed messages from government given inconsistencies initially around the usage of PPE and the message around C19 safety protocols kept changing.**

*"It's been a changing climate around PPE. The requirements keep changing. Initially the advice was not to use it. It was hard because clients wanted us to use it and the Department didn't give us grounds to use it. But with the escalating situation in the last week, PPE has become mandatory. So that's what's been challenging, the inconsistent messages."*

**3** **A silver lining was the positive reception to a virtual online program for those who had digital access and a realization this should be offered beyond C19 for those unable to attend onsite. The program offered activities including quizzes, games, exercise classes and coffee and chat sessions using Zoom and WeChat, as well as C19 related information sessions from DHHS to ensure isolated elderly clients stayed socially connected and supported during the pandemic.**

*"It has been a big hit and will continue when things return to normal to ensure those unable to attend activities in person can stay connected."*

**"More than 150 people have engaged and the feedback indicates that the online program has been essential to help them stay connected during C19. They love being able to see each other virtually, share stories and talk about how they are feeling. The sessions have been popular as people have learnt how to use Zoom to keep in touch. It's been a real chance for them to support one another and they feel like a close-knit family."**

**– Sean Spencer, Fitzroy**



## Recommendations

### Leveraging existing resources:

- 1 Ensure supports are in place for carers before hospital release** in the event of hospital lockdowns in a pandemic
- 2 Provide communication that does not rely solely on remote/technologies** that some elderly can't access due to cognitive, vision, or hearing deficits
- 3 Create a buddy system where those aged care participants who have the coping skills call more vulnerable participants** and stave off isolation while sharing those coping skills.

### New funding:

- 4 Undertake wide awareness campaigns about minimising preventative health appointments** to minimise future health implications.
- 5 Reform the practice of aged care workers splitting shifts between different facilities** to stop the spread to alleviate aged care recipients concerns

Further themes as well as recommendations around aged care in other research are detailed in our [COVID-19 Insight Series on Older People and Aged Care](#).

## **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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