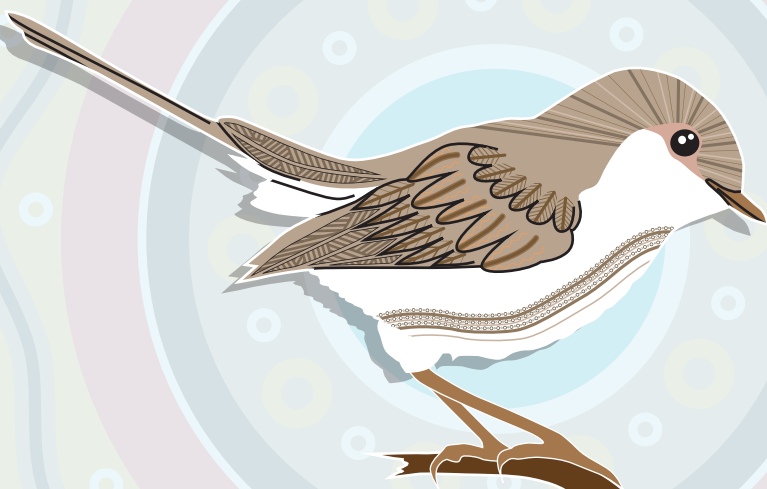




ABORIGINAL ELDERS CULTURAL WELLBEING PROJECT

FINAL REPORT



**Metropolitan
Partnerships**



VICTORIA
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Aborigines Advancement League Inc. working in partnership with the
Metropolitan Partnerships

Report Author: Merle Hall
Project Manager: Dr Esme Bamblett
Research Facilitators: Aunty Doreen Lovett and Aunty Dianne Kerr

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resourced through the Metropolitan Partnership Development Fund.

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Artist/Graphic Design: Gary Saunders - indigital@live.com.au

The 2 Wrens (Fairy & Superb) are totems of the Gunaikurnai.

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians and Elders of the lands throughout
Melbourne, Victoria and Australia and their connections to land, sea and
community.

We pay our respect to Elders past and present and extend that respect to all
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.





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Foreword

I would like to thank everyone who contributed to this important research about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Aboriginal Elders in Melbourne. The project came about in early 2021 when Aboriginal members of the Metropolitan Partnerships expressed their concerns about the Elders in our communities.

My organisation, the Aborigines Advancement League, agreed to lead the coordination of the project for the Metro Partnerships, working with the Aboriginal members. We were very fortunate that Aunty Dianne Kerr and Aunty Doreen Lovett were willing to work with us. We were planning for Aunty Dianne and Aunty Doreen to lead Yarning Circles with Elders in four regions across metropolitan Melbourne to find out about their experience of the pandemic. They were to be supported by Merle Hall.

Resourced by MPDF funding, we started work in July 2021. The lock down restrictions returned, we couldn't gather in person, so we had to move to telephone interviews. It took a lot of time for the team but it was really important to talk with the Elders. These were long calls and Elders spoke about their isolation, separation from family, Country and each other, the effects on their health and finances and their fears and worries. They were individual stories but there were lots of common issues and experiences. And their experience needed to be shared and listened to.

When we brought Elders together in March 2022 for the metro-wide gathering, some Elders were seeing each other, and family, for the first time in two years! Elders are the most vulnerable members of the Aboriginal community, but also our community leaders with strength and resilience. They need additional support in times of crisis. One longer-term outcome of the project was to give recommendations to the Government on how Elders can be supported in the event of similar occurrences. Hopefully, if there is ever another pandemic, we will be prepared.

However, the research has shown that this is not just about the future, our Elders still require support. They are still experiencing the effects of being in isolation, of not being able to be together and being separated from their families. There have been delays to diagnosis and the treatment of other health conditions. The results of this are only starting to emerge now and some will not show until later. This needs to be monitored and better understood. And we all need to talk seriously about how we help Elders recover from the pandemic.

One thing that has shown very clearly from our conversations with Elders and the organisations that they are connected to, is that the Aboriginal organisations and services that care for our Elders are critical for their support and to maintaining social and cultural connection. This is particularly so in times of crisis. The ACCOs, gathering places and Aboriginal services need to be appropriately recognised and resourced. And the Elders need to gather, to be together, to talk and to heal.

Please join with us in the conversations that need to be had about the results of this report. I hope you find the Elder's Cultural Wellbeing report insightful and informative.

Esme Bamblett
CEO, AAL





1. Introduction

Background Information

The Aboriginal Elders Cultural Wellbeing Project was developed through a partnership between the Metropolitan Partnerships, with the Aboriginal representatives of each Partnership involved, and the Aborigines Advancement League who led the delivery of the project. As a result of discussions relating to the impact of COVID-19 on Aboriginal Elders, the project was undertaken to consider how the needs and tailored responses to social isolation may have varied across several different groups of Aboriginal Elders due to COVID-19, including those who are chronically unwell and have dementia.

The Objectives were to:

- Ascertain the cultural wellbeing needs of the Elders in the Melbourne Metropolitan region.
- Gain an improved understanding of issues and needs across a number of Elders groups to address social isolation, loneliness, and mental wellbeing with on-the ground understanding of what works and connections.
- Provide support to Elders to assist them with recovery from any physical or mental health issues that have arisen from social isolation and fear.
- Bring together Elders from across the metropolitan region in a community gathering to promote their cultural and wellbeing, in accordance with COVID-safe planning.

The project deliverables included:

- Undertaking a mapping exercise to determine the needs of Aboriginal community members as a result of COVID-19 including communication needs.
- Undertaking Metropolitan Melbourne yarning circles led by Aboriginal community members in community and residential care to further understand the assistance needed and how it can be delivered.
- Developing a package of resources, tailored to the needs of Aboriginal Elders in the Metropolitan region.
- Putting together and providing essential packs for the physical and mental health of Elders.
- Delivering up to two social events bringing Metropolitan Melbourne community Elders together in accordance with COVID-safe planning.

The Project Reference Group

The governance of the Elders Cultural Wellbeing project included a Project Control Group (PCG) and a Project Working Group (PWG).

The Project Control Group included representatives of:

- the Delivery Partner, the Aborigines Advancement League
- the Office for Suburban Development.





The Project Working Group included:

- Aboriginal Partnership Members from four Metropolitan Partnership areas
- The Aborigines Advancement League CEO.
- Relevant stakeholders determined by Aboriginal Partnership Members and Aboriginal organisations in Partnership regions who work with Elders.
- State and Local Government.
- Three Project Staff.

Evaluation

Evaluation was to be based on the following Victorian Aboriginal Research Methodology (Bamblett, 2010) that included:

- Stories - through the yarning circles
- Waiting - until the Elders are prepared to engage
- Connecting - through interaction with Elders
- Listening - to Elders telling their issues
- Observation - face to face.

However, because of the Covid19 lockdowns, it was impossible to conduct the project with face-to-face meetings and focus groups and therefore this method could not be included in the evaluation. Stories came through the interviews conducted and were useful to ascertain the extent of the Covid 19 restrictions on the Elders.

Data was collected from each of the Aboriginal COVID-19 Recovery groups to ascertain the Metropolitan region's recovery from COVID-19. Specific project objectives and outcomes will be evaluated by the Project Working Group. Data was collected directly from Elders across the Metropolitan region as well as organisations that deal with Elders and any issues they may have.

Limitations

This research is not an exhaustive study. The information is limited to the feedback from the number of Elders that participated. A number of organisations have been identified by Elders and further information was sought from them for this report. This research is not a mapping exercise. It is recognised that many organisations provided services and support to Elders during the pandemic and that they will not all be included in this report.

Surveys

The Surveys were developed by the Research Consultant, the two Research Facilitators and Project Working Group members and were conducted by the two Aboriginal Facilitators who are well-known and very well respected, having grown up in the metropolitan region. They conducted the surveys over the phone and then when the restrictions lifted, through yarning circles and a cultural gathering. The surveys were conducted in the four Metropolitan regions, Western, Eastern, Northern and Southern. Fifty Elders from each region were surveyed to ascertain how they felt about COVID-19. Their responses were recorded and then collated into this report.





2. Elders Responses

Finding out about the Pandemic

When asked how they felt when COVID-19 pandemic was announced Elders responded that they felt terrible, frustrated, shocked, confused and worried. They felt stressed at the thought of something so big happening within their own communities and how it may affect them. Below are some quotes from Elders expressing their feelings at the time:

"It's a really scary thing...I really have high concerns for our Elders and how do we keep them safe. Even young ones, how do we keep them safe to ensure they won't bring it home to their Elders." (Western Female)

"We lost everything. We need to be doing more in our community to help people understand it." (Eastern Male)

"Terrified. I was absolutely panicking. I just felt like people didn't understand how catastrophic it could be." (Northern Female)

When asked about how they felt about the vaccinations, the following comment sums up the feelings of many of the Elders surveyed:

"At first, I was scared but then I got the second shot. And then they start talking about booster shots. I was worried we will be jabbed every 4 months." (Western Female)

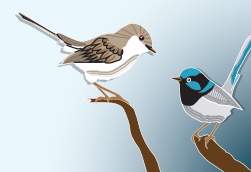
There were several Elders who were not worried about the announcement of the Pandemic at the very start of it. Many of them believed it was not true and therefore did not take it seriously. It wasn't until it got very serious that they started to become more fearful. The fears were broad and included the fear of getting Covid, what vaccination to get and concern about the underlying chronic health issues such as heart conditions that some Elders have.

One Elder said, "When I first heard about it, I wasn't too worried but then I started to realise in time how it was impacting on our lives...and then as the cases increased, I really got worried." (Southern Male)

Receiving Information

The Elders stated that they received information about Covid mainly from television, newspaper, family, and friends. They were watching large amounts of television, the majority of their information about Covid coming from this source, and contributing to the confusion about Covid. One Elder talked about the community grape vine and how they all share information with each other. There were a few Elders who got their information from a local Aboriginal organisation. One Elder stated that the Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative staff were very helpful and had given them the information they needed to know about the vaccinations and what the restrictions were about. She explained

"We were luckier than most Elders because Wathaurong broke it down for us. They told us what to expect before we had it (vaccination) and they helped us to know more about it." (Eastern Female)





The Restrictions

When asked how they felt when the restrictions were introduced half the Elders said they were unhappy, worried, depressed, felt disconnected and scared. Several Elders said that the hardest part of restrictions for them was that they could not connect with community through participating in cultural gatherings which they would normally participate in. The other half said they were not worried and felt it was the best thing to happen. They believed it made them safer and was what had helped them get through the Pandemic. A couple of comments from Elders about the lockdowns included:

"It was fine, only thing was my family who I couldn't see, but then you gotta think about being careful and save yourself and save them." (Eastern Female)

"I was relieved. I knew it had to happen." (Western Male)

Loneliness

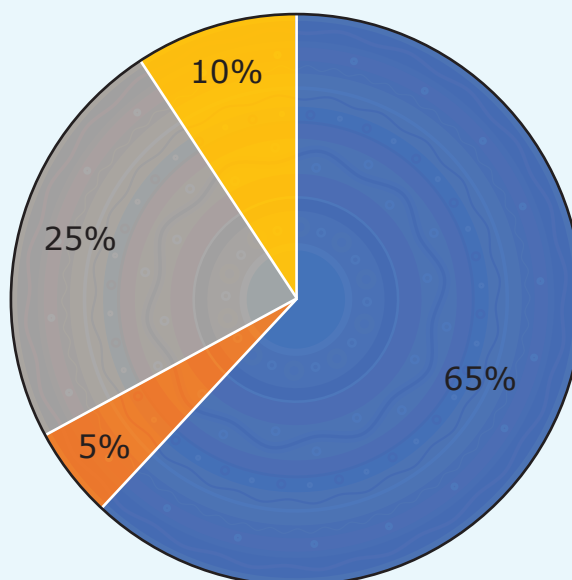
The Elders expressed their feelings that they were very lonely they felt during Covid. While there were different responses to this question the majority felt very lonely and isolated.

One Elder said that "the isolation has been hard. When we had the 5-k rule that was extremely hard, and I was depressed." (East Female)

Another Elder expressed how she felt, saying "In the end once you got up and did whatever little housework you wanted to do or could do, the rest of the day there was nothing to do. I was going through photo albums and looking at photos of babies and getting more depressed." (South Female)

There were several Elders who did not have any problems with being lonely, however the majority of these Elders were employed or in a relationship.

The Chart below shows how lonely Elders felt on a scale of 1 to 10. You can see that 65% of Elders felt very lonely, with those Elders rating the extent of their loneliness between 8 and 10 while only 10% rated the extent of their loneliness as low at 2, 1 or 0.



■ 10-8 out of 10 ■ 7-5 out of 10 ■ 4-2 out of 10 ■ 2-0 out of 10





Barriers that Elders experienced because of the COVID-19 pandemic included not being able to connect to the Aboriginal community, not seeing family and friends, not being able to connect with other Elders, not doing everyday activities like shopping and meeting up with people and not accessing specialists for medical or mental health issues. It was particularly hard for Elders with dementia because they need health worker support and during lockdowns when there was no face-to-face contact, this could not occur. This meant that it was very confusing for these Elders who did not understand what was happening.

While some expressed the need for counselling during this time, they found it hard to access timely and culturally inclusive counselling. They also indicated that they didn't like the fact that they were not being part of the community because they couldn't participate in Elders/PAG/Women's groups.

Cultural Impacts

Another important area that was spoken about was how difficult it was to attend funerals. Some Elders missed out on attending funerals because of the restrictions on the number of mourners allowed, so it affected them because they were not able to grieve for family, friends and community in a culturally appropriate way. Another cultural impact of Covid that affected Elders was when they could not see their family, friends, and community. They were also unable to visit their traditional country and for some of them this was a huge issue. They also stated that they could not connect with other Elders which they felt they really needed during this time. One Elder talked about how it had affected him stating:

"It's very frustrating because it's affected our human rights. We can't go out and do what we've been doing for many thousands of years like going out and enjoying time with family. Our family connection is our main priority these days." (Western region male)

Another Elder said she was okay because she still connected through culture in other ways. She explained that she was "Ok. Still had meetings in a cultural setting even though virtual and culture was always acknowledged respecting one another with acknowledging country and identifying ourselves." (Northern region female)

Financial Impacts

Some of the participants in the project were employed and for them, their financial situation was not as bad as the others. They were able to cope better with their financial bills because they continued to have a good income during this time. However, there were Elders who struggled to manage to keep up with bills and they found that the cost of living was much more expensive during Covid than before which made it more difficult for them. Some Elders commented that they were too scared to go to the large supermarkets for fear of getting Covid and instead went to the smaller ones and consequently, their groceries cost more. In the Southern and Northern region, they found it hard and talked about how they needed more money for bills because they were always at home and groceries were harder to get and were so much more expensive.

A small number of Elders had trouble because they turned to gambling online. They turned to gambling because of boredom and this had therefore increased the financial stress on them. Others used online to connect to and some enjoyed online activities such as Bingo





All the Elders had left the house during Covid but only briefly for reasons such as attending doctor's appointments, getting medical treatment and shopping. Some Elders had the opportunity to go away and see family for a while. Other Elders did meet online because they were working from home and had to use online media for their meetings.

The Elders loved the idea of receiving a care package and when asked what they wanted in the care package they stated items such as:

- A colouring in book
- Food
- Face masks and RAT Tests
- Toiletries
- Positivity books
- Novels
- Creams and oils
- Puzzles
- Paint and canvases
- Food and petrol vouchers

The Elders in the Western and Eastern Metropolitan areas said that there was a need for the care package to include information pamphlets on what community organisations are available to assist them, what Covid is about and strategies on how they can stay healthy. The Elders believed there needed to be more information given to them so they can be prepared if a Pandemic was to happen again. One Elder stated that

"I want our Elders to be looked after more. That's what I'd like to see in a care package. More care which I don't think is happening anymore." (Western female)

Support

When receiving support Elders looked to the local Aboriginal organisations within their regions such as the Aborigines Advancement League, Victorian Aboriginal Health Service and the Aboriginal Community Elders Service (Northern region), Mullum Mullum (Eastern region), Kirrip Aboriginal Corporation and Wathaurong (Western region) and Nairm Marr Djambana (Southern region). They also received support from their family, and this was extremely important for those Elders who were fortunate enough to have their family around during this time. Sadly, there were several Elders who did not receive any support due to lack of knowledge of what the organisations could offer them.

Recovery

When discussing recovery from COVID-19, Elders indicated that the kinds of things they wanted to help them to recover included counselling, attending Aboriginal community events (such as pamper days), community activities and care packages. One Elder said that she wanted to have help reconnecting with community as she explained "Practical help to be able to get back out and reconnect with some community members. Culturally we need a lot of work there because we have not been able to connect at all." (West/East Female) There is also a fear of other variants of COVID and some Elders feel that it is safer for them to stay at home.





The Elders were also asked what activities they have done to try and stay positive during COVID restrictions, Elders said that they:

- Cleaned the house
- Worked
- Yarned with people on the phone
- Played music
- Watched TV
- Did Arts and Crafts activities
- Exercised by walking and moving around the backyard
- Painted
- Meditated





3. Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO's)

Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations were reported as playing an important role in supporting Elders during the Pandemic and lockdowns. There was a huge demand on ACCO workers and many were exhausted by the end of the Pandemic. As a result, some Elders said that at the start of the Pandemic there was a concerted effort from the ACCO's to proactively reach out to the vulnerable community members, however it appeared to some Elders that the Aboriginal service workers got tired as everyone was dealing with their personal and professional lives from the prolonged restrictions.

Aborigines Advancement League

The Aborigines Advancement League (AAL) is Australia's oldest Aboriginal organisation that has focused on Aboriginal welfare issues and the preservation of Aboriginal culture and heritage. It was established in 1957 and continues to provide a broad range of programs. While the AAL is based in the Northern Metropolitan Region and is funded to primarily provide service delivery in Northern Metropolitan region, it also provides Statewide services. The services include the Commonwealth Home Support Program and the Home and Community Care Program for Younger People, the Victorian Aboriginal Funeral Service, Gurwidj Neighbourhood House, the Aboriginal Tenants at Risk Program, the Family Services Program, and Corporate services.

The AAL featured strongly with the Elders who spoke about the organisation helping them during COVID. The League provided a number of different services including dropping off food and pamper packages, providing cultural activity packs for NAIDOC week, shopping for Elders, checking on them over the phone regularly, doing lawn maintenance, arranging to provide medical alert items to Elders in high need and those who wanted them, and sourcing numerous donations to be able to provide extra support to the Elders during COVID-19. They also provided up to date information to Elders regularly on COVID-19 and the State Health Orders that were put in place. The League serviced 75 Elders weekly of the 200 Elders they have on the books. The Elders used the Commonwealth Home Support Program the most because it is a Commonwealth program and staff had to provide services during the lockdowns and restrictions. During this time, all the staff who provided a service to the Elders had to do so through non-contact delivery and, when necessary and if possible, face to face using PPE gear.

The staff became very worried about Elders because they were very fearful and worried about catching Covid. Many of the Elders could not attend funerals or see loved ones in hospital so they were very distraught at times.

The League responded well to the Elders and got them the necessary PPE gear they needed when they requested it. The League had developed their COVID-19 Safe Plan very early in the Pandemic and were able to cater for the Elders. The League is now working on recovery for the Elders to get back to where they were before the Covid Pandemic. They will provide referrals to counselling for those Elders who need it and are very excited to disseminate the care packages.





Mullum Mullum

Mullum Mullum is another Aboriginal organisation that has been very proactive in helping Elders in the Eastern region. Mullum Mullum Indigenous Gathering Place (MMIGP) provides a culturally safe and inclusive space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Melbourne's East to come together to feel connected and empowered. MMIGP supports and facilitates a variety of cultural activities and programs which incorporate art, music, language, and storytelling and provide a range of cultural, wellbeing and community support programs.

They have a Planned Activity Group (PAG) / Social Support Program that has been set up to support Elders in a safe and culturally appropriate way. One of the purposes of the program is to provide advocacy and support for every Aboriginal Elder and people with disabilities living in the Eastern Metropolitan Region community. During COVID they undertook several activities which included:

- Weekly Zoom meetings that were held to keep Elders engaged with the PAG / Elders group.
- Dadirri Healing Sessions that were held every month on zoom.
- Seated Tai Chi every 2 months for 1 hour on zoom.
- Self-Care Packs were provided.
- COVID Safe Reflection sessions to discuss how everyone was going during Covid and to find out if any supports / services for the group may have been required. The self-care packs and reflections sessions were to ask everyone what they did to keep busy, what activities they did during COVID such as gardening, participating in arts and craft activities, jigsaw puzzles etc, and what changed and how they managed themselves and their families
- A Food box drop off was made during the COVID (essential service provider).
- COVID Cuppa Connect and Lunch Zoom meeting was held with the PAG /Elders group – they basically had no agenda, just a yarn about a whole lot of things.

In August 2021, 10 Elders also participated in the development of the book called 'Footsteps of Our Elders' (coffee style book vinyl cover). They finalised the publication and printed the book in December 2021.





Nairm Marr Djambana

Nairm Marr Djambana is a gathering place for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in the Metropolitan Southern region, in Frankston. It was conceived in the late 1990s by local Aboriginal Elders, dreaming of a time and place where Aboriginal culturally safe environment to build cultural pride, understanding and knowledge together and share the cultural wisdom with the broader community in the region. It was officially launched in 2016. As well as an Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisation (ACCO), it recently became a Neighbourhood House.

During the covid pandemic, Nairm Marr Djambana kept their doors open to look after the community; in the words of the Chairperson, to keep them “keep them safe and connected”. To assist them they accessed a small amount of state government funding through the (then) Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

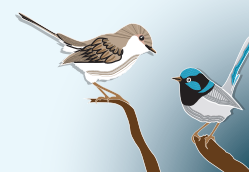


Nairm Marr Djambana kept their Integrated Team Care (ITC) program that cares for people with chronic diseases, in operation throughout the pandemic. They transported people to medical appointments, rather than have them use ubers and taxis which were seen to be a higher risk of getting Covid. They would pick up medicine from the pharmacy and deliver them to people in their homes. The centre provided care packages with fresh food rather than staples, guided by a chef. The chef led cooking classes for the community online, to connect people. There was a focus on native, cultural foods, and dishes such as bush chutney and lemon myrtle scones were prepared. There were also cooking classes organised for children which were very successful in engaging children being home schooled during the pandemic.

Two NAIDOC events were held online during the two years of lockdowns and included an Aboriginal band and the presentation of awards. This was in collaboration with Casey Gathering Place (which is facilitated by the City of Casey and run by Aboriginal workers) to run online BINGO for the Elders. Seventy grazing boxes were distributed to families for the events. Christmas hampers were also distributed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in the community, including a present for each child. Chairperson at the time, Deb Mellett, spoke of the challenge of securing IT equipment to keep the community connected and stated that relationships and trust needs to be built between government and community. With some persuasion Nairm Marr Djambana were able to obtain the equipment needed to keep community members connected with each other.

Deb says that she is very proud of Nairm Marr Djambana and the support they provided to their community during COVID. She said that Aboriginal communities need to be empowered and with that empowerment they can manage really well as this is what self-determination looks like.

“It was a privilege to provide the service to our community”.





Care in the West - IPC Health

Alex Roja has the Care Coordination Aboriginal Health role with the community health provider, IPC Health. IPC run a culturally safe drop in space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their families called the Elders Lounge. It is located at the IPC Health Wyndham Vale Campus and is open weekdays. Alex was part of the team that supported the establishment of the Deadly Kitchen as a gathering place for the Aboriginal community nine years ago. The Kitchen was not able to operate during the pandemic. It recommenced operation in February and the 30 March gathering was the third gathering in two years. It is now managed by the community who all contribute \$5 for the communal meal.

The Deadly Kitchen Elders spoke very highly of Alex and the importance of her support and coordination. Alex spoke about her experience of the pandemic and said that it was a very challenging time. She had to work from home and couldn't support clients in person. She normally attends clients' health appointments with them in person to support them but during the pandemic appointments became tele health, and she wasn't allowed to attend as well. She reports that many people were not able to set up chronic care management plans during the pandemic. She is concerned about the longer-term health impacts of the pandemic restrictions and she knows of clients / community members whose chronic health conditions deteriorated during the pandemic. She said pre-screening hasn't been able to happen for many people and believes the impacts of this on their health will show up later.





Facilitator Reflections

The project's two lead Research Facilitators are Aboriginal Elders. The first Research Facilitator was surprised at how bad COVID was for the Elders, but she always knew the Elders would take care of themselves and get through it. She felt that the project was like seeing a lost family member after being in lockdown for so long. This project gave her something to look forward to and to wake up to each morning. She wasn't sure if anyone else felt how she felt during lockdowns but found out from the project that she was not alone. She explained "I didn't think people felt how I did. Knowing everyone was feeling the same, that gave me the strength I needed to keep going." Out of the project she has been able to gain access to the AAL for some much-needed help of her own.



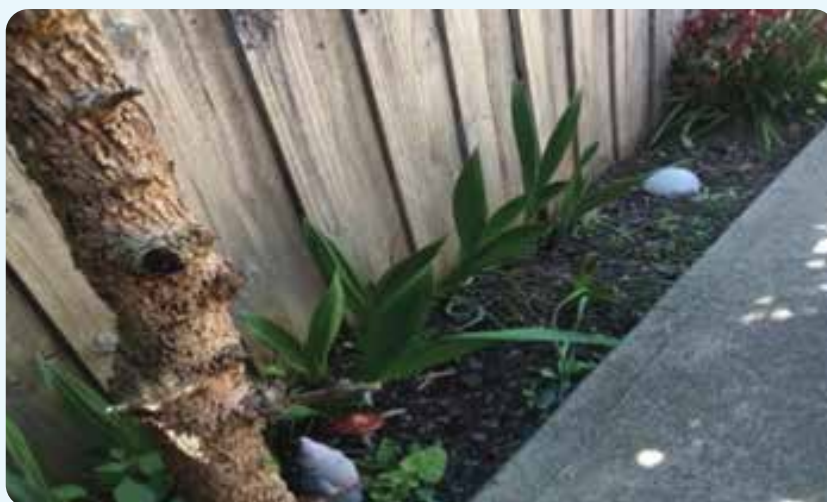
The second Research Facilitator felt that this research project really gave her the chance to connect with Elders she hasn't seen in years. She felt that it was almost a family reunion which gave her a lot of strength to keep going. She was very lonely and isolated herself before the project started so it was very timely for her to begin the project. Due to the isolation, she set up a Facebook page where people could come together and just yarn or send recipes to each other or photos. The project was an opportunity for her to do something not only for herself but the other Elders she believed were also lonely and in need of a platform to socialize with others. She was very thankful for the opportunity to do the project and looks forward to the outcomes.





Case Study 1 – Aunty Dotty Lovett Southern Region

During COVID, one of the Elders was able to take the time to turn her plain garden into an Indigenous Garden. She started the garden during the first lockdown. She planted several plants which included Kangaroo paws and reeds that she uses for basket weaving, Aloe vera plants that she uses for scares and moisturizer and daisies. She ordered her plants online at Bunnings through click and collect. She is also an amazing basket weaver using reef plants and pandanus plants to make these baskets. Below are some amazing pictures of what the garden looked like before and what it looks like now.





Case Study 2 – Aunty Pat Grundy, Aged Care Worker.

Patricia Grundy is an Elder who works fulltime at a residential aged care facility. Patricia spent the first three weeks of the Covid pandemic and lockdown in 2020 in hospital caring for her dying brother, Ernie Chapman. Ernie had bowel cancer which had spread through his body. She took six weeks off work and lived at the hospital for this time, she cooked and cared for her brother. No other family or friends were able to visit him. She said they were not able to have a funeral like they normally would but did manage to have a smoking ceremony in the front of the hospital when he passed away. This was a first for the hospital.

After this, Patricia returned straight to work at the aged care centre and worked for two years straight without taking any leave. She spoke about how difficult it was. She had to wear the full PPE, including headgear and a black apron. There was no air conditioning and no open windows. All residents had to be kept in their rooms alone, not allowed to have contact with other residents and not able to have their families visit. They often did not understand why, and she described the residents as 'devastated'. Some residents contracted COVID, and they lost 12 residents who passed away. She describes the two years as a very busy and sad time. She couldn't see anyone, had to keep herself safe. She was very worried about keeping herself safe so as not to contract COVID, for her own health but she was also very worried about bringing covid into the nursing home and making residents sick. She said she worked all the time, working lots of extra shifts because they were always short staffed.

During the two years of the pandemic, Patricia has not left the Werribee area. She has not been to visit her friends and family in Fitzroy where she grew up, but she hoped to go soon. The day of interview was the two-week anniversary of her brother Ernie's passing. He was a loved member of the Deadly Kitchen and the group marked the anniversary.

Patricia reports that it is still challenging working at the Nursing Home. She still works wears the headgear, there is a regime of constant rapid antigen testing and residents are still only allowed to have two visitors at a time. She says that she is still afraid of catching COVID.



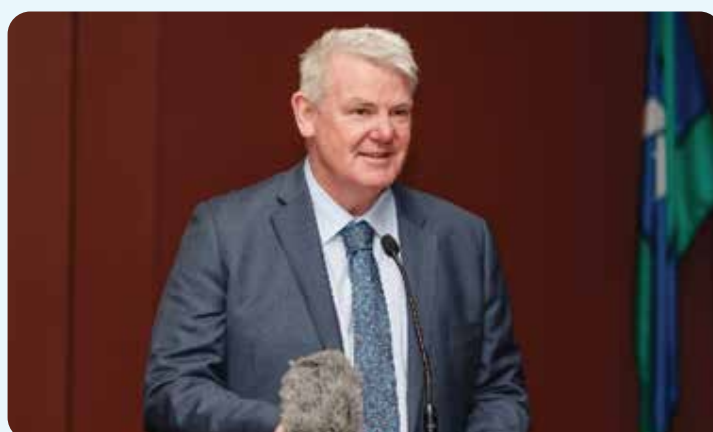


4. Metropolitan Melbourne Elders Social Group Gathering

A Metropolitan-wide Elders group was organized to bring the Elders together in a face-to-face setting, to find out if they had any more to contribute to the report and to meet the Minister for Local Government, Minister for Suburban Development and Minister for Veterans, The Honourable Shaun Leane MP.

At the gathering, the Elders came together in four yarning circles to discuss the effect of Covid on them and their families. The issues they raised included:

- Family funerals where you could only have 10 people attend and this caused family conflict. It was a very heartbreaking time for Elders because attendance at funerals is a cultural obligation.
- No one could go to footy games because they were too scared of catching Covid.
- Our Elders were worried about Covid because they thought they would get it and the messages from the Health Department and on the news was that Elders were the most vulnerable members in the community and that they were passing away from Covid 19..
- People in hospitals were very lonely because could they could not have visitors.
- The Elders could not attend grandchildren's graduations.
- Not being able to see family for long periods of time was very distressing to the Elders.
- They were bored and lonely in isolation.
- They said that it is important to be vaccinated. They felt that even though there were affects from vaccinations for some people, it was because everyone has a different reaction.
- They could not access home maintenance and services and they were worried about the effect on their tenancies.
- It was very lonely.
- There was no social life and some turned to gambling online (suffering in silence).
- They need alternatives. There were no women's or men's groups and they missed the opportunity to mix with other Elders.
- There were no calls or support from the Government Departments.
- Their freedom was taken away.



Minister Shaun Leane
Minister for Local Government
Minister for Suburban Development





Shaun Leane MP 20 hrs · 🌐

Fantastic trip to the Aboriginal Advancement League today to meet with Dr Esme Bamblett and Auntie Doreen Lovet to chat about the Elders in the community who have been brought together by the Elders Cultural Wellbeing Project.

This great project has been keeping Aboriginal Elders connected and supported throughout COVID-19 through phone conversations and yarning circles.

The project has provided invaluable insights into how we can continue supporting Aboriginal communities, and is proudly supported by the [#MetropolitanPartnerships](#), which is focused on building a strong economy, a sustainable future and greater social inclusion.

connection.vic.gov.au/keeping-conversation-flowing-among-aboriginal-elders

[#MetroPartnership](#)
Aborigines Advancement League Inc. Vic





5. Recommendations

This research found that Elders were heavily, potentially disproportionately, impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions.

Many conclusions can be made from the research. In this type of crisis, it is critical that Elders retain connection to community – to other Elders and family – and to culture and country. The use of digital technology was very important in retaining community connection, often new skills were required and accessing sufficient equipment is a challenge.

The research also revealed that Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations and Aboriginal services within mainstream providers play a critical role in supporting Elders in their community. These organisations delivered well beyond their service remit during the pandemic and their resources were stretched thin. Innovation was evident with new ways of connecting and supporting. The ACCOs and other Aboriginal services with state and local government and the private sector needed to be resourced to support local Aboriginal communities on an ongoing basis so there is continuity in programs, support and connection. This needs to be substantially increased in times of crisis such as the COVID pandemic.

The full impact on Elders from the pandemic is possibly yet to be seen. Many Elders had underlying health conditions and their access to care was impacted during lockdowns. Some Elders are still living in isolation and fear. Many Elders reexperienced trauma through separation from family. Further research is needed, as is ongoing resourcing.

The consultation and yarning circles showed that it is critically important to provide the opportunity to Elders to talk about their experience, for them to be heard and listened to. There is value in conversations being shared with other Elders.





Key Recommendations

The following key recommendations are provided to decisionmakers to inform policy and service provision, to support preparation for future events and to strengthen the resilience of Aboriginal communities in metropolitan Melbourne:

1. That Elders have access to technology and education about using technology in the event that lockdowns and restrictions occur again to ensure they are able to connect with their family, friends and community.
2. There needs to be increased funding for the ACCO's who have gone over and above to support communities through the Pandemic.
3. There needs to be provision of ongoing cultural support for the Elders during the lockdowns.
4. Post Pandemic there needs to be investigation and support for Elders to reduce the financial stress on them.
5. There needs to be provision of financial assistance for Elders during and after lockdowns and restrictions, particularly with utility bills.
6. There should be more government support for Elders in times of crisis such as information about what is happening and what Elders can do to lessen the impacts of the crisis.
7. Provision of timely and ongoing counselling support for Elders who have a hard time coping. Counsellors need to reach out to Elders because some Elders don't have the capacity to reach out to counsellors.
8. Provision of opportunities for cultural gatherings for Elders.
9. Despite restrictions allow Aboriginal Elders to attend funerals on their Traditional Country because of their kinship and cultural obligations.
10. Continue service delivery as long as there is a need and not because the crisis has passed
11. More Cultural events should be organized for Elders to come together as a healing and debriefing mechanisms.
12. Extra resourcing should be allocated for Elders to access any medical appointments that they were unable to attend during Covid.
13. Non-urgent medical surgery should be immediately introduced during recovery for Aboriginal Elders who are already suffering from chronic conditions.
14. Funding for the importance of messaging to Elders to access medical appointment post Covid to prevent chronic health conditions.
15. There needs to be systemic recognition of the importance of Country to Aboriginal people's cultural, mental and physical wellbeing. Elders need continuing and uninterrupted access and connection to Country, lands they are on and their Traditional Country.





6. APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Elders Wellbeing Survey

1. How did you feel when the Covid 19 Pandemic was announced?
2. Did you feel this way before COVID and the lockdown was introduced?
3. Where do you get your information on COVID19 – TV, friends, family, social media?
4. Do all the different media announcements confuse you or scare you in any way?
5. Were you worried about catching COVID? If yes, are you still worried?
6. How do you feel about the restrictions because of COVID 19?
7. Do you ever feel lonely or isolated? Or on a scale of 1-10 how lonely and isolated do you feel?
8. What issues / barriers have you experienced because of the COVID Pandemic and the lockdowns?
9. How have the restrictions affected you culturally?
10. 'How connected do you feel to the community and country you are living in?
11. Are there any issues from community and country that could be contributing to how you feel?
12. Have you had any financial issues because of COVID? If so what are they?
13. Have you left your house at all since COVID? If so, what for?
14. What kinds of things would you like to see in a care package?
15. Have you received support during COVID? If so, where from?
16. What help do you need to recover from Covid 19?
17. What things have you done to try and stay positive during COVID restrictions'?

Appendix 2 Metropolitan Elder Support Gathering 30th March 2022

- | | |
|----------|---|
| 10.00 am | Elder's arrive – morning tea |
| 10.30 am | The Hon Minister Shaun Leane arrives |
| 10.35 am | Welcome to Country (led by Aunty Di Kerr, Wurundjeri Elder) |
| 10.45 am | Esme Bamblett introduces Minister Leane and Minister Leane addresses the group. |
| 10.55 am | Aunty Di and Aunty Doreen speak about their experiences of Covid and provide an overview of what they have been told in their consultation with Elders |
| 11.15 am | short break so that the Minister can talk with Elders in attendance. |
| 11.25 am | Aunty Esme provides an overview of the project and reports on the findings |
| 11.35 am | Elders break into two groups and have a yarning circle about their experiences of the covid-19 pandemic (respectively led by Aunty Di and Aunty Doreen) |
| 12.15 pm | LUNCH |





Appendix 3: Keeping conversation flowing among Aboriginal Elders

Article published in the Victorian Connection, 24th January 2022 by the Office for Suburban Development -
see connection.vic.gov.au/keepingconversationflowingamongaboriginalelders

Keeping conversation flowing among Aboriginal Elders



Dr. Esme Bamblett



Aunti Di Kerr



Doreen Lovett

Aboriginal Elders across Melbourne are staying connected with their culture during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

The Elders Cultural Wellbeing project is engaging Aboriginal Elders across metropolitan Melbourne through phone interviews and yarning circles, to better understand the needs of Indigenous communities and help address social isolation, loneliness and cultural wellbeing.

Aunty Esme Bamblett, proud Bangerang, Wiradjuri and Taungurung woman and CEO of the Aboriginal Advancement League, is leading the project which is funded by the Metropolitan Partnerships.

"Elders play a key role in the Aboriginal community and it's important that they are able to continue to connect with the wider community. The pandemic has meant that some of that support and engagement is spread quite thin." The project aims to improve services for Aboriginal Elders and provide some baseline data on how government services can be improved and allocated in the future. The project is important on two levels, Esme notes. The first is a cultural level. "Our mob are all about connection and a lot of that has been lost due to the pandemic. It's been really tough for the Elders, but also for the wider Aboriginal community who value this connection and exchange of dialogue, stories and experiences."

Secondly, the project addresses some of the fears associated with COVID-19. "The reality is, the life expectancy of our mob is not as long as the general population, and there is a lot of fear around that. We want to know the impact of that fear."

Esme is working with Wurundjeri Elder Aunty Di Kerr and Gunditjmara Elder Aunty Doreen Lovett to conduct phone interviews with Elders in their networks.





The Elders Cultural Wellbeing project is being staggered into three stages. The phone interviews will be followed by yarning circles and a forum, which will continue to strengthen the voices of Elders in the community.

"It's important for us to devise programs that Elders want to see, rather than what we think is good for them," she says.

"I'm proud of the development of the Elders Cultural Wellbeing project. This coordinated effort across all the partnerships will amplify the voices and role of Elders in our communities and ensure we are providing relevant emotional, physical and mental support across different regions."

Esme has a wealth of knowledge and passion advocating for the rights, welfare and support available to Aboriginal communities.

As the CEO of the Aboriginal Advancement League, she leads one of Australia's oldest Indigenous organisations, focused on Indigenous welfare issues and the preservation of Indigenous culture and heritage. She also completed her PhD in Koorie Identity and is an elected member of the Victorian First Peoples' Assembly, which will be the voice for Aboriginal people in the next phase of the Treaty process in Victoria.

Esme was a founding member of the Northern Metropolitan Partnership, dedicated to giving the northern suburbs a voice in government decision making.

"Being part of the Northern Metropolitan Partnership has been such a valuable experience, engaging with communities at a local level to drive tailored support."

As the Partnership enters its second term, Esme continues to work alongside the Aboriginal Partnership members delivering the Elders Cultural Wellbeing project, which is the first of its kind to be funded by the Metropolitan Partnerships.

Since 2017, the Partnerships have engaged over 12,000 Melburnians to understand community priorities and work alongside government in building a strong economy, a sustainable future and greater social inclusion.

Almost \$11 million from the 2021-22 Victorian State Budget was allocated to the Metropolitan Partnerships to support Melbourne's communities as they recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

To find out more about the Elders Cultural Wellbeing project and the Metropolitan Partnerships, visit the website.

The Office for Suburban Development engages with local stakeholders and communities to identify their needs and aspirations, and deliver projects to improve local community involvement, infrastructure and services.





Appendix 4: Elders Care Package

- A word search book
- An Aboriginal designed Travel Mug that celebrates the 50th Anniversary of the Tent Embassy
- A Paint by Numbers Kit
- An Aboriginal designed bag
- A \$30 voucher
- Information flyers



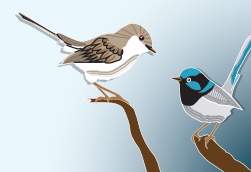
Appendix 5: Aboriginal Elders and Cultural Wellbeing – Two Years of Pandemic Impact Video



The Project

A video was produced featuring some of the Elders who participated in the 'Aboriginal Elders Cultural Wellbeing Project'. This video can be accessed via a live link the attached to the digital version of this report. For further information go to:

www.suburbandevelopment.vic.gov.au/metropolitan-partnerships





Appendix 6: Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge all the hard work and care provided in the delivery of the project – the coordination, research and Yarning Circles. Thank you to:

- Project Leader, (Dr) Aunty Esme Bamblett
- Project Researchers:
 - o Aunty Di Kerr
 - o Aunty Doreen Lovett
 - o Merle Hall (who also wrote the report)

Thank you to the other organisations and networks that helped to connect Elders with the project:

- Mullum Mullum
- Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative
- Kirrip Aboriginal Corporation
- Aboriginal Community Elders Service
- The Deadly Kitchen
- IPA Health
- Nairm Marr Djambana

Thank you also the Aboriginal members of the Metropolitan Partnerships for your time and advice – Karen Jackson, Gheran Steel, Deb Mellett, Michael Brown, Diana David and former member Elke Smirl.

The project was also supported by the Metropolitan Partnerships team in the Office for Suburban Development (Victorian Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions).

A full report will be available at www.suburbandevlopment.vic.gov.au/metropolitan-partnerships
Thank you to Libby Chow and Nick Edrington for making this video.

Acknowledgement is provided to the staff of Aboriginal Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS) and other Aboriginal care units of regional health services who were recognised by Elders for their service provision during the crisis.

And finally, the biggest big thank you is offered to all the Aboriginal Elders who shared their experiences and feelings and stories of the pandemic.

Closing Quotes

"In the end once you got up and done whatever little housework you wanted to do or could do, the rest of the day there was nothing to do. I was going through photo albums and looking at photos of babies and getting more depressed."

".... the isolation has been hard. When we had the 5 km rule that was extremely hard, and I was depressed."

".... practical help to be able to get back out and reconnect with some community members. Culturally we need a lot of work there because we have not been able to connect at all."

