

# Sunraysia Multicultural Response Group (SMRG)

## *Working with Multicultural Communities*

October 4, 2023

[smecc.org.au](https://smecc.org.au)



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## About SMRG

Sunraysia Multicultural Response Group was formed by the Sunraysia Mallee Ethnic Communities Council in early 2022. Our aim was to improve the local response to Covid-19 and other emergencies, and reduce the disproportionate health, economic and social impacts encountered by multicultural communities in Sunraysia. We did this through community-led and locally based initiatives and culturally responsive engagement with multicultural groups.

SMRG is made up of community leaders from 12 different cultural groups and meetings were attended by representatives from emergency services such as Mildura Police, SESVIC Mildura, AMES Australia, Mildura Rural City Council, Loddon Mallee Public Health Unit, Mildura Life Saving Club, Country Fire Authority, and others. Meetings enabled information flows between government, local service providers and leaders representing communities, and allowed for community advice to be valued and used in the implementation of key initiatives.

SMRG was developed with support from the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria's Multicultural Regional Emergency Preparedness and Response Program, which was funded by the Victorian Government.

The SMRG Showcase was supported by the Victorian Council of Social Service and One Red Step, as part of the Multicultural Resilience Project, jointly funded by the Australian and Victorian governments under the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements.

## Achievements

Emergency information translated and disseminated to community members

Language support provided at Covid-19 and JEV vaccination clinics

2500 face masks distributed

400 mozzie repellents distributed

2600 Rapid Antigen Tests distributed

300 hand sanitisers distributed

## Community Contacts

Not all groups are the same, and so not everyone can be available for every enquiry you have. So, we've colour coded your community contacts based on what they are happy to do...

- Red: We're happy to help local services reach our community with any vital health or safety information that needs to be distributed.
- Yellow: We're happy to help local services share preventative or educational information that might help our community.
- Blue: We're happy to help local services organise information sessions with our community if we think they are needed.
- Green: We're happy to help local services co-design projects or be consulted with on how to engage with our community.

## Incorporated Groups

### Sunraysia Indian Association Inc

Languages: Malayalam, Tamil, Hindi

Treasurer Norton Antony

0451 595 600

[sia.mildura@gmail.com](mailto:sia.mildura@gmail.com)

Prefers mobile text

● Red ● Yellow ● Blue ● Green

### Solomon Islands Group - Tristate Wantoks Inc

Languages: Pidgin English, Bislama, Tok Pisin

President Kennedy Roga

0488 335 703

[kennedyroga@gmail.com](mailto:kennedyroga@gmail.com)

Prefers email

● Red ● Yellow ● Blue ● Green

### Mildura Congolese Association Inc

Languages: Swahili, Lingala, Kinyarwanda/Kirundi, French

Chairperson Benedict Baraka

0466 656 241

[barakabenedict92@gmail.com](mailto:barakabenedict92@gmail.com)

Prefers email or mobile text

● Red ● Yellow ● Blue ● Green

### NABACU Burundian Community Association Inc

Languages: Kirundi, Kinyarwanda (some may also speak Swahili)

President Joselyne Ntahomvukiye

0413 998 661

Prefers calls

Vice President Jeal Paul Birama

0402 522 655

Group email: [nabacub@outlook.com](mailto:nabacub@outlook.com)

● Red ● Yellow ● Blue ● Green

### **Mildura Fijian Community Association Inc**

Languages: Bauan, other dialects Lauan, Nadi

President Theresa Ah Koy-Ketting

0428 082 493

[tket3500@gmail.com](mailto:tket3500@gmail.com)

Prefers email or mobile text

Vice President Kalaveti Masi Naquto

0477 840 213

"Contacts are available to be contacted 24/7"

● Red ● Yellow ● Blue ● Green

## **Non-incorporated Groups**

### **Nepalese community**

Language: Nepali

Hom Dawadi

0405 193 351

[nepalesecommunitymildura7@gmail.com](mailto:nepalesecommunitymildura7@gmail.com)

Prefers calls

● Red ● Yellow ● Blue ● Green

### **Malaysian community**

Languages include Malay, Mandarin, Tamil

Francisca 'Flora' Walter (Malay)

0469 151 461

[franciscawalter6@gmail.com](mailto:franciscawalter6@gmail.com)

Prefers email, calls or mobile text

Shammursaleen 'Sam' Samsudin (Malay)

0404 852 525

[shammur72@gmail.com](mailto:shammur72@gmail.com)

Prefers email or mobile text

● Red ● Yellow ● Blue ● Green

### **Mildura Fofoaanga Club**

Language: Tongan

President Viliami Vea

0467 212 194

[viliamivea20@gmail.com](mailto:viliamivea20@gmail.com)

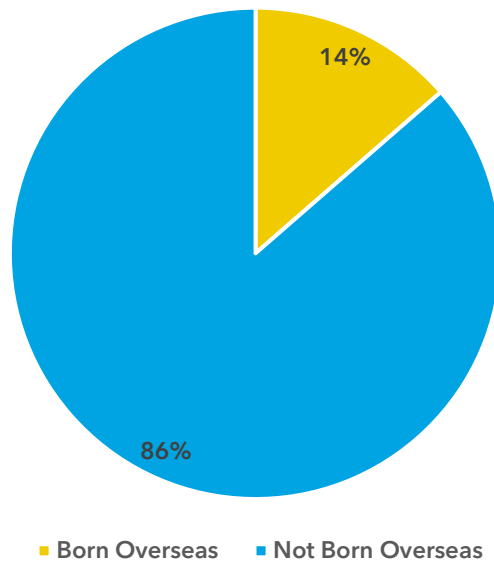
Prefers email or mobile text

● Blue

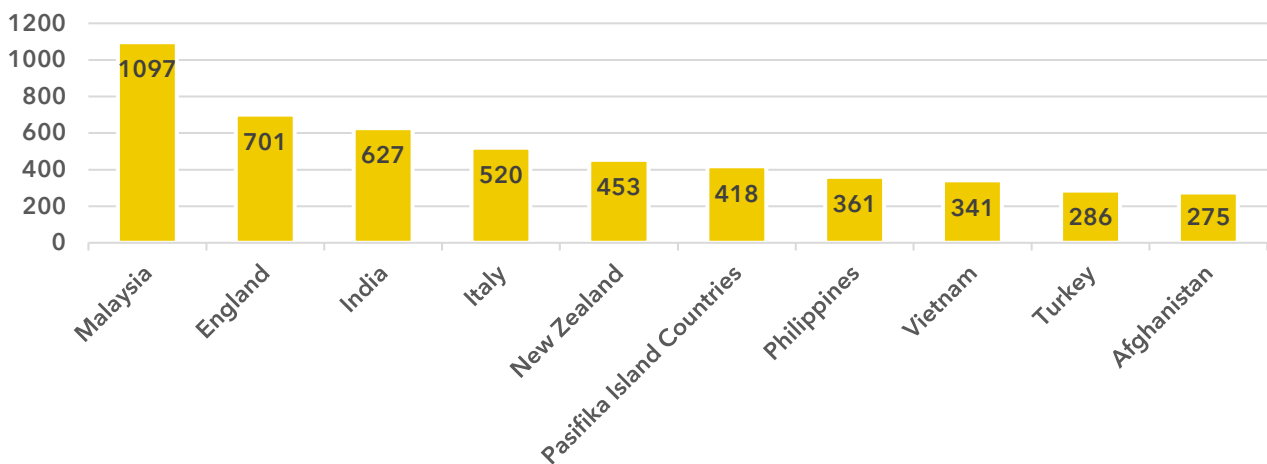
## Cultural Diversity in Mildura LGA

This data gives you an idea of migration patterns for the Mildura Local Government Area. At SMECC, we know that not all community members complete the Census because of barriers such as language, so keep in mind that the statistics cannot truly reflect the area's cultural identity.

### Mildura Population Born Overseas



### Top 10 Countries of Birth for People Born Overseas in Mildura



Source: 2021 Census, Australian Bureau of Statistics.

## Community Focus: Burundian

**By Joselyne Ntahomvukiye**

*President of NABACU Burundian Community Association*

Burundian refugees started to settle in Mildura in 2009 through the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP). The local Burundian community has a total of 114 people, including 74 children. There are 27 families.

Most Burundians here are Christian. They attend different churches: Revival Pentecostal, Living Waters, and Seventh Day Adventist. Our community is strong in religion and often follow what the bible says. Many decisions, such as whether two people marry, need the pastor's approval.

### **Our community has many strengths...**

NABACU Burundian Community Association is established as an incorporated group and have 26 members. We supply letters of support addressed to the Department of Home Affairs for association members who are sponsoring their families to settle in Mildura. The group helps new arrival refugees to settle locally by assisting them to find shops to buy cultural food. When refugees come to Mildura, they go to AMES Australia for settlement support. We gave a flyer to AMES to put in their welcome packs with a little bit of cultural food like maize flour. This is so they know we are here.

Food Next Door Co-op is somewhere a migrant person will go if they want to grow vegetables or their favourite food. It is hard for refugee migrants to find land to grow their foods. The Co-op has taken people out from social isolation. Members are doing what they would be doing back at home if they were not here. This is important because it gives people purpose.

The Burundian community help to connect members to services. We work closely with AMES, Mildura English Language Centre, and SMECC. We would be interested in creating better relationships with other services. I volunteer for everyone in the community because people trust that I know many services. My community come to me with a lot of questions and issues to solve. They come to me when they have migration questions, for help filling in forms and suggestions for the best mechanic, counsellors, childcares for children, and so on.

About three years ago, the disability industry became a major employer for our community. Many of my community members work in disability support. I am proud of this. Some of our community members receive an income and contribute to the Australia community by paying tax. Why disability support? I think they opened the doors for us. Language did not seem like a big issue for learning. The teacher uses simple language. The practice was with simple language. We have good feedback from employers who hire our community members. I think we have a good reputation. This makes me feel happy. I encourage other services in other industries to be more open-minded with new arrivals and offer a warm approach so that your workforces can also be culturally diverse. I would love to see our community members working in emergency services.

## **We have some challenges...**

We have no fixed premises for our community to use. For example, if we wanted to organise an information session with you, we would need you to provide a venue.

Our community has language barriers. If you are a doctor, nurse, real estate agent, pharmacist, local government worker or case worker, please use the Free TIS interpreting service. It comforts person to feel that part of they are a part of the conversation or supported. It opens this person to contribute their feelings.

Our home country, Burundi, is a lot different to the Australian landscape. We did not have dangerous snakes. People did not learn to swim. And so, our community is afraid of the bush and the river. Our weather was different, too. We only had autumn and spring – no winter or summer. We did not see temperatures above 38C, and nothing ever froze outside. We did not have air conditioners or heaters. We never had Total Fire Bans. We did not have smoke alarms. We lived in a different way. We did not have vacuum cleaners. We used firewood and stones on the ground to cook our food.

Back in our home country, we had bad experiences with police. When police asked us to stop, you know it is not good news even you are a behaving good. Police would still do something bad on you. In Australia, we still remember those experiences in Burundi. We do not say hello to police and do not approach them. When we first arrived, we would still run away from police.

## **This history in our home country still impacts us today...**

About six months ago, one of our community members was handcuffed and taken away by police. It has been explained to us that this is the law, and people must be handcuffed. But this was traumatising for her. She is a woman who is around 50 years. She could not go back to work for three months. We wish that there was another way to do it without handcuffs because she was not fighting and was willing to go. From my community's perspective, it is not easy to understand why this happens like this.

Because of this incident and because there are many questions from community, we arranged an information session with police on October 7, 2023. We want to learn about how they work because people are concerned about the police. It is a good time to have this information because there are many things that community members do not know about.

About seven years ago, we used to have police talk to the community every year. We had a direct mobile phone number for a police officer. It is different now, but we want this kind of relationship to come back. We trust that our police community information session this weekend will be a good start.



## Community Focus: Fijian

**By Theresa Ah Koy-Ketting**

*President of the Mildura Fijian Community Association*

There are about 1000-1500 Fijian community members living in the Loddon Mallee. About 500 are in the Sunraysia region, and the others are scattered between Robinvale, Nyah, and Swan Hill. On the NSW side, they are in Dareton, Wentworth, Euston, Pooncarie, and Broken Hill. I cannot know for sure exactly how many community members I have here due to their seasonal worker movements. There are also Fijian people that lay low because they are undocumented and too scared come forward and compromise themselves.

Fiji consists of more than 300 islands – only about 100 are inhabited. Most people live on the two mainlands called Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, which translate to Big Fiji and Big Land respectively. There are more than 300 dialects on our tiny little country. Bauan is the official Fijian language. Due to migration, other languages include Hindi and English. Many Fijians speak English, except for some elderly people who only knows the basics.

Fijians tend to stick to their own islands. For instance, you will find that if there many Nadi people in one area in the Loddon Mallee, that is the gathering place for all Nadi people. In Mildura, I am surrounded by people from Nadi. Lauans all tend to live in Robinvale, Euston, Nyah, Tooleybuc, and Swan Hill. There is only a handful of people from my heritage, which is Kadavu.

### **Our community strength is banding together when the chips are down...**

We tend to assist one another, culturally, traditionally, spiritually, and emotionally. If there is a wedding, birth or death, the community rallies together to fundraise and assist the family concerned. The same goes for emergencies. A few years ago, a house burned down in Robinvale and the community rallied together to assist the Fijian couple to secure temporary accommodation and ongoing support to feed them, refurnish, and rebuild their lives.

Mildura Fijian community uses social media to communicate with each other. Facebook and Messenger are the most popular platforms. We can reach almost 600 people in the Fijian community through these channels, which have been used over the past few years to disseminate Covid and other important health information.

As part of my work in the SMRG, I have helped to get more than 200 of my community members vaccinated with the Covid vaccine at clinics supported by SMECC and run by local health services such as Mildura Rural City Council, Sunraysia Community Health Services, Hands Up Mallee, Murray Primary Health Network, and Loddon Mallee Public Health Unit. I have also helped to distribute masks, Rapid Antigen Tests, sanitisers, and mosquito repellent. Earlier this year, we had more than 50 Fijian community members come to SMECC for a clinic with Loddon Mallee PHU and SCHS for the Japanese Encephalitis Virus vaccination.

As a leader of the wider Fijian community, people tend to look to me for leadership. If I say that the vaccination is OK to be administered, and I am in attendance to receive it, the Fijian

community will all follow my lead. In Fiji, we have a saying, "monkey see, monkey do". If I do not get it, they do not get it. Without me, they neither trust the information nor understand *why* they need to do it.

### **One challenges in our community is mistrust in governmental information...**

Until I stipulate or inform them in our language about the finer details, and how important the issue is at hand, there seems to be mistrust in some official information passed down from governments. Religion plays a big part of disinformation as some religious sects do not believe in receiving western medical treatments, such as transfusions and blood samples. We had a group of men from one religion who refused to have the Covid vaccination as their religion barred them from doing so. If they did, they risked being segregated from the church. I reassured them that the vaccination was safe and told them that there were other churches to attend. I told them that the Covid vaccination was just like the vaccination they all received prior to leaving their home country to come to Australia.

We refer to the Fijian community members as 'Coconuts'. My saying to community members is, "once a Coconut, always a Coconut". It means that they have a hard skull with coconut water inside, and no matter. The coconut after the water goes away, it starts to grow inside. I always say to them, "can you please have some Vara in your coconut?" Vara is the word for the growth inside a coconut. So, basically, this means, "grow a brain!". It sounds harsh, but it is hard for information to sink in for many Fijian people, and the community is stubborn.

### **I will tell you a sad story of one of my dear friends and Coconuts...**

This is the story that the community has come to know. He was a gentleman from Robinvale who went to the hospital, supposedly with chest pains. He tried to describe to the triage nurse what his symptoms were, and the triage nurse asked a few questions. The man was a bit hesitant to answer or did not properly understand. He was asked if he had a Medicare card, which he did not. He was told that it would cost him money to be attended to. He walked out the door and told his friend to drive him back home. He was still feeling unwell when he got home.

The next day, his friend came to pick him up for work, but he was a bit sluggish and slow, so they decided to sit and have a break. He grasped his chest, fell over backwards, and had a major heart attack and unfortunately died. The community rallied together and fundraised about \$15,000 to send his body back home. This was in the peak of Covid.

What do I want you to learn from this story? That most Fijians shy away from emergency services when met with lines of questioning and probing. I suggest that if you do not need to ask certain questions, whether it be about visas or other documentation, then do not ask. That person should have been treated first, and then asked questions later or informed later about the circumstances that he was in... I think then we would have had a better result.

## Community Focus: Malaysian

**By Flora Walter**

*Leader in the local Malaysian community*

In Sunraysia, there more than 3000 Malaysian people but it is hard to tell exactly how many because they are mostly seasonal workers, and many are now staying here 'unlawfully'. The term more commonly used is 'undocumented'.

It is important to understand who the Malaysians are in our community. We are from mixed ethnic backgrounds. In Mildura, there are Tamil Malaysians, Chinese Malaysians, Malay Malaysians, and people from Indigenous tribes like me. When working with a Malaysian person, you should always ask what languages they speak. The official language is Malay, but hundreds of others are also spoken, such as Tamil, Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, and then all the native tribes have their own dialects. There are also many different religions, such as Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Bahá'í.

### **Our community has many strengths...**

Many Malaysians are here to work hard and make money to support their families back home. Some of them are taking courses to learn skills to gain more meaningful employment. It is progress for them because they cannot get this education back in Malaysia. Some of them are learning English. Many are joining the local community, volunteering, and giving back. Everyone from the Malaysian community supports each other around Mildura. When we had the Covid vaccination clinics at SMECC, the Malaysian community came out in huge numbers. I have attended a few Covid vaccination clinics held by local health services to provide interpreting and advocacy.

Our community uses social media to find out information. During Covid, SMECC started a WhatsApp group for Malay speakers. There are 160 people in this group and growing. The group was designed for sharing credible and reliable information, in language. Because I am in the SMRG, I have volunteered to translate vital information from Covid and times of flood through this WhatsApp group. I have also helped to distribute mosquito repellent, Covid RATs, and Personal Protective Equipment such as masks and sanitiser.

My community love to use WhatsApp. There is a group chat of almost 500 people originally from Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries and they help each other to find work, cars to buy and more. There is another WhatsApp group called Malaysian Mildura Everything where people talk about where they can buy cultural food and find accommodation to rent. These spaces are like Facebook marketplace to my community.

### **Many Malaysian community members experience a lot of challenges...**

Community members with expired visas choose to stay here because they want to work, and most of them work on farms. Living conditions can be poor for many farm workers. There is crowded accommodation. I have seen it – it is just a mattress on the concrete. Contractors or employers have used and exploited our community by not paying them correctly. Some people

are so desperate to stay here, that they are scared to get help. They think they are going to get deported. They are afraid to give their names or contact details. When they get sick or injured, they put up with the pain because of this fear.

When emergencies like the flooding happen, and if 'some white guy' comes to the door in uniform, they will most likely be scared and not trust you. If you know they speak Malay, use an interpreter. And if you cannot get an interpreter, can you use Google Translate to help convey the *gist* of what you want to say? When you are using the app, maybe explain at the beginning that this translation might not be 100 per cent correct, but that you will try to organise an interpreter later.

I have always been available to community members, helping with questions, referring to services and finding options for them. They ask about how to live and work here. The Malaysian community group is not incorporated or formalised, but I and my fellow countryman, Sam, know a lot of people around town, and we are willing to help local services communicate with the local Malaysian community when it is needed.

## Key Insights

- Multicultural communities are complex and diverse: there are different religions and languages that exist within one country. E.g., Islamic Malaysians, Chinese Malaysians, Tamil Malaysians.
- Communications in each community group vary. E.g., Afghan group have six sections and each of them have their own leader responsible for disseminating information to their section of families.
- Multicultural community members might not be 'locals'. Transient nature of farm work means that people living in Mildura might not know about local services.
- Community leaders volunteer a lot of their time to helping their community members. They are ready to serve their community 'all day, every day'.

## Recommendations

- Emergency services should have a Multicultural Action Plan. The plan should include a contact list for each community group for assistance in disseminating information and any consultation/expertise needed.
- Community leaders should be paid a 'sitting fee' by emergency services for supplying subject matter expertise.
- Community leaders should be provided with a contact within each emergency service who they can call on if regular communication avenues are not working or if there are extenuating circumstances that requires special treatment.
- Emergency services should participate in, and fund, biannual social get-togethers with community groups. This will help to build connections, foster trusting working relationships, and improve cultural awareness among service workers.
- Emergency services should have an outreach unit whose job it is to provide information to multicultural groups on how the service works and how emergency responders work together.
- Law enforcement should not be quick to punish new arrivals. Instead, lead with education.
- Emergency services should include multicultural engagement in KPIs.
- If possible, emergency services should avoid asking multicultural community members about visa status as this may deter them from seeking or accepting help. Wait for the right time to bring up this subject.

Please scan the QR code to provide feedback on the SMRG Showcase:

