

Housing Related Challenges for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities

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'Kim' was 61 years old when she first became homeless. She moved to Australia from Vietnam (speaking Cantonese) with her new husband who was 20 years her senior. Kim's husband was abusive, controlling and isolating; she did not have anyone to ask for help. She had distant relatives in Australia, but they didn't provide any support due to concern their lives would be 'contaminated' by her hardship. Kim did not speak any English.

Following a domestic violence incident, Kim moved into a neighbour's garage. She cooked and cleaned for her neighbour for seven months in exchange for this 'accommodation'. She didn't have access to a kitchen, cooking her meals in a rice cooker on the floor.

A bi-lingual social worker at the local health centre supported Kim while she was homeless and waiting for permanent residency. After two years, and moving house four more times, Kim finally got permanent residency. Her bi-lingual worker suggested that she attend a Home at Last Cantonese information session. Here she learned that she was eligible for public housing and was linked to Home at Last for housing assistance.

Kim was quickly housed into older persons' public housing in inner-Melbourne. Kim said that 'To this day, the availability of bi-lingual social support has been invaluable'. Kim can now garden, and attends a support group for survivors of domestic violence. She is happy with her housing, and especially happy that she will never have to move ever again.

Making sure that people from diverse backgrounds have the same access to services as English speakers is a

priority at Housing for the Aged Action Group (HAAG). This paper describes some of HAAG's work in this area, including a growing focus on ensuring culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) voices are part of our voice in the sector and the community more broadly.

Older people from CALD backgrounds make up around 25 per cent of all older people in Australia.¹

Though older CALD communities face many of the same barriers to housing experienced by the older population as a whole, such as inappropriate, insecure and unaffordable housing, they are also more likely to encounter additional challenges. Making sure that these vulnerable seniors have access to independent and culturally and linguistically appropriate information, advice and advocacy is crucial if they are to avoid homelessness.

Discrimination in the Rental Market

Reports by the West Australian and Victorian Equal Opportunity Commissions have identified 'a pattern of denial of access to accommodation' for culturally diverse groups, and that migrants are being forced to accept poor quality accommodation and less favorable treatment once in accommodation.² They also reveal a pattern of real estate agents stereotyping people based on their cultural background, with one survey respondent stating: 'someone once told me that people of my nationality are dirty so they would not rent to me'.³ Culturally diverse renters are less likely to complain about mistreatment by landlords or maintenance issues.⁴ This is in addition to the age related discrimination that older people

face in the private rental market, as they compete for a limited number of affordable properties with younger people who may have one or two full incomes.

Lack of Information on Housing Options

HAAG's *Preventing Homelessness in Older CALD Communities* project⁵ was the first of its kind in Australia to provide information about housing options and services to older people from non-English speaking and culturally diverse backgrounds.

The project delivered the information directly to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) seniors, using bi-lingual workers and community leaders. This helped to alleviate some of the stigma participants associated with being at risk of homelessness, helping build trust of the service within the communities.

A Successful Service Response

HAAG is proud of its focus on culturally diverse communities. The *Preventing Homelessness in Older CALD Communities* project⁶ began the vital process of informing older people in culturally and linguistically diverse communities about how to access housing services, particularly the Home at Last service.

This project resulted in a 345 per cent increase in referrals to and from ethno-specific agencies and a 200 per cent increase in the number of clients housed by Home at Last from the targeted communities.⁷ The proportion of Home at Last clients from culturally diverse backgrounds has risen substantially since this project, from a steady 35 per cent of all clients to consistently over 50 per cent since 2015.⁸

The key factors in the success of this project are:

1. Training of Bi-Lingual Workers and Delivery of Information Sessions

The *Preventing Homelessness in Older CALD Communities* project trained 16 bilingual workers from 'high need' communities in information about Home at Last. This information was delivered to 1,161 older people through 64 in-language information sessions, mostly to ethno-specific seniors groups.

These information sessions not only delivered information but also began addressing the stigma that exists in many communities around accessing services. The sessions, delivered by community members, helped to build trust in the Home at Last service, with the bi-lingual worker often becoming a bridge between community and service.

2. Development of Community Specific Brochures and Films

The project formed groups of service providers and community leaders from each community, called 'Community Reference Groups' (CRGs). The CRGs were consulted throughout the process of developing and disseminating resources.

HAAG tailored resources addressing concerns and common understandings unique to each community. For instance, in the

Indian communities, homelessness was often the result of family breakdown — living with adult children is common. The stigma associated with experiencing family conflict superseded seeking independent accommodation prior to ejection from the family home. The Indian language brochures (Hindi, Punjabi, Tamil) therefore addressed this concern by emphasising that strained family relationships may be resolved through separate living arrangements and encouraging forward planning.

In the Chinese community there was a clear understanding of public and social housing as a housing option for older people who wish to live independently. Therefore, the brochures included clear and simple details about how to access Public and Social housing and support services.

HAAG also developed four community-specific films based on stories shared in the Community Reference Groups. These films were overdubbed in ten languages and currently used as part of HAAG's ongoing ethno-specific community education.

Feedback on these films indicates that people are touched that effort has gone into making something specifically for their community and that the films are a simple way to show the issue of homelessness from their community's perspective.

3. Engagement with Ethno-Specific Services

Perhaps the most beneficial element of the project was that it created a high level of engagement with ethno-specific services. Ethno-specific services are often the only contact people from CALD backgrounds have with the service sector, so it was essential that these services knew of and trusted Home at Last.

Many of the participating services had never heard of Home at Last before, or did not believe that Home at Last could assist their clients. The process of engagement with the participating ethno-specific services involved a two-way learning process, whereby information was fed to and from our services. HAAG received vital information about the cultural, religious and language-specific housing needs of the communities, and the ethno-specific services received information about how the housing and homelessness system works, debunking myths and misconceptions.

Sharing Our Learnings: A Home for Diversity Project

In 2016 we partnered with the Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health to develop and deliver training to other housing and homelessness services to share what we had learned about engaging CALD communities. This was informed by a Community Reference Group and a Homelessness Services Reference Group. A sector survey with 89 respondents revealed a low use of interpreters and low engagement of CALD communities in many homelessness services.⁹ In fact, Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) 2016/17 data reveals that only 14 per cent of SHS clients are born overseas,¹⁰ despite this group representing 28 per cent of the population as a whole.¹¹

The Community Reference Group identified a number of strategies for services to improve their access to CALD communities. They included:

- workers should use interpreters (telephone and in-person) when a need is identified by the client or the worker
- written materials including brochures and other important information should be translated



Image provided by HAAG



Image provided by HAAG

where possible, using a professional translation service.

- where brochures are translated, a process of consultation with a community reference group, to test meaning and understanding of key concepts should be used.
- sufficient time should be allocated to each client needing the use of an interpreter.
- be aware of stigma and community perceptions
- use 'word of mouth' to promote services through community representatives
- acknowledge the impact and stigma of elder abuse in preventing people from CALD backgrounds and others living with family from seeking help
- continue ongoing training and professional development in the skills required to communicate effectively with people from CALD backgrounds.

A Sustainable Model: The HAAG Cultural Diversity Reference Group

HAAG has begun to embed the learnings of its project work into its daily practices through the HAAG Diversity Reference Group which commenced earlier this year. This reference group includes eight members of the 2015 project communities who meet with HAAG on a monthly basis to make its practices more culturally responsive.

Members of this group are given the title of 'HAAG Community Advocate' where they are responsible for representing HAAG in their community as an active volunteer that community members can approach if they have a housing issue.

The HAAG Cultural Diversity Reference Group contributes to relevant HAAG policies, builds awareness of HAAG in the community, reports specific information about community needs to the group and advocates more broadly for community interests.

Conclusion

No matter what language a client speaks, HAAG works to ensure that communication and support will be available to them. Through bilingual workers, use of telephone and on-site interpreter services, language and culture-specific brochures, films and training resources, HAAG strive to ensure its service options are clear and understandable.

We urge other homelessness services to do the same, as people from CALD backgrounds, of all ages, are falling through the cracks. If we truly want to embrace our multicultural society we must ensure that all people have equal access to the services we provide. After all, every older person has a human right to belong; in their home, in their communities, at our services and in our country.

All HAAG's multicultural work can be viewed here:
www.older tenants.org.au/multicultural

Endnotes

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018, *Census of Population and Housing: Cultural Diversity Dataset 2016, AGE5P — Age in Five Year Groups by BPLP — 2 Digit Level*, ABS Canberra
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3. VEOHRC 2012 p. 12.
4. VEOHRC 201 p. 9.
5. HAAG-Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria, (ECCV) 2015, *At Risk of Homelessness: Preventing Homelessness in Older Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities*, found at https://www.older tenants.org.au/sites/default/files/docs/eccv-haag_preventing_homelessness_report.pdf
6. Ibid. p. 6
7. Ibid. pp. 20–22.
8. Department of Social Services 2017, *Commonwealth Housing Data Set*, unpublished data
9. HAAG, *A Home for Diversity: Building the Capacity of Homelessness Services to Meet the Needs of Older Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Victorians*, 2016, p. 24–29
10. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2017, *2016–17 Specialist Homelessness Services Collection, Data Quality Statement*, found at <http://meteor.aihw.gov.au>
11. Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016, *Press Release: Over 28 per cent of Australians born overseas*, cat. no. 3412.0, viewed 13 June 2018 <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@nsf/lookup/3412.0Media+per+cent20Release12015-16>