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Call for a New Framework for a Culturally Responsive and Safe Mental Health System in Victoria

The impact of the failures of the state's mental health system on the mental health and wellbeing of Victoria's migrant and refugee communities and recommendations for a transformed, culturally responsive mental health system are outlined in a new paper released today.

Produced by the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) in partnership with Victorian Transcultural Mental Health (VTMH, St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne), the **Recommendations for a Culturally Responsive Mental Health System** paper sets out how the mental health reforms underway in Victoria could also lead to better mental health services and outcomes for people from migrant and refugee backgrounds. It outlines key considerations for a mental health system that supports the needs of a diverse community and that is culturally safe, culturally responsive, equitable and inclusive for all members of the community.

"The Royal Commission found that the Victorian mental health system is not culturally responsive and in many cases is unsafe and exclusionary, resulting in increased distress and further marginalisation," said ECCV Chairperson, Eddie Micallef.

VTMH Manager, Dr Anita Tan, said: "People from marginalised communities often report that they do not feel heard, safe or understood when seeking help for mental health issues or emotional distress. The Royal Commission agreed, and concluded that the reimagined mental health system will need to 'put the needs of diverse cohorts at the centre of planning, strategy, monitoring and leadership'".

The paper was commissioned by the Victorian Government, Department of Health to identify ways the mental health system in Victoria can increase its cultural responsiveness and improve access to mental health services for people from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

"COVID-19 has further exposed the failures and gaps in the system's ability to support migrant and refugee communities impacted by the pandemic. It's more important than ever to ensure people can get the help and support they need, when they need it", Mr Micallef said.

"ECCV and VTMH agree that community and health providers have a rare opportunity to reimagine and rebuild the mental health system to ensure it is fit for purpose and can support the mental health and wellbeing of a society defined by diversity," he said.

Mr Micallef welcomed the record $3.8 billion announced in the state budget for mental health, saying it was critical that the government worked with the community to ensure that the new reforms address the structural and systemic barriers for people from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

Dr Tan said the implementation of the ECCV-VTMH report's recommendations will help build a more contemporary, effective and culturally responsive approach to mental health reform in Victoria.

"This means helping organisations to implement culturally responsive and safe practices: getting to know their local communities, acknowledging that a person's mental health and wellbeing can be affected by multiple and intersecting forms of inequality, and understanding the complex relationships between culture, identity, and mental health," Dr Tan said.

Mental health and community professionals needed to be better equipped to respond to the complexities of working in a multicultural community, says Ms Silvana Izzo, mental health clinician and co-author of the paper.

"We need to ensure that the mental health system is resourced to provide quality care for all, but not in a one-size-fits-all way, because people experience multiple forms of inequality, including racism, sexism, ageism, ableism and heterosexism," Ms Izzo says.

"We know that families and groups want to talk about mental health and wellbeing in culturally safe and respectful ways, that make sense to them, and strengthen community connection and belonging."

The paper regards human rights-based and intersectional approaches as integral to mental healthcare. This involves addressing the systemic barriers that lead to discrimination and exclusion as well as engaging diverse communities as partners.

It also calls for partnerships with multicultural services, ethno-specific community organisations and people with lived experience to overcome the many barriers that prevent people from migrant and refugee backgrounds from accessing support.

Key recommendations include:

- Developing and applying a strengths-based model to engage with migrant and refugee communities to draw upon their lived experiences of community mobilisation and mutual support.
- Ensuring all decision-making bodies are representative of the diversity of the community
- Developing the capability of the mental health workforce to deliver culturally safe and responsive care and ensuring services are more representative of the cultural diversity of the community
- Building partnerships with people with lived experience, ethno-cultural and multicultural organisations, community leaders and advocates to design and deliver mental health services
- Improving access to professional interpreters who are mental health trained

Download the report here

Read ECCV's Analysis of the State Budget – Mental Health here

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