Hope Over Fear

MWA SERVICE DELIVERY QUARTERLY REPORT ON COVID-19 GREATER SYDNEY LOCKDOWN

JULY - SEPTEMBER 2021
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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Muslim Women Australia (MWA) is a representative body for Muslim women working to enrich humanity and advocate for women’s rights through leadership based on Islamic principles. Established 38 years ago by Australian Muslim women to facilitate the full participation of Muslim women in Australian society, MWA now provides a comprehensive array of services, including settlement support, community education and capacity building initiatives for women and children. Nationally, MWA plays an active representative advocacy role for Muslim women and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities working towards inclusive policies, best practice and social cohesion.

MWA is a specialist provider of domestic and family violence (DFV) support for multicultural and CALD communities in New South Wales (NSW). In addition, MWA implements and advocates for culturally, linguistically and religiously appropriate best practice models of DFV service provision. This service, known as Linking Hearts, delivers holistic support options focused on prevention and early intervention, crisis and transitional accommodation, rapid rehousing, and intensive support for clients with complex needs. MWA is a leader in the field in terms of combatting DFV across CALD and religiously diverse communities, utilising client centred practices which support women’s agency and a ‘whole of community’ approach where everybody has a role to play to keep women and children safe.

As part of its COVID-19 Delta response, MWA has been working to provide hope over fear, a sense of calm and dignity in the delivery of services while advocating fiercely for measured solutions to support CALD communities in South-West Sydney.

While we acknowledge we are in this ocean together, we need to also acknowledge that each individual and family’s vessel is different. Some are in yachts, ships, canoes. Others in rafts or hanging on to a plank of wood in the water.

All of our staff, and the vast majority of our clients and members live and work in the LGAs affected by the hard lockdown. Caring for the health and wellbeing of our community and their families to empower them to continue to be informed and supported has been critical at this time.
Following on from the issues and responses documented in the MWA’s Preliminary Report in December 2020, *Serving with Purpose: Domestic and Family Violence, CALD Communities and COVID19*, this report highlights key areas of multicultural community sentiment in South West Sydney as well as MWA advocacy and response in relation to social cohesion and service delivery. Most importantly, it captures stories of lived experience, acknowledging pain and fear but also focusing on hope.

Importantly, MWA uses a strengths-based model of empowerment and faith to develop resilience and optimism in the face of adversity by acknowledging the existential realities and lessons throughout Prophetic history.

*This spiritual activism should be acknowledged as part of the health response carried out by MWA.*

South West Sydney is comprised of diverse cultural, linguistic and faith-based communities and currently experiences high levels of housing unaffordability, low socio-economic households, locals without permanent residency, a history of trauma as well as securitization.

In addition, light must be shed on the mental health and financial implications on South West Sydney families, with higher levels of casualized workforce, sole traders and unemployment intersecting with distinct familial and caring responsibilities, particularly within diversified household groupings.
As a service provider, MWA has been working hard to prioritise DFV and Homelessness intake from both a safety and health perspective, with transitional housing at full capacity while also working towards voluntary vaccine rollout for clients in shared settings. MWA has supported clients, including COVID positive patients, through ongoing and consistent communication, direct service delivery and community outreach. Additionally, MWA has intensified its advocacy both within the sector and more generally within the community, by sharing service learnings based on current experiencing and informing service and sector resources about the reality of the experiences that vulnerable communities are facing.

Overall, this has been one of the most difficult times for the communities of South West Sydney. The significant increase in referrals for financial and material relief, including rent assistance, as well as support for non-citizens has directly demonstrated the severe financial impact this lockdown and the rhetoric has had. Further, the mental and emotional effects have been demonstrated by MWA’s amplification of mental health support for women, including young people, particularly those in their senior years of high school. MWA has played the role of support for women to be able to support their families in an array of areas, from digital literacy, COVID updates, and basic needs of life.

MWA has been listening to, responding to and supporting communities for over 30 years, and 2021 has amplified the need for this work to continue.

Further to the constant engagement with the community in responding to various needs, MWA also conducted a survey of over 200 families and individuals, where they were able to communicate their main issues of concern and the struggles that they were facing. Broader policy and advocacy implications in relation to policing, vaccine hesitancy and survey findings are not captured in this report but will form part of other works of MWA.

This report will highlight the primary needs that have been affecting communities over the period of July to September 2021 with a focus on direct service responses that MWA engaged in, and the various ways MWA has supported the community. This provides a snapshot into the systemic issues of concern that need to be addressed, and the ways in which communities collectively come together to support one another despite the obstacles that are placed in their way, and truly embody the message of hope over fear, on an individual and communal level, for the betterment of all.
ABOUT MWA

OUR VISION

We are a representative body for Muslim women working to enrich humanity, advocating for equality and the rights of all women, through authentic leadership based on our Islamic principles.

MWA has been supporting and advocating on behalf of all women and Muslim women in particular for over 36 years. At the heart of the MWA is a commitment to fairness, equality and justice in all our interactions and activities that support Muslim women.

OUR VALUES

Muslim Women Australia is guided by the following values that ensure our aims and objectives are achieved. All staff and volunteers act with these values in mind:

- AUTHENTICITY
- TRANSPARENCY
- TRUST
- COMPASSION
- SINCERITY
- CREATIVITY
- RESILIENCE
OUR MISSION

Muslim Women Australia attaches significant value and importance to the role of women within the family and in society at large. Our mission is to:

ADVOCATE

Engaging, consulting and advocating with governments at all levels on issues of importance that impact women

SERVE

Developing religiously and culturally appropriate service models that support women to achieve their full potential and enrich their lives through inner peace and prosperity

RESEARCH

Investing in knowledge and research to support evidence-based policies and frameworks for the advancement of women

NETWORK

Creating holistic networks of individuals and communities that are engaging and build a unified and harmonious society

LEAD

Providing genuine and authentic leadership on women’s issues and building the capability of emerging women leaders
SUPPORTING WOMEN AND FAMILIES FACING HOMELESSNESS, DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE

Providing support to women and families experiencing domestic and family violence, and/or homelessness is part of the core service of MWA.

MWA has been working hard to prioritise Domestic and Family Violence (DFV) and Homelessness intake from both a safety and health perspective, with transitional housing at full capacity while also working towards voluntary vaccine rollout for clients in shared settings. Due to the significant increase in demand, MWA has seen an increase in service to victim-survivors in crisis and temporary accommodation, with increased service provision to non-permanent citizens via referral to Emergency Accommodation.

During the pandemic, MWA received a significant increase in the number of self-referrals for financial aid, surpassing requests for crisis support. During the pandemic, MWA received a significant increase in the number of self-referrals for financial aid, surpassing requests for crisis support. The main reasons for referral are financial (65%) and mental health (15%), which has increased consistently during the pandemic. Housing affordability has also been a primary reason for referrals and requests for support.

MWA support for non-permanent citizens included rent support and ongoing daily essentials alongside case management planning to identify immediate short term needs, as part of early intervention response amidst and post lockdown. MWA supported 102 clients on temporary visas in the month of September 2021 alone.

Some of the main identified Issues for clients seeking support included:
- Bridging visa
- Loss of employment
- Severe mental health

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In actively such a large amount of families, MWA ensures that each individual is treated with respect and their dignity is upheld.

Community and individualised support has taken many forms, such as supporting individuals to be able to follow stay at home orders, and reducing harm and risk to others in crisis accommodation settings, all while providing dignified, empowered supports with transformative engagement.

- Weekly shopping lists for all clients in both crisis refuges and identified by clients via caseworkers
- Home Packages inclusive of bed sheet sets, kettles and heater for clients moving into transitional homes.
- Weekly lunches to all clients each Friday, supporting local businesses.
- Weekly bread distribution with fresh juice and sanitizer
- Weekly produce packages
- Home delivered BBQ meat packs
- Oz Harvest food packages, kids activity packs
- Donations received from community to purchase new clothing and provide financial support to struggling families
- 40 boxes of 4pack chocolate covered strawberries donated
- Eid packages: home made waffle and dessert packs
- COVID At Home Health Kits consisting of essential medical supplies and equipment
- EAPA (Energy Accounts Payment Assistance)- In July 2021 we assisted 45 families with EAPA and used up all vouchers allocated for July – December 2021 period, utilising a 6 month allocation in one month. Since then MWA has requested and been approved for an increase in EAPA allocation to be able to continue to provide this financial support

Giving generously ensures people feel supported with dignity. Not a hand out but a hand up.

Packages don’t just bring staples that every household has in each pantry but bring energy, life and colour to people’s hearts and home, giving energy to the home and the people.

These packages were anything but ordinary household essentials, it provided a beautiful, shared experience between co-workers, clients and caseworkers. It brought to light a social connection, a cultural exchange, and really highlighted that serving with a purpose truly brought us together while simultaneously being physically apart.
MWA has been able to support families not only in the provision of goods, but also in the establishment of connection and community. The material support provided a catalyst to connect with families and ensure they felt supported, that their dignity was upheld, and that they knew where to go to for further support. Caseworkers maintain regular contact with clients, be it daily, or weekly, depending on need, to ensure that individuals and families never feel “in need” but instead feel “needed”. Essentially, this is what community service is about, and this is how we instil hope over fear.

MWA support for community members who tested positive for COVID19 took place in terms of direct service settings as well as community engagement settings, offering radical practical help, psycho-social supports and spiritual activism where appropriate.

**Individualised case management for children and young people**

MWA has also provided more intensive support for children and young people, particularly those with experiences of domestic and family violence. This has included individualized case management for women as well as individualised case management for children.
Particularly important when working with CALD women and families, it is important to understand caring structures and extended caring structures. For many women, her healing will be very much dependent on building her capacity to parent and supporting the needs of her children. Through empowering her children, it has often been the case that a mother also finds herself. This is very much reflected in work around resilience and resistance in DFV contexts.

“Those children lost their mother due to a cancer couple of months ago, the father stopped working and taking care of them, today’s deliveries put big smiles on their face, the father made Duaa for MWA”

“Salam beautiful sisters. Yesterday felt like Eid for me and my daughter that I actually cried at the counter using my gift voucher. What u did was amazing and I can’t thank you enough my only family you are thank you so so much may Allah reward you both immensely!”

As part of our COVID response, the work of the traditional caseworker has transformed tremendously. Caseworkers have taken on so much more than what has initially been expected. This has included:

- Daily check-in (sometimes twice per day) with family as whole
- Mental health support and referrals: with children and young people scared about testing, vaccines, getting sick, isolation, as well as anxiety and fear
- The provision of age appropriate games, toys and activity packs
- Support with schooling from home, and often providing some reprieve for struggling parents
- Activities online: including drawing and colouring; played scrabble; links to ABC Kids activities and sessions
- Virtual visits, from pre-school to teenagers, including supporting HSC students
- Checking for:
  - any digital needs
  - all offered Telstra mobile top-ups - direct access on mobile phones
SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Listening and Supporting

MWA has always been passionate about empowering young women and continues to encourage this through our community-based programs and creating opportunities for active engagement and participation. MWA has implemented a number of programs and initiatives and continues to work alongside young people where they can express themselves freely, talk about some of the challenges, issues or barries they face as well as have the opportunity to talk in a safe space with someone that would understand where they are coming from, someone who isn’t a parent or guardian, someone who ‘speaks their language’.

The pandemic and lockdown saw a pivot in the way that young people were supported and listened to, ensuring MWA was still providing a space for young women to know that they have a voice and be supported in a judgement free, familiar environment. The inspiring SAYIT Program, which usually runs fortnightly during the school term on Saturday afternoons, began to take place online, and over the course of lockdown, the senior youth members of SAYIT and MWA staff established ongoing communication channels through MS Teams,

The aim of these catchups is to help young people stay connected and have a break away from the reality of lockdown as well as the stresses of online schooling, emphasising that they are not alone in this pandemic.
To ease the hardships of lockdown, lockdown packs were sent out to both junior and senior members of SAYIT, hoping to increase their sense of hope, optimism and cheerfulness. The goal of sending out packages has been to create a bit of joy in the lives of young people, taking their minds off the reality of lockdown and getting them involved in an activity. The packs sent out so far have been a DIY dessert pack as well as a DIY terrarium kit. Both activities ignited the creativity within the youth members, in which they found great enjoyment.

Forming part of MWA’s youth strategy, an online mindfulness session with a Senior Psychologist from South East Sydney Local Health District Multicultural Health Services (SESLHD) had taken place with the youth and was centred on providing realistic and beneficial strategies one may incorporate into their lockdown routine, with a particular focus on mindfulness activities. The participants were prompted to express themselves, engaging in meaningful discussions about their feelings and what is most important to them. Having gone through discussions and strategies, mindfulness exercises were also demonstrated and participated in as a group.
The MWA Youth Advisory Committee (MYAC) had been established in the midst of lockdown, comprising of the senior SAYIT members. MYAC was designed to give young people a voice, allowing them to be heard and to express their opinions on current issues, while giving them the opportunity to put into practise proposed recommendations, with the ultimate aim of assisting young people across communities.

The first initiative of the committee involved MYAC members getting together and noting their top lockdown survival tips. These tips were then designed and shared through social media platforms to reach wider communities. MYAC meetings will continue to take place on a fortnightly basis where issues and recommendations are discussed through the perspective of youth community members with the aim of benefitting the wider community.

From publishing tips on surviving lockdown on social media platforms to planning school holiday activities, the young people have been very active. With the school holiday activities that took place, there was a virtual baking with both senior and junior members that was hosted by the MYAC members. They took it upon themselves to plan the session and organise the activities. From the baking show to lockdown strategies, talent show, escape room and all, we have valued their input and they have truly made a difference.
Issues Identified By Young People

The open and varied channels of communication that MWA has established with young people has allowed them to convey their issues of concern and alleviate

High school aged students from communities in South West Sydney have shouldered added burdens and responsibilities while engaging with remote learning. Often this has a gendered element and has included:

- Managing their own schooling and supporting the learning of younger siblings
- Additional caring and home duties for siblings while at home
- Navigating online literacy and shopping for multicultural and intergenerational families
- Learning skills to identify and regulate their psycho-social responses
- Physical and mental health impacts in line of extensive stay at home orders, with one-hour limits to time outdoors and significantly reduced recreation and social opportunities
- Mental health: anxiety, isolation, fear, lack of comfort with accessing mainstream services

It is essential that we are not just equipping young people with the knowledge and skills to be active in their own circle, but also externally within their community, supporting community growth and strengthening community ties in an authentic way. Creating opportunities for young people to support program tasks of other MWA programs has created a sense of empowerment and proactivity despite hard lockdown and despair.

We will continue to support young people in the most effective ways, and raise their issues of concern when and where needed.
A MATTER OF HEART AND MIND: SOCIAL, SPIRITUAL AND MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL BEING

MWA has been running Arabic and Quran courses continuously since its inception. Many of the women that attend these classes are older women with limited digital literacy. With the knowledge of the extended lockdown, MWA staff reached out to the teacher and went through detailed instructions on how to run the class online via MS Teams via phone and video calls and exchanging many messages. MWA Staff provide weekly tech support to the class where these women are able to connect once a week and continue their class which has become a staple of their week. The fact that this class has been able to continue online in this way has had a significant positive impact on the social and mental health of these women.

Due to the negative impacts of lockdown, the need for support such as healthy stress management and mental wellbeing became an ongoing issue faced by women and mothers everywhere. In partnership with SESLHD Senior Psychologist Hend Saab, a program was designed specifically for afternoons to allow a reprieve for mothers and women from their daily lives and workloads. This ran online over the course of four weeks, providing in-language assistance for women while allowing for soft entry points to ongoing support.

The Mindful Stretching and a Healthy You program was developed to provide not only mental and social support for women, but also a means for addressing the concerns women had for their own physical health. The first session was designed as an information and Q and A session with Dr Wafa Samen from IVF Australia (who supported this program) presenting on the COVID vaccine for women and expecting mothers, Healthy wellbeing and fertility. Participants from the first workshop later received a phone call checking in. Feedback from the first session was excellent. Participants found the Q&A with Dr Wafa very informative and the Mindful Stretching session with trainer Amatullah very soothing and a more practical approach to being mindful of the present. The Stretching class also highlighted how our thoughts and actions impact our bodies and the trainer provided great strategies to do at home.
The Hidden Gems virtual book club series, established by MWA Staff, provides an opportunity to address the social, mental and spiritual health of Muslim women. Addressing the important role of faith and spirituality in maintaining mental health has been an issue that MWA has been quick to respond to. This Hidden Gems Book Club runs on a weekly basis during the evenings, allowing for women to attend after finishing work and home-schooling duties. The sessions allow wide group discussions, highlighting intentions and understanding all that contributes to our spiritual wellbeing. A WhatsApp group and MS SharePoint folder was created to maintain ongoing communication and avenues for greater group discussions. Weekly audio recordings were also made available for those unable to attend.

The programs that MWA has developed and implemented during the extended lockdown have had a strong focus on mental health, stress management and strengthening one’s connection to faith. Through MWA’s strong community connections, we have had a number of great facilitators contribute to the various programs. These programs have been reaching people all over Australia, also allowing for soft entry points for further support such as counselling, emergency relief, housing support as well as financial assistance. We have also maintained communication in between sessions through phone call check-ins, connecting through WhatsApp, SMS and via email as well. These multiple points of communication ensure that women feel supported and know where to go for further support that they may require.
WORDS MATTER: COMMUNICATION AND MESSAGING

MWA as part of its COVID19 Delta response has been working to provide hope over fear, a sense of calm and dignity in service delivery while advocating fiercely for measured solutions to support CALD communities in South-West Sydney. Every phone call, message, and interaction with our members has gone far beyond providing information about COVID and the vaccine.

They are about allaying fears and supporting clients mentally, emotionally, as well as financially to be able to cope during this very difficult period.

Advocacy is an ongoing effort for MWA, and in this pandemic we have addressed the concerns of the community both directly and indirectly through various avenues of stakeholder engagement. We have advocated for improved local and state responses, e.g with NSW Police messaging and practice, language and tone of NSW Government in addressing South West Sydney and multicultural communities, and the divisive effects of identifying “LGA’s of concern”.

Identify negative messaging from media and government, MWA has been developing messaging that can respond to community concerns regarding unfair lockdown policies, yet still ensuring that families stay safe. Utilising social media, MWA has published numerous posts, videos, texts and images on Instagram and Facebook, promoting factual information, the availability of services and more.

Further, MWA has published numerous articles on the MWA website including the publication of an article as well as the production of a case study video, relaying the story of a Sydney woman and her family who have been severely impacted by COVID. To encourage accessibility and tackle language barriers, these publications have been produced in numerous languages including English, Arabic, Persian and Bengali.
Also making use of the trust and rapport we have with the community to ensure they are well informed, info and Q&A sessions have been incorporated as part of workshops and programs that are run on a regular basis.

With that, we have noticed a dramatic reduction in vaccine hesitancy with many more people wanting to get vaccinated so that we can finally move past this current state we are in. However, there are still people concerned about the safety and efficacy of the vaccine, and we have ensured that everyone’s fears are listened to and validated. It has been through this authentic approach, where we provide factual information alongside emotional and social support, that we noticed has had a greater impact in addressing the fears and concerns of the public.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout this report, we have highlighted the primary needs that have been affecting communities over the period of July to September 2021. This is simply a glimpse into systemic issues of concern that need to be addressed.

Learning, understanding, and acknowledging the personal experiences of individuals is critical to bringing awareness of the impact of collective hardships as well as the complex paths to healing and recovery.

Therefore, our contribution to knowledge is an explanation of using culturally and religiously informed faith-based practice, expertise and experience.

We cannot change the past but we can certainly change the present for the future, and to do that we need to come together, and recognize the need for healing.

By enabling change to take place, where hope is embedded in our framework, in our interaction with one another and in the sector itself, through reforms, regulations, beginning the change within the sector, for the health and well being of women, children and society at large.

The following recommendations are made based on this understanding of the ways in which communities collectively provide support despite the obstacles that are placed in their way. And it through this, that we can truly embody the message of hope over fear, on an individual and communal level, for the betterment of all.
• Enhanced engagement with and equitable service provision to multicultural communities, with recognition to intersecting needs and trauma informed care.
• Safety and risk assessments inclusive of family based responses for children
• Supports for families and children that have contracted COVID, inclusive of psycho-social recovery responses
• Early intervention responses to support CALD young people and mentoring especially across life transition points (transition to school orientation, primary to high school; HSC to tertiary studies/employment etc)
• Role for specialist and place-based, community led solutions in delivering health response and service delivery, inclusive of culturally and religiously inclusive mental health supports
• Proactive engagement across police, government, media, and NGO’s to support crisis planning
• Additional funding to specialist services:
  • to meet increased client intake and the rise in case complexity
  • To respond mental health crisis triggered by COVID19, in particular support for women’s and children’s mental health via access to adequate counselling services
  • to deliver post-support services
  • additional social housing stock, or funding for specialist homelessness support services to secure private tenancies
• Investment in technology
• Review of government information, messaging and communications strategies
• Domestic and Family Violence as central to coordinated response planning
• Expanding and reviewing eligibility criteria for government support, particularly for women on temporary visas
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(02) 9750 6916  mwa.org.au  info@mwa.org.au

/MuslimWomenAustralia  /MuslimWomenAustralia