

PREPARING PEOPLE OF REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS FOR EMERGENCIES



Migrant and refugee communities are often more vulnerable than others to the impacts of emergencies and disasters. They often have lack of access to translated information, have low literacy levels, challenges accessing and navigating local services, lower levels of social support and fear of authority and uniforms. They're also unfamiliar with the Australian environment and the physical dangers of fires, floods and heat waves.

Significant achievement

The program partners, Country Fire Authority (CFA), Victoria State Emergency Service (VICSES), La Trobe University and City of Greater Bendigo (CoGB) nominated this life saving program to the Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC) for the Refugee Business Award in 2024. The program was awarded as 'Highly Recommended' in Victoria under the Refugee Business Award.



THE PROGRAM

Bendigo is home to some 4,000 Karen and 350 Afghan Hazaras and increasing numbers of South Sudanese. In recognition of the increased vulnerabilities of local former refugee community members in the event of bushfire, flood, and heat, BCHS, in partnership with the CoGB, VICSES and the local CFA, co-designed and delivered bushfire, flood and heat health awareness and capacity building programs.

Achievements over the past 5 years 2020 - 2024:

- A review of available translated literature.
- Co-design of culturally-safe easily-understood resources addressing gaps as per review of literature.
- Community education sessions.
- Training of community champions and further delivery of key messages via these champions.
- Sessions for emergency management staff on understanding of residents from refugee backgrounds.

"We have not received this sort of information in language here. The information is not available in the language that I can read." -
A Karen family from Queensland

REACH AND IMPACT 2024 - 2025

Community education

A total of 17 community information sessions (fire, flood and heat) were held with a total of 1,214 participants attending the sessions.

Community champions program

Eighteen community champions from the Karen (15) and Afghan (5) communities were invited to attend training sessions on bushfire safety, heat and flood provided by CFA, VICSES and CoGB. Following the sessions, community champions delivered key messages conversation and resources to their respective communities.

Community champions spoke with 669 people.

Printed resources distributed

		Resources		
Language		Bushfire Safety	Flood Safety	Beat the Heat
Karen		1,200	1,200	1,200
Dari		70	70	70

NEW INITIATIVES

The start of Fire Restriction Season video

BCHS and CFA developed a video in Karen and Dari, to remind these communities of the start of the fire restriction season. The video covers key messages like the regulations around what people could or could not do about the fire and where to seek help in case they need to know more about the information. To date, the Karen video has received 1,100 views and 523 views of Dari. This shows significant interest and willingness of refugee communities in accessing the information and doing the right things.

Support key community leader to codesign fire plan

In early bushfire season this year, BCHS and CFA supported Karen community leaders to build their capacity to codesign the fire plan for the monastery, and the Buddhist Karen community. The monastery was grateful to receive the support from the CFA to have their fire plan in place. An on site visit was welcomed by these leaders.

LEARNING AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Emergency warning systems need to be more accessible for all refugee community members, with a focus on a more accessible Vic Emergency App.
2. The program model needs to be replicated for additional vulnerable ethic/language groups and new arrivals.
3. The model should be scaled up and tested in other regional and metropolitan areas.
4. Emergency preparedness programs should be a core component of refugee settlement programs across Australia.

The program has been made available for the communities of refugee backgrounds over the past 5 years, with the support of different donors and COGB as a key funder. Additional funds are required to scale up the program and to meet demands.

“I have been here for more than 10 years and have never heard this information. Everybody should know this” - A former Karen refugee in Bendigo