



The Impact of Coronavirus on Settlement Services

Consultation Report

Introduction

In March 2020, the Settlement Council of Australia (SCoA) carried out a consultation with its members in order to gauge the impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) on settlement agencies and the communities they support. This was in response to the unprecedented measures taken by the Federal and State governments in Australia to minimise the spread and subsequent impact of the Coronavirus.

A national teleconference was held on Thursday 19th March, with 39 people from 28 organisations taking part in the call. An online survey was also developed for SCoA members, and was open for approximately one week. 58 responses were received from organisations in every state and territory in Australia. This report provides a summary of the feedback received through SCoA's consultations with its members.

Key Findings and Recommendations

The key recommendations arising from the consultations are:

1. The settlement sector has been quick to respond and adapt to the challenges created by the Coronavirus pandemic. Many agencies have adapted their service offerings through the innovative use of technology. However, financial and practical support is needed to ensure that these approaches are widely available and achieve the best possible outcomes for service providers and clients.
2. Clear, reliable and simply worded information is needed on the Coronavirus and the measures to address it. This information should be made available as quickly as possible in a range of community languages, as well as in audio and visual formats.
3. A single, reliable source of information and resources which are suitable for sharing with refugee and migrant communities should be established and utilised.
4. Flexible arrangements need to be agreed and clearly communicated with regard to Federal Government funding of settlement services. This should reflect the difficulty many agencies face in achieving agreed KPIs as a result of cancellation of programs and activities and the shift to new methods of providing individual and group support. It should also provide for continuity and certainty of staffing levels.
5. Additional resources are needed to meet the increased need for translating and interpreting services in order to respond effectively to the current crisis.
6. Settlement service providers need regular opportunities to share ideas, and to discuss and debrief from the challenges created by the Coronavirus crisis. And once the crisis is over, it will be beneficial to review and analyse the ways that service providers have adapted their practice, so that positive new approaches to service delivery are not lost.

The Impact of Coronavirus on Settlement Agencies

SCoA members were asked to outline the impact that Coronavirus - and the measures that Federal and State governments have taken to address it - has had on a number of aspects of their organisation's work. These issues are outlined below.

1. Communication with clients, their families and communities

Coronavirus and the efforts to address it have already had a huge impact on settlement services, and their ability to communicate with individuals, families and communities. The impact include:

- Reducing or stopping face-to-face contact - both for individual client work and groups. This has led to an increase in isolation for clients
- An initial drop in the number of people participating in group programs (prior to these programs being cancelled) due to fear of infection
- An increase in phone and digital contact with clients - making communication more difficult for many due to language barriers, limited access to (and familiarity with) technology
- Increased requests for more intensive types of support, and a decrease in services provided by many partner agencies
- An increase in anxiety, confusion and panic amongst clients. Many are also experiencing trauma responses, brought on by previous experiences such as lack of food and forced isolation
- A loss of work for many - which is particularly problematic for people already facing precarious working arrangements, on low wages etc
- A sharp rise in the need for and use of translators and interpreters - due to increased phone contact; the need for accurate information etc
- Some reports of increased experiences of racism and discrimination, particularly in rural and regional communities

Comments include:

"Language barriers and communication with clients has always been a challenge... communicating through online medium is not an easy task. Clients get overwhelmed, confused and scared with the shared information. To reduce the panic, we call clients regularly to check and clear any doubts with the help of an interpreter"

"Investment in technology platforms will be required ... in order for frontline staff to most effectively maintain daily individual and group support for vulnerable clients and families, who need streamlined information flow from professionals across community / health / government / education sectors"

"The whole community is in panic mode, so less clients come to the office, as they are scared to leave their homes. All settlement related trainings, info sessions and events have been cancelled"

2. Working with vulnerable clients including the elderly, disabled and children

Similar issues to those outlined above are impacting on work with more vulnerable clients, but these issues are often exacerbated for more vulnerable groups. Whilst many agencies are looking to adapt their service delivery - by offering programs online; providing telephone counselling and advice and so on - it's important to note that many clients of settlement agencies face additional barriers to accessing these types of support. This includes:

- Language barriers
- Lack of experience using online technologies
- Financial barriers to accessing digital platforms and extensive use of mobile phone

Comments include:

“Some cohorts, especially the elderly and people with disabilities, are canceling services for fear of being exposed the virus by support workers. There are increased levels of anxiety by support workers when working from clients' homes”

“Vulnerable clients are staying home but unfortunately (it is often) those with DV or mental health challenges”

“Many elderly experience deprivation of their sole opportunity to engage with friends, family and the broader community, which increases their anxiety, depression and loneliness.”

“All the programs conducted at the centre for the elderly have been cancelled as has the playgroups. Our AFC counsellors are continuing to meet with their client following strict protocols set by NSW Health, Hunter New England Health, Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) and National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and/or implementing virtual / remote sessions where possible. We have also notified the schools that our centre is available for any students working from home and not having any internet access to come to the centre to access out wi-fi”

“We are struggling to find extra food, finance, accommodation and toiletries to support those coming through our doors asking for help”

3. Responding to community concerns

Responding to community needs and concerns has been a significant challenge, not least because of the rapidly changing and evolving situation. When new information does become available, it is typically initially only available in English. The issues raised include:

- Keeping management and staff regularly updated about changes and developments
- The need to translate and interpret health and other relevant information into community languages
- The reliance on bilingual and bicultural workers to share information with clients
- Issues caused by conflicting messages; rapid change; misinformation spread through social media and so on
- The need to convert government directives into organisational policies and procedures and communicate these with staff, volunteers and clients

Comments include:

“We have been inundated with concerns from the ethnic communities we support to settle. We have also been required to help the medical and other service providers to communicate with the community.”

“With the government closing many facilities across the nation, there is a degree of anxiety among clients that they may be unable to access various services and organisations”

“It is difficult to provide communication as things change on a daily / hourly basis. Government health warnings and processes are continually changing”

“(We) hand every client a copy of copy of the “Coronavirus: What do you need to know” information sheet in their language. Practice social distancing and good hygiene in the office”

“Key stakeholders are being communicated with, and our risk mitigation and service continuity plan is being reviewed daily. At this stage we are ensuring service delivery is met and adapting this as necessary”

4. Service capacity in “frontline” work with clients

As outlined earlier, frontline work with clients has been drastically impacted by the Coronavirus pandemic. Face to face work with individuals, families and groups has either been significantly reduced or stopped, and there has been a corresponding reduction in clients attending programs and appointments for fear of contracting the virus. At the same time, there has been an increase in telephone, email and other digital engagement, in order to provide counting support and address individual and community concerns. There are unique concerns in rural and regional areas, where workers often work alone. Comments include:

“Frontline work has either been cancelled or being delivered with very strict measures in place. Training for all workers and training to clients was needed and continues to be provided as this situation evolves.”

“We have continued to work with (individual) clients directly but we are cancelling groups. Lack of clarity is our greatest issue especially re casework. We want to work with our clients (including our groups) to help non-English speaking clients to access up to date information”

“We have re-organised and will continually review our delivery in terms of case management of those most vulnerable. Capacity building, social and civic interaction and services to clients not at risk is being drastically cut. This has considerable impact on the health, well being and transition of our client groups in the foreseeable future”

“Many volunteers are retired, and many choose not to volunteer to reduce their exposure. The way services are funded assumes volunteer support, and can't be delivered with funded staff alone”

“We can only provide service under the Telehealth model at 50% of our normal capacity”

“Rural settlement workers are often alone. Planning (is needed) to continue to provide settlement service support if that worker is sick or isolated”

5. Training and supervising staff and volunteers

The training and development needs of staff and volunteers has been impacted in a number of ways. These include:

- An increased need to provide staff with up-to-date health information, as well as changes to policies and procedures as a result of the Coronavirus
- The need to train and equip staff in alternative ways of engaging and supporting clients, and delivering group programs using digital technologies such as videoconferencing, group chats etc
- The postponement or cancellation of ongoing training provision, such as First Aid, Workplace Health and Safety, Child Protection etc, and the need to offer new ways of providing these

Comments include:

“The rapid development of COVID-19 has made it challenging to ensure staff are all adequately trained in the changes to work conditions. The biggest area has been the effective training of staff to operate and deliver services through online platforms”

“RTOs have cancelled scheduled team development sessions. Currently there is no provision for online training from the RTO”

“Looking at different ways to connect staff with training that doesn't compromise health and community safety”

“We have put in place staff training for case managers, community support workers, volunteers and client carers. This initiative is over and above our current resources and will have to be repeated fairly regularly”

“We have had to stop all group work and face-to-face with our volunteers now for a couple of weeks. This is in part social distancing but also in recognition that many who volunteer are elderly or in other groups where their own health is at greater risk with COVID-19. In future we will explore ways we can offer training online to ensure our volunteers are ready to start back as soon as it is safe to do so.”

“We made the regrettable decision that we will only use a minimum number of volunteers and review this situation regularly. Nevertheless, the 80 or so volunteers we require need extra supervision and training, to ensure they are sending relevant messages to the communities they belong to”

Managing Risk

Specific questions regarding SCoA member organisations’ risk management strategies, and their needs relating to these, highlighted that there is a high level of compliance in managing risk in the settlement sector. Responses to these questions include:

- 95% of respondents (53 out of 56 organisations) have a risk management plan in place
- 84% of organisations (49 out of 58 organisations) stated that they do not need help to develop a risk management plan
- However, 51% (28 out of 55 organisations) stated that their organisation would benefit from a generic risk management plan that they could tailor to their own needs

Comments regarding managing risk include:

“We are a very small 100% volunteer organisation. We do not have a formal risk management plan but we have policies and procedures to address risk that have worked well for us”

“(Our organisation) is developing contingency plans for the organisations and the leadership is providing lots of good communication and direction”

“It would be great to share more resources that we have about risk management. We don’t necessarily need a lot of support but it would be nice to have other people’s plans to compare so that we can feel reassured that we’re doing ok”

“There is a need for detailed updates around service delivery and KPIs from the funding body, not just being directed to follow the advice from the Department of Health”

“It would be great if our Grant Managers and the Department gave some advice on what to do with permanent staff and how to keep them paid”

Support, Information and Resources

The consultations highlighted the need for a range of support, information and resources to help equip the settlement sector to meet the challenges presented by the Coronavirus and its impact on clients and communities. This includes:

- Good quality, simple information in a range of community languages, as well as audio and visual materials for people who are not literate in their own first language

- One clear source of reliable information - good coordination, signposting etc
- Support and resources to develop online platforms, and teach staff and clients how to use them
- Funding to keep the settlement sector workforce employed
- Clear information from DHA and other funders about how the consequences of Coronavirus on service delivery will affect funding - due to cancelled programs, not meeting KPIs etc
- Flexibility around acquitting grants, adjusting work plans etc
- Clarity about staff salaries and entitlements - such as the need to take forced leave; impact on entitlements and so on

Comments include:

“There is a lot of conflicting advice/information at the moment. There needs to be one clear source of updated information by Health authorities. This information needs to be delivered in different languages as quickly as possible in written form at least, (so it can be) decimated to community leaders / frontline workers.”

“We need to look at technology / online platforms for providing all important support for clients and communities, in order for staff to continue their frontline work. But this new environment will require funds”

“Flexibility in acquitting workplan reports, reviewing the workplan, and having additional resources to train additional casual workers and disseminate information to community groups and our case-managed client cohorts.”

“Government support for employees if the time exceeds our capability to keep them employed”

“Regular teleconferences and webinars in order to discuss issues and any developments”

Innovative Responses

Despite the unprecedented scale of this crisis and the obvious challenges it has created, the Coronavirus crisis has inspired a range of innovative and creative solutions amongst settlement service providers. Many settlement agencies are using new approaches and adapting service offerings in order to meet the needs of their clients and communities. Examples of this include:

- Using bilingual workers to translate some of the simple instructions on issues such as hygiene and social distancing, especially in languages that aren't covered elsewhere
- Using WhatsApp and other phone-based communication platforms to reduce isolation
- Live-streaming activities that would normally be happening in centres such as yoga classes, music festivals etc
- Having live online “drop in” and “hang out” sessions
- A “kindness pandemic” page, bringing good news stories of people connecting to each other via phones, TikTok etc
- Running playgroups through videoconferencing - with craft materials posted out prior to the online sessions
- Running online English classes

Comments include:

“We have had to move a consultation we were doing with young people to an online version rather than F2F. We are starting an online drop-in each afternoon with our 2 youth workers so young people can chat, hang out, and get support from our team.”

Those of us who work with young people and the youth sector are used to working in different circumstances, and have resources for using different technologies”

“We have moved our playgroup online and are sending out the craft materials beforehand so that everyone can still take part”

Other Issues and Concerns

When asked for “any other comments”, a number additional issues were raised by those who participated in the consultations. Comments include:

“We are spending a huge amount of time and resources on emergency management, so we will not have the ability to deal with ordinary business as usual matters”

“The cost of interpreters sitting on hold for hours is needlessly wasteful, especially when we are crying out for language resources that federal government hasn't funded yet. An interpreter call needs to go to the top of the phone queue to prevent this waste”

“The biggest concern is for asylum seekers who are not eligible for many other support services”

“Creating a sense of solidarity is important for staff and clients, so that all are treated the same”.

It is evident from these consultations that the Coronavirus is having an unprecedented impact on the settlement sector - and the individuals, families and communities they serve - just as it is on the entire Australian community. It is vital that Governments, service providers, communities and peak bodies work closely together during this critical time, to ensure ongoing support is provided to the most vulnerable.

Settlement Council of Australia
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