

# MULTICULTURALISM, COMMUNITY RESILIENCE AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT - THE POWER OF ONE: COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

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## **Introduction**

The very definition of resilience is exhibited passionately by members of our diverse community either through community connectedness or the willingness to volunteer for an emergency service organisation. Cultural expectation and/or obligation defines resilience for CALD (culturally and linguistically diverse) communities while in the context of emergency service volunteers, it is the willingness to 'give back to their community' and the satisfaction that comes with being able to assist a person in need. At this grassroots level, what is sought is a sense of belonging, It is an innate human condition to want to be a part of something or to be a valued member of a team and/or group. It is this desire, obligation or otherwise, that underpins a successful collaboration.

The National Strategy for Disaster Resilience (NSDR) 2011 states that resilience is the collective responsibility of all social sectors and that every sector must do more. This will involve sustained behavioural change in how communities operate, and how governments and emergency service organisations work with them. This paper will discuss the need for emergency service organisations to adapt existing work practices to ensure that the 26.2% of the population, as illustrated by the 2011 Census, currently deemed inaccessible due to communication and/or cultural barriers, will play an active role in shaping the way we embrace those challenges and turn them into opportunities.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics only 14.6% of the 26.2% speak little or no English, thus highlighting potential communication issues, the remaining 11.6% have likely to have been exposed to hazards and/or risks in their countries of origin that do not occur here in Australia. It is possible they have developed skills or experienced events whereby their response and/or recovery techniques conflict and/or contradict to the information they are currently receiving. It is important to understand and acknowledge the differences and be prepared to incorporate mutually agreed actions into localised strategies and/or plans.

Emergency service organisations need to focus on transforming their workforces to better reflect the community in which they serve. CALD (Cultural and Linguistically Diverse) communities are perhaps some of the most resilient communities based purely on historical and/or cultural belief systems so together emergency service organisations and CALD communities can implement sustained behavioural change through a variety of initiatives that are both collaborative and interdependent.

The definition of resilience has proven challenging depending on whether or not the paradigm sort is tangible or holistic. Strategies such as the NSDR 2011 highlight the importance of community resilience however falls short of what resilience should actually look like. A vast majority of people may indeed possess a level of resilience not yet challenged while others may possess a false perception and/or belief that they are resilient yet when confronted with adversity, their response is somewhat polarised. The

question becomes: how do we perceive resilience in the emergency management sector on the basis that while it is at present an unknown quantity, building collaborative relationships, combining resources and approaching the challenge as a unified body will only yield positive advancement?

Initiatives such as the Victoria State Emergency Service (VICSES) Multicultural Project will create opportunities in the form of new relationships and/or partnerships with multicultural communities who, according to the Victoria Governments Emergency Management Reform White Paper 2012, “need to be recognised as inherently resilient, have many strengths and capabilities and can be trusted to know what they need and how that need can be met” (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2012).

## **The VICSES Multicultural Project 2013-2016**

The main aim of the VICSES Multicultural Project is to clearly define an engagement framework whereby VICSES and CALD/Indigenous communities can liaise effectively, utilise some of the key findings of the VICSES Environment Review (2010) and harness the experience from similar projects that had shared objectives prior to this project being instigated. VICSES is committed to developing appropriate relationships with key CALD and/or Indigenous stakeholders to prepare, plan, respond and recover from flood and storm emergencies which is consistent with the principles of the National Strategy for Disaster Resilience 2011. This is to be done while simultaneously building the capacity of the organisation to deliver warnings and advice to diverse community groups and respond to whole-of-community expectation.

Key initiatives taking place under this project banner include:

- establishment of a Project Team consisting of subject matter experts
- development of CALD community profiles for each municipality (*Case Study 1*)
- direct community engagement pilot programs in the East (*Case Study 2*) Northwest and Southern regions of Metropolitan Melbourne
- cultural awareness brainstorming sessions – to determine the best way to increase cultural understanding amongst Volunteers
- publication of StormSafe and FloodSafe Key Safety Messaging in 34 Languages
- large scale community events such as Cultural Diversity Week
- as of December 2012, in excess of 30 direct engagement presentations to community groups and schools
- collaboration with Country Fire Authority (CFA), Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MFB), Australian Red Cross, Victoria Police and Local Municipalities
- liaison with state and federal government bodies such as Australian Emergency Management Institute (AEMI), Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC) and Centrelink
- membership in over 10 CALD community networks and advisory groups

The VICSES Multicultural Project culminated in the development of the VICSES CALD and Indigenous Community Engagement Strategy 2013-2016. This strategy was a key deliverable of the over-arching VICSES Community Education Strategy 2011-2016 which in written terms, is VICSESs commitment to disseminating key safety information surrounding floods and storms to the entire community.

## **Resilience in the Context of Multiculturalism and Emergency Management**

Resilience is as difficult to define as it is to define what constitutes an emergency. Both are open to interpretation and can mean different things to different people. This paper acknowledges that while we can attribute certain behaviours as resilience, it does not automatically constitute a resilient community and that there needs to be more dialogue between emergency service organisations and the community to characterise resilience at the grassroots level being mindful that it will be as unique as the demographics of the community and the partnerships that are formed along the way.

### ***Defining Resilience from a Multicultural Perspective***

The VICSES Multicultural Project acknowledges that not all members of our diverse community can be considered 'at risk'. It does however acknowledge that some members of our diverse community may be unaware of their risks and therefore unable to activate pre-existing community based action plans and that it is VICSES's role to find ways to disseminate that information in the most appropriate way.

Potential reasons for our diverse community to be deemed 'at risk' include:

- have arrived in Australia and settled in Victoria within the past 5 years
- may not yet have family or community support networks in Australia and therefore no defined support groups/networks protecting their interests
- may or may not have secure accommodation or are in temporary housing
- may also be unaware of the various risks associated with their new environments
- may not know where they can access appropriate flood and storm information
- new and emerging groups (religious, cultural and/or linguistic group) that are not yet well represented in Australian society. They represent the smallest percentage of the population and as a result, may be the most 'at risk' because they do not have the social constructs in place.
- elderly post war migrants who, during an emergency or an incident prompting high level stress, revert back to their mother tongue. In this case, consideration would be given to second and third generation family members that would potentially be the point of contact

Multicultural Communities are more likely to know, understand and accept responsibility (or be resigned to) the events and/or circumstances that impact on their lives. This visible illustration of resilience can in turn result in these communities being even more *invisible* in terms of engagement or taking any form of action in response to the information emergency organisations have to disseminate. They are less likely to seek out information or take the time to get to know their 'new' environment via traditional methods opting in favour of information either delivered and/or endorsed by a trusted source prior to taking any action. This could be in the form of a community leader or elected representative.

A large proportion of the CALD Community exhibit a level of resilience few Australian born community members share. Possible reasons for this include but are by no means limited to their journeys as refugees or asylum seekers fleeing war-torn countries for fear of persecution or victims of natural disasters whereby the impacts and/or loss of loved ones is unfathomable to the vast majority of the Australian population. The ability for them to recover quickly and turn to their well established community networks for support is a model emergency service organisations and the governments alike should perhaps strive for in terms of promoting community resilience. Multicultural communities

generally have low expectations on governments to provide them with the resources and/or access to information or financial support. In fact, citizens of a number of countries, whereby democracy has deemed to have failed, has resulted in the uniforms worn by our government and emergency service organisations, that in Australian society instils pride has quite the opposite effect in the eyes of some of our most recent arrivals. Reversing that perception is but the first challenge and will perhaps be the most critical investment of time.

### ***Defining resilience from an Emergency Management Perspective***

Perhaps one of the biggest misconceptions when trying to define resilience from an emergency management perspective is the assumption that resilience can be taught or acquired as though you were completing a university degree. The parameters established, through the development of appropriate legislation and standard operating procedures by the emergency management sector cannot be emulated in order to promote community resilience. Adopting the chain of command methodology when attempting to increase community resilience, while critical in the initial response to an emergency, will result in alienating some of the most at risk groups whereby empowering others to take responsibility for the decisions they make during an emergency, will in essence be advocating characteristics akin to dependency.

Consideration of the holistic traits of resilience such as behaviours and understanding an individual's ability to respond under pressure or undue stress also constitutes resilience and cannot be ignored. Unless that new-found knowledge or belief in one's own capabilities to respond and recover from an emergency event is actually tested, the emergency management sector is unable to measure or predict its ability to influence the community without responding to what the community is saying they need. From an emergency management perspective, to isolate the community from taking the lead in regards to building resilience, it would be setting the industry up to fail, and for VICSES, setting the Volunteers up to fail.

### **The Power of One – The Art of Collaboration**

Collaboration is indeed an art form. It requires balance, trust, understanding and above all, commitment; to all the participating stakeholders, to the shared objectives and ultimately to the beneficiaries. The latter ensuring that the vision and/or focus is not lost amidst competing agendas or revolving resources such as funding and personnel. In addition to establishing common ground from the onset, transparency and honesty quickly becomes the primary component that in turn can determine if the collaboration is a success. When all of these elements come together and the collaboration is somewhat seamless, almost self-sufficient then you epitomise the very same traits that constitutes a single entity with the same vision. The more diverse the collaborators, the more unified the cause and the more powerful and influential the entity becomes – the power of one.

To understand what you hope to achieve and the audience that you are trying to influence, you need to appreciate your audience. You need to know what their capacity is to respond and recover effectively from an emergency, what information and/or tools are currently missing. This then needs to be overlaid with the capacity of the responding agency. For VICSES, it is the Volunteers. The results will provide an understanding of the priority tasks required to capacity build both the organisation and

the community. Even more important is that this needs to be done at the local level; local VICSES Units supporting their local municipal community groups.

The VICSES Multicultural Project endeavoured to understand its multicultural communities through the development of CALD Community Profiles for each municipality (see *Case Study 1*).

### ***Case Study 1: VICSES CALD Community Profiles: Municipality***

There is no shortage of information available to assist interested parties in understanding their communities better. The Australian Bureau of Statistics, via census data, collected every five years enables us to monitor trends and patterns for growth in relation to who and where our diverse communities are located. This data is also analysed by local municipalities in order to budget and develop programs for the particular groups within their jurisdiction. VICSES gathered the information thought to be of value from an emergency management perspective. With the statistics and patterns captured in the Municipal Profiles, relevant Country Profiles were created incorporating key elements that could potentially influence the actions of an individual from that specific background if indeed an emergency was to occur. Elements such as language, religion and/or belief systems and statistics such as the length of time in Australia which could reveal what potential social constructs are already in place. These Country Profiles were authenticated by the respective community groups and/or organisations as outlined in the Municipal Profile.

With this information readily available, an evaluation of the existing capacity of each VICSES Unit to engage effectively with their local multicultural community was completed via means of a survey. The questions included in the survey do not currently appear on current recruitment documentation therefore reaffirming the possibility that VICSES is actually unaware of the potential skills that exist in the Volunteer workforce. Questions such as birthplace of the Volunteer and also birthplace of their parents, primary language spoken at home and whether or not they can speak more than one language were included in the questionnaire. Volunteers were asked if they have employment in the multicultural sector as it might prove to be a valuable connection (it is important to note here that VICSES Volunteers devote their own time to respond to the needs of the community in the event of a flood or storm in addition to securing full-time employment, study or family commitments). The diversity in professions of VICSES Volunteers is as profound as the diversity within the community.

Identifying the skills to engage with multicultural communities enabled VICSES to customise the appropriate training and/or opportunities required to enhance that capacity. It also enabled the organisation to assess and request permission to use skills that could potentially be useful during a major emergency event. As first responders to an emergency, VICSES Units could use the intelligence gathered in the profiles to problem-solve or diffuse conflict caused by confusion, a symptom synonymous in the immediate aftermath of an emergency event.

Collaboration took place between the Multicultural Project Team and the VICSES Oakleigh (Glen Eira) Unit to create the Glen Eira CALD Community Profile which is currently being trialled by the Unit in order to seek feedback on how effective it is as an engagement tool and how it could potentially be enhanced even further. The most important aspect of these profiles is the need for the Unit to take ownership on its development and its purpose within the Unit based on the capacity of the Unit itself and the community they represent.

## Innovation in the Implementation

Like any new project, the desire to be innovative weighs heavily on the need to avoid repetition, produce promising results and discover unique ways to address an age old concept: effective communication. This paper will discuss the distinctive ways VICSES has decided to create 'innovative' projects to achieve the objective of engaging effectively with multicultural communities. It will acknowledge, where applicable, the lessons learnt from others, the evidence to support a strong belief that with the right set of circumstances, each pilot program has every chance to succeed beyond expectation. That is not to say that the scope will not need change in order to sustain that belief but flexibility and being prepared to adapt is both critical and necessary especially if the program and/or partnership is truly a collaborative one.

Implementation of best practice methodology/models is essential. Acknowledging the wealth of knowledge already present in the emergency management sector both nationally and internationally and enhancing that even further is where innovation can excel. This is no more evident than in the recommendations from the Best Practice Guidelines for Engaging with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Communities in Times of Disaster (2012) commissioned by the Christchurch City Council post the Christchurch earthquake in 2011. The recommendations support the:

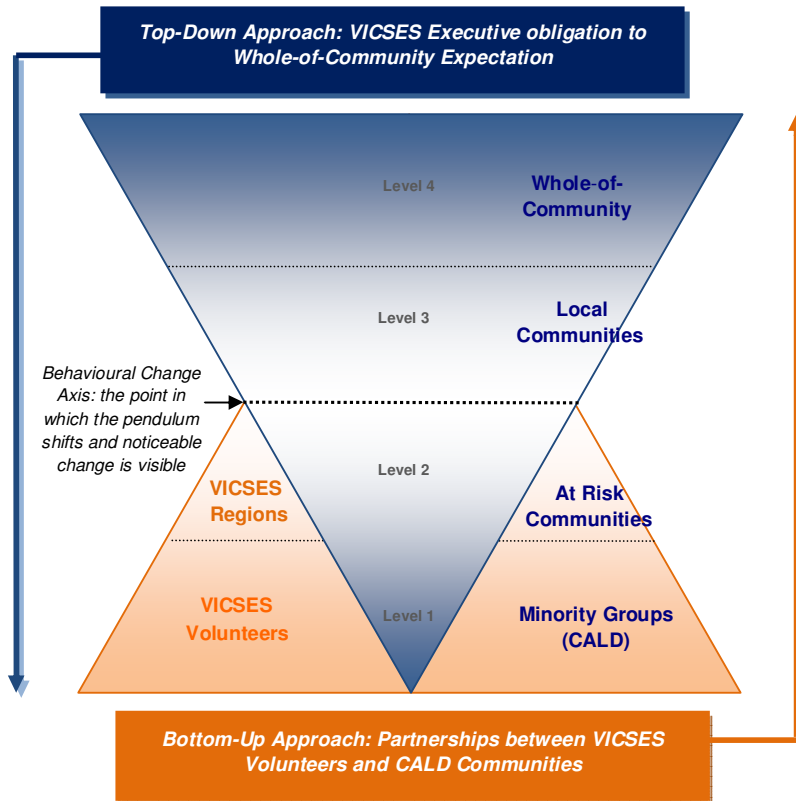
- building of relationships based on trust, respect and understanding between emergency service organisations, individual CALD/Indigenous communities, CALD/Indigenous service providers (including local government) before an emergency occurs
- making best use of existing CALD/Indigenous community connections and networks such as community leaders/representatives and community-based organisations
- scope and then build upon existing community resilience and cultural competence with the community not to the community and
- effective liaison during emergencies, including in incident Control Centres where high CALD populations live and/or work

The VICSES Multicultural Project echoes these themes and those illustrated in the NSDR (2011) that the conventional 'top down' approach to emergency management is changing. The project acknowledges the need for governments to lead by example however a concurrent bottom up approach will ensure that all aspects of an organisation is involved in the change and the beneficiary is the whole-of-community.

The Victorian Governments EMR White Paper (2012) acknowledges that changing attitudes and behaviour takes time. The top down, bottom up approach illustrates where and when such behaviour change is likely to start taking place and provides VICSES with a benchmark in which to commence measuring the success of the pilot programs currently underway. For the VICSES Multicultural Project, it is anticipated that a noticeable behavioural shift will take place around June 2016.

This approach, objective of achieving both community and organisational resilience simultaneously, is reflected in the diagram below. It is designed to measure the capacity of the organisation to meet the expectations and needs of the community and to identify where (section within the pyramid) modifications and/or changes need to take place should that key objective be compromised.

**Figure 1: The VICSES Multicultural Project Community Engagement Model 2013 - 2016**



The orange and blue pyramids represent VICSES and the community respectively and are broken up into four sections representative of the organisation and community at its various levels. VICSES comprises mostly of Volunteers who are at the frontline of emergency response and are the ones physically engaging with the community either directly or indirectly. This figure reflects the partnerships, at the grassroots level between volunteers and 'at risk' communities or minority groups (new and emerging) gradually growing from the bottom up to incorporate regions and local community groups and/or organisations. The top down approach is simultaneously driven by the State and Executive levels of the organisation, those responsible of ensuring that the whole-of-community is prepared in the event of an emergency,

It is when the top down and bottom up approaches intersect that we will start to witness change indicated by the behavioural change axis. Some of the indicators for behavioural change include:

- increase in the number of VICSES Units participating in engagement activities with their local CALD Communities.
- awareness of all sectors within VICSES through the establishment of appropriate operating procedures and guidelines to assist all VICSES members to effectively engage with CALD communities.
- increase in the awareness of the CALD communities understanding their risks and implementing appropriate measures to mitigate these risks (emergency plans, attendance at community events, requests for information).

The behavioural change axis is the point where maximum participation by both the organisation and community will be evident at any given time and therefore further supporting the power of one concept.

One of the projects pilot programs is the 'Volunteering for Mainstream Organisations' Program coordinated by the Migrant Resource Centre in Eastern Metropolitan Melbourne (see *Case Study 2*). This program is an excellent example of creating opportunities to engage with the local CALD Communities while simultaneously building the capacity of the organisation (VICSES Unit) to develop appropriate skills and promote volunteer retention.

## **When Challenges Become Opportunities**

Not all challenges and/or obstacles result in disappointment. On the contrary, it is these challenges that actually unlock new possibilities. This could be as a result of the connections made, the lessons learnt or the potential for greater access to the funding pool if indeed an emergency service organisation was to partner with a local community organisation.

VICSES Units operate as individual business units. They are responsible for the management and recruitment of their respective Unit. This translates into a workforce of varying degrees of capacity to perform the core responsibility of responding to requests for assistance during flood and storm events. Expecting Units, which comprise solely of Volunteers, to go above and beyond this core responsibility and add community engagement and cultural awareness training to their current workload, would ultimately be the greatest challenge of all.

When the Multicultural Project first commenced, it polled very low on the list of priorities for Units to consider participating. It was quickly identified that before the project could even commence engaging with multicultural communities, it needed to engage with the volunteers and market the benefits of being more accessible to the wider community. Fortunately, there were approximately 6 Units in the Metropolitan Melbourne region willing to invest in the concept and participate in a series of pilot programs paving the way for other Units to eventually follow suit once the best practice model had been identified.

A perfect example whereby a challenge and/or obstacle became an opportunity is the pilot program in the East (see *Case Study 2*). What commenced as an initiative targeting multicultural youth, which proved too difficult as a first attempt, became an opportunity in the form of VICSES nominating as a mainstream organisation in the 'Volunteering for Mainstream Organisation Mentoring Program' being coordinated by the Migrant Resource Centre Eastern Region. This program has introduced participants to volunteering and to VICSES as well as providing the participants with the necessary support that VICSES Volunteers were not yet equipped to provide.

### ***Case Study 2: Volunteering in Mainstream Organisations – VICSES/Migrant Resource Centre Eastern Melbourne***

VICSES Croydon Unit volunteered to participate as one of the mainstream organisations to mentor recently arrived migrants and assist them in developing appropriate skills in order to seek future employment. The benefits are two-fold. The Unit will have the opportunity to engage with members of their local multicultural



community subsequently disseminating key safety information in relation to floods and storms while also potentially sourcing future volunteers to assist them in responding to the needs of their entire community.

As at April 2013, there are 4 participants of this program currently being mentored by the VICSES Croydon Unit and attending the Unit for a structured training program that is a prelude to the accredited training program offered to all new VICSES Volunteers. It is anticipated that the CALD participants will take this opportunity to see if VICSES is an organisation they wish to join either as an operational or associate member while existing members are given the opportunity to work alongside their 'new' members thus engaging in an informal cultural awareness training program. It is also hoped that this engagement opportunity will raise the profile of VICSES to the respective CALD groups and provide an avenue in which to share the key safety messaging for floods and storms.

Prior to being involved in this program, VICSES joined forces with Victoria Police and Eastern Volunteers to provide multicultural youth with an opportunity to become engaged and assist in their settlement into society. A program providing access to youth interested in participating in a 14 week training program designed by VICSES Croydon Unit, commenced well with a number of youth and their families turning up to the open night hosted by the Unit. This transpired to six youth signing up to participate. However, the first session resulted in a no-show by the youth despite six VICSES Croydon Volunteers attending on a non-training night. The most obvious and perhaps critical error was the absence of a youth ambassador responsible for motivating and monitoring the youth participants and liaising with VICSES, who prior to now, had little experience in mentoring youth from a diverse background.

This pilot program is a perfect example of the need to re-evaluate the scope based on lessons learnt but more importantly not to be discouraged by the initial setback. As at April 2013, the Croydon Unit is hosting 4 CALD community members at the Unit.

## **Where to Now?**

The Victoria Governments EMR White Paper (2012) sets a baseline assumption, widely accepted by many emergency service and community based organisations, that not everyone in the community will choose to be involved and that the challenge is to understand the unique features of a community, determine who to work with and then determine the approach that is appropriate to lead and develop effective engagement.

A key lesson learnt during this project is to take the time to select the community group you wish to partner with and be aware of what can be considered the 'usual suspects'. These are community groups and/or organisations that have either partnered with or are currently partnering with an organisation similar to your own. Primary reason being that the information sought has already been documented and the community groups to which they represent have already been 'engaged' therefore creating overlap whereby very little progress is made in terms of increasing the level of preparedness for emergencies. The objective is not to re-invent the wheel.

That said, this paper will acknowledge there is strength in partnering with well versed community groups and/or organisations, it is incredibly important to establish the boundaries and expectations from the onset. This is achieved by establishing the terms of reference that ensures that the new partnership will enhance the outcomes from

previous partnerships and that the audience and/or beneficiaries are newly identified 'at risk' communities. Terms of reference provide clarity on the expectations of each stakeholder, roles and responsibilities, budget, timeline, limitations and most importantly inclusions and exclusions.

There will be times when communities and/or organisations will want an opt in/opt out clause written into the partnership contract. For continuity and consistency of the collaboration, putting contingencies in place to address if and/or when this should take place will be a valuable inclusion.

Additional considerations for effective engagement with CALD communities, that were identified as a part of this project, and reinforces the importance of collaboration include:

- awareness of the role of VICSES. Be prepared to vigorously promote the organisation and clarify any misconceptions
- literacy levels are quite low, even in the mother tongue, of many of the 'at risk' communities therefore printed material in multiple languages or SMS messaging alone will not suffice in getting the message across
- being realistic when facilitating the needs of the CALD community. An example of this could include what to expect at a relief and/or evacuation centre. It may not be possible to provide for or consider the needs of each specific cultural group and therefore the provision of such information prior to an emergency is imperative to enable members of the CALD community to make well-informed decisions incorporating all the relevant cultural, social and environmental considerations
- keeping the Volunteers informed of the activities occurring in their area under the guise of the project. It is one thing to raise awareness of VICSES to the CALD community but if the Volunteers are not engaged or aware of the potential for members of the CALD community to call 132 500 asking for assistance, they may be unprepared

## **Conclusion**

The way we engage now with multicultural and indigenous communities and how that might change in light of the development of the national framework for community engagement, as highlighted by the NSDR 2011, is unknown. However, it is anticipated that it will not deviate too dramatically from what is happening now and merely endorse the enormous effort illustrated by the variety of initiatives leading the way, the VICSES Multicultural Project merely one of them.

The Coalition of Australian Governments (COAG) National Disaster Resilience Statement (2009) affirms that "disaster resilience is the collective responsibility of all sectors of society, including all levels of government, business, the non-government sector and individuals. If all these sectors work together with a united focus and a shared sense of responsibility to improve disaster resilience, they will be far more effective than the individual efforts of any one sector".

Resilience is exhibited on a daily basis in every facet of our lives. While the degree of resilience exerted may vary as does the context in which we require it, the symptoms are the same. Therefore so is the 'response' whether that be scientific or holistic, the role of emergency services is well documented and accessible and for members of our

multicultural community, it is visible through community connectedness be that through 'faith' and/or 'family'.

The role of VICSES is to provide leadership, facilitation and support to the building of resilient communities. This includes seeking local knowledge and using local networks to consult, involve and collaborate with the community and empower them to be better prepared.

Victoria's multicultural community affords emergency service organisations the opportunity to expand on existing emergency management preparedness through active participation and consultation. This knowledge and commitment, vested in the one place provides the opportunity to pool resources further endorsing the power of one philosophy.

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