

Merri Health
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Community Wellbeing COVID-19 project team Update on activities to 8 June 2020

The Community Wellbeing COVID-19 project team was established on 7 April 2020.

This is the fourth update on key activities undertaken by the team. These updates will be shared regularly.

If you have any queries about this email, please don't hesitate to contact us using the details below.

Community engagement

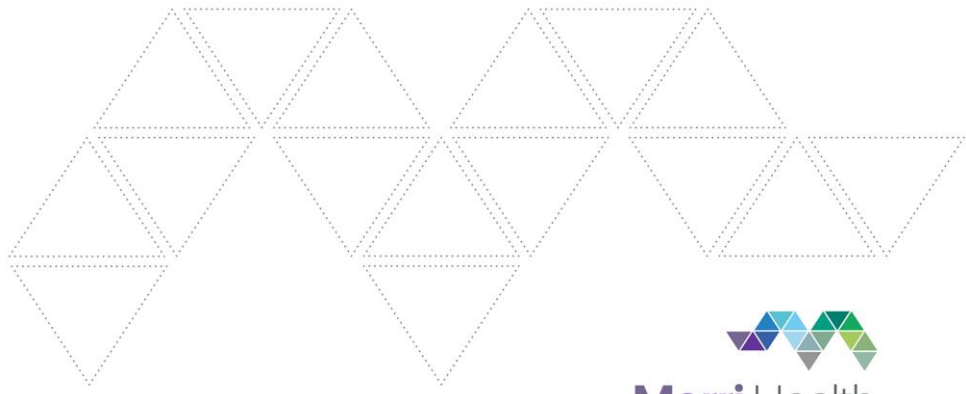
As of 8 June 2020, 51 consultations have occurred with 57 community members. The majority of these were held as one-on-one conversations, with two focus groups held with young people.

Questions asked include the following topics:

- key current concerns
- health and wellbeing
- access to food
- employment
- supporting pre-school and school-aged children
- access to information

The table below outlines key demographic information* for community members engaged so far.

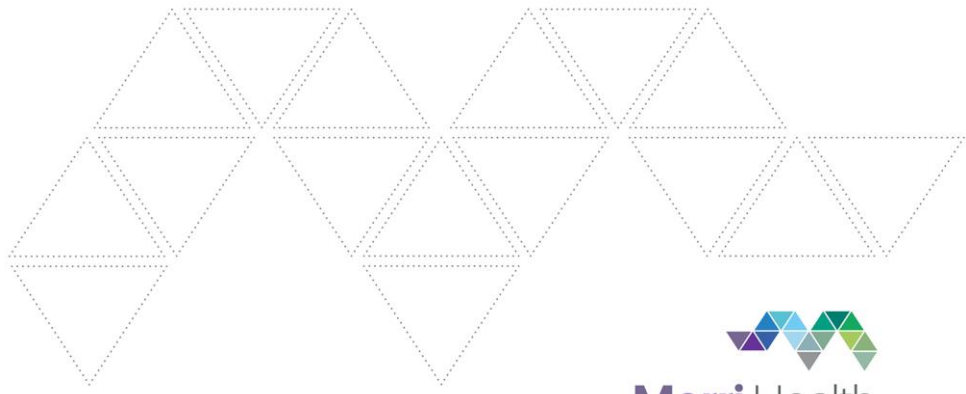
Demographic information	Responses
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person	3, with one person acknowledging they are a descendant of the Stolen Generations
People who speak a language other than English	43
Cultural backgrounds	12 – Pakistani (25) – Indian (9) – Lebanese (4) – Australian (7) – Indian Muslim (1) – Russian (1) – Italian (1) – Bosnian (1) – German (1) – Sri Lankan (1) – Maltese (1) – Sudanese (1)
Languages spoken	18 – Auslan – Arabic – Balochi – Chinese



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Demographic information	Responses
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - English - Gujrati - Hindi - Hindko - Marathi - Pashto - Punjabi - Russian - Saraiki - Sindhi - Singhalese - Tamil - Turkish - Urdu
Age groups	7 young people aged 4-12 9 young people aged 12-25 34 people aged 25-65 years
Number of households with people aged	0-5 years – 30 6-12 years – 26 12-25 years – 18 25-65 years – 39 65+ years – 3
Lives in	Moreland – 82% <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fawkner – 42 - Glenroy – 2 - Brunswick – 2 - Pascoe Vale – 1 - Other: Dallas, Mernda, Reservoir, Broadmeadows (2), Strathmore, Viewbank
Gender identity	Non-binary – 1 Non-binary / agender – 1 Lesbian / non-binary – 1 Female – 43 Male – 6
People who identify as LGBTIAQ+	4
Household size	2 people – 4 3 people – 8 4 people – 16 5 people – 16 6 people – 7 7 people – 1

**Please note, providing demographic data is optional (some figures will not reflect the full range of participants).*



Each update, we will highlight one story from a community member to help illustrate the diversity of experiences during this period. Please note, real names have not been used.

Hamid, international student living in Fawkner

Hamid lives in a rental property in Fawkner with four friends, who are also international students.

Already struggling financially before COVID-19, Hamid has supported the household over the past couple of months after all four housemates lost their jobs. Hamid has also seen their work shifts reduced by more than 60%.

"In the first few weeks of COVID-19, sometimes we only ate once or twice a day to save for fees and rent."

They have seen no relief in paying for rent or university fees, and have found it difficult to access the supports available for international students. They reported that the application process is hard, and requires a lot of irrelevant information and documents, some that are very difficult to obtain at the moment.

They shared that some of their friends are now sleeping in cars because they can't afford the rent. Hamid said they have accessed food boxes from community groups for friends, who are shy and hesitant to access support themselves.

Hamid expressed frustration and disappointment about the lack of support from Australian governments, especially given the contribution of international students to the Australian economy and culture. They have heard friends studying in other countries, like Canada, have received so much more support. Despite the financial difficulties, Hamid says:

"We need moral support more than financial."

They felt that the lack of support left them feeling like they weren't valued by the Australian government, and that they did not belong in the community.

With studying continuing remotely, Hamid indicated that some online subjects do not work well online, are not of the same quality, and yet they still are paying full fees.

"We could study from back home if we had to study online."

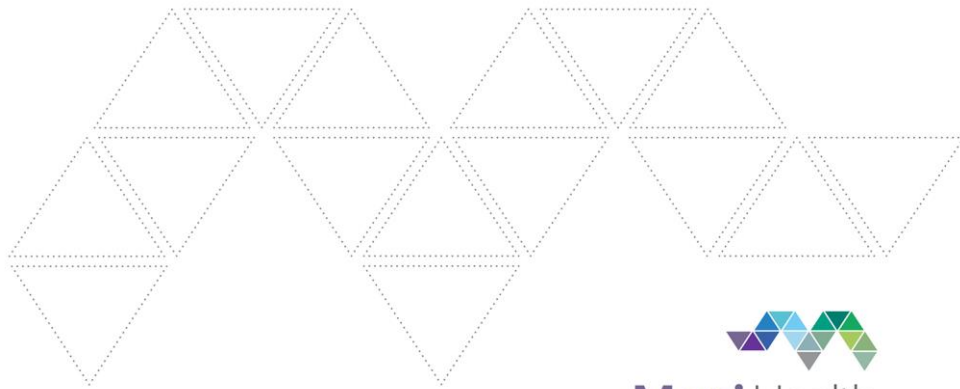
However, Hamid also indicated that returning home was not an option due to travel restrictions and high costs for flights. Plus, they highlight:

"We have invested so much here."

They also report that many families are also struggling in their home countries due to loss of income, making it difficult for them to send money to support their family members in Australia.

Hamid was also worried that international students may continue to be left behind when everything starts to normalise, particularly in terms of employment opportunities. They felt that Australian citizens were likely to be offered jobs before non-citizens.

Hamid said their housemates' and their own mental health was significantly affected. In particular, providing support to friends and family has taken a toll on their wellbeing. They also shared concerns about catching COVID-19, with a close friend's experience of infection increasing stress and anxiety.



Below are general impressions/reflections from these conversations, and particularly from the last fortnight.

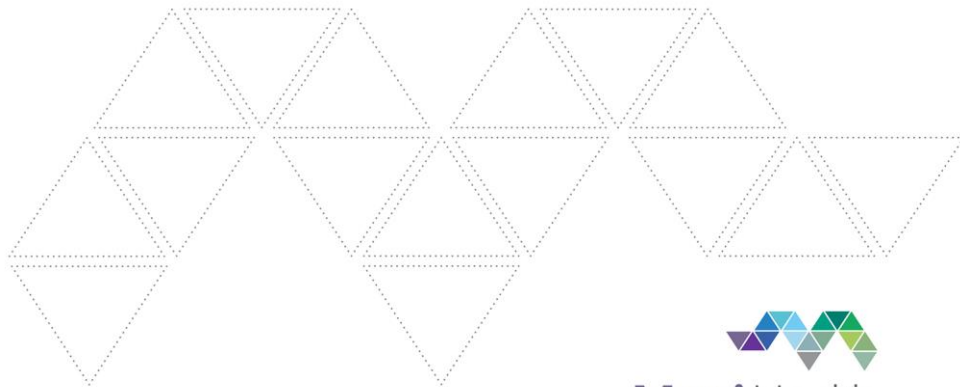
- We have spoken with seven **young people aged 4-12 years** who all live in Fawkner:
 - Most children are missing the face-to-face interaction with their teachers and friends
 - Most children are feeling safe at home, but feeling uncomfortable when out in public and nervous about making mistakes with physical distancing
 - Some parents who were present during interviews remarked that they had not realised how much their child noticed how busy they were with home and work responsibilities
 - One young person who is an older sibling had found it hard to balance family responsibilities with their VCE studies at home
- Since the **easing of government restrictions** around physical distancing, many community members have reported:
 - Feeling less stressed and more positive
 - Socialising more with friends and family
 - Feeling relieved for their families about schools re-opening
- Despite these positives, many community members – including children and young people – still report **significant concern and anxiety** about leaving the house for fear of infection.
- Individuals reported using the following platforms to **access information**:
 - News (25 people)
 - Social media (21) – eg. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, “Premier’s page”
 - Internet (17)
 - TV (7)
 - Partner/family member (7)
 - WhatsApp / Viber (6)
 - Friends (5)
 - COVID-19 app / app on phone (5)
 - School (3)
 - Youtube (2)
 - Radio (2)
 - Work (2)
 - Other: word of mouth (1), press release (1), international news (1), government website (1), community groups (1)

Depending on the conversation, the Merri Health team has provided additional information to community members about relevant services.

Stakeholder engagement

Merri Health team members regularly participate in the following networks and sub-groups:

- Moreland multicultural settlement services network
- Moreland family violence network
- Moreland Council’s Be Kind sub-group
- Moreland Council’s community initiatives sub-group
- Moreland Council’s advocacy sub-group
- Moreland Council’s reconciliation working group
- Northern metro local Aboriginal network
- Hume Moreland prevention partnership



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- Inner North West Primary Care Partnership prevention alliance
- Fawkner service providers network
- Glenroy service providers network
- Moreland youth mental health working group
- Moreland multicultural settlement services network
- Moreland family violence network

On 3 June, Merri Health met with Moreland Council's advocacy sub-group to share some of the stories and experiences we have heard from community members. The purpose of the meeting was to provide illustrative examples of the complexity of people's circumstances, and highlight where local, state and federal systems and policies are not meeting community needs.

Communications

Since 7 April, 15 options for social media posts were provided to the Merri Health communications team, with 11 posts shared during this time.

Overall, this content reached an average of 238 people per post, with an average of 19 engagements per post. While these numbers are modest, the communications team reported they have performed higher than other posts on the Merri Health Facebook page.

Content included information on young people's mental health and wellbeing, financial services, and employment opportunities in the area. Specific posts were also developed for parents and carers of children aged 0-6 in Moreland's northern suburbs. Some of these posts were also shared in a Fawkner-based private Facebook group for parents and carers of young children on average seen by 55 of its 117 members. Feedback from the group administrator showed appreciation for the variety of interesting topics covered.

Information about Merri Health's service changes was included in two of Moreland Council's hard-copy newsletters, which were mailed to suburbs where residents are less likely to have access to the internet. Moreland Council also shares information in its fortnightly service provider newsletter.

Updates from Moreland Council are also shared with Merri Health's management team for broader distribution.

More information

Please don't hesitate to contact the team if you have any queries about the above information.

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Previous updates

[Update #1: 27 April 2020](#)

[Update #2: 11 May 2020](#)

[Update #3: 25 May 2020](#)