Guidelines for Emergency Managers working with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities

"Minority group citizens tend to suffer disproportionately high negative consequences in connection with the impact of disasters" (Perry and Green, 1982).

By Louise Mitchell

This paper outlines some Australian examples of working with culturally and linguistically diverse communities during and prior to emergency situations. These examples reinforce the message relating to the importance of planning and prior knowledge, communication and a strategic approach involving partnerships, all of which take into account the different cultures and languages that are in a community[1]. This sentiment is reinforced in a newly published document titled "Guidelines for Emergency Managers working with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities". These guidelines are based on the principle of inclusiveness, an approach that is sensitive to the differences and the similarities in our communities. The guidelines were written in an inclusive manner, with diverse representation giving input and a consultative process of development. They signify the continuing development of strategies for emergency managers to ensure the well being of all members of our communities.

The guidelines can be obtained in hard copy from Emergency Management Australia, or electronically from EMA's website http://www.ema.gov.au.

The Guidelines for Emergency Managers working with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Communities[2] (herein called the Guidelines) are timely given the increasing recognition amongst the emergency management industry of the importance of focussing on the relationship with community and the aspects of community vulnerability.

It has been argued in many studies[3] in the US, for example, that natural disasters[4] pose greater vulnerability and risk for racial and ethnic communities[5] than for mainstream communities. Although there are few such similar studies in Australia it is fair to assume that within the very diverse groups of Australia's culturally and linguistically diverse communities there may be vulnerable groups. Fothergill et al (1999) say that the reasons for the greater vulnerability of ethnic peoples are complex because people's vulnerability is determined not so much by the event itself but by the social, economic and political processes by which society creates different conditions for people, e.g. housing, the risk environment where they live, ability to communicate proficiently. I. Kolarik[6] commented that "for emergency services (in Australia) the immigrants and international visitors … constitute a special risk group". He goes on to say that it is of vital importance for emergency managers to be aware of and understand culturally determined behaviour in order to be able to provide culturally relevant and sensitive services in an emergency.

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1 Community is used here to refer to a group of people who live within the same territory or geographic space

2 Indigenous peoples of Australia were not included in this group as it was considered necessary to look at the groups separately. The National Studies Program on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and emergency management is ongoing in 2002

3 Fothergill, et al, 1999

4 the guidelines uses the broader "emergencies" term which includes other disasters such as technological, biological etc.

5 seen here to be synonymous with culturally and linguistically diverse communities
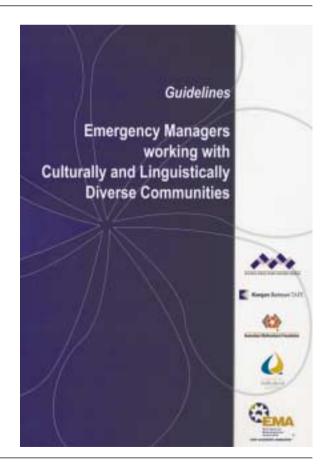
6 Kolarik, I G, 1991

Macedonian dance troupe supporting last year's national launch of the Guidelines at Thomastown, Victoria.

The Guidelines

The Guidelines are another step toward the development of solutions to the potential vulnerabilities faced by CALD communities. Throughout the process of developing the guidelines, there was emphasis from all contributors that knowing your community is an essential first step in the provision of culturally relevant, appropriate and sensitive emergency management strategies. The guidelines encourage emergency managers to get to know their communities with suggestions for:

- identifying who is in a community;
- connecting with a community through partnerships, participation and consultation;
- communicating with a community;
- responding to communities' needs;
- education and training; and,
- monitoring and evaluation.

In these guidelines there is also an emphasis on the planning and preparation for emergency situations. "It is important that groups are not left out of the disaster-reduction (risk management) process; people who are marginalised in the early stages are marginalised later – they need to be part of planning from the beginning"[7].

7 Fothergill et al, 1999

The principle upon which the Guidelines are based is inclusiveness. What this means for emergency managers is that diversity considerations need to be integrated into the corporate management processes of the service agency and organisations. Other key points include the need for a local approach and the development of ongoing relationships, and/or formal or informal partnerships involving trust, credibility, respect for diversity and a willingness to connect[8]. Fothergill et al (1999) recommend that large-scale organisations and agencies working on disasters (emergencies) should "understand the specific diversity issues of each area, plan for changing demographics … and ensure that members of all communities are involved in the disaster reduction process". They suggest that agencies forge connections with neighbourhood houses, churches, etc, so that the community and not outside organisations can decide on what their needs are during a disaster. A number of agencies in Australia are already working to this philosophy and the Guidelines encourage this way of working.

Examples

A number of incidents and situations in Australia and an overseas example applied to Australia give a variety of illustrations of dealing with an emergency when people from different cultures and speaking languages other than English are involved and of the provision of culturally appropriate services. The examples illustrate some of the points in the guidelines about getting to know your communities, partnerships, communication, education and cultural appropriateness. The examples given are:

- From an industry perspective in Australia:
- the tourism industry in the case of the Childers Backpacker Fire;
- the essential services industry in the case of the Sydney Water Crisis; and,
- an emergency services perspective – Fire Preparedness in the Broadmeadows Community.
- From an international perspective:
- East Timorese evacuation to Darwin; and,
- SwissAir Flight 111.

The Childers Backpacker Hostel Fire

The Childers Backpacker Hostel fire occurred at midnight on Friday 23 June 2000. Fifteen people from 6 countries died (4 Australians, 6 Britons, 2 Dutch, 1 Irish, 1 Japanese and 1 South Korean) and 69 people survived the fire[9]. The planning and preparation for this

hostel fire cannot be commented on at the time of writing because the coronial inquest is still in progress.

After the fire occurred there were communication challenges, particularly from a tourism industry perspective. Strategies to assist in clear communication of information included the provision of free 1800 telephone number for enquires from local and overseas relatives. Issues such as relatives needing information on where Childers was, and the names of the dead not being released for five days, added to the stress of the relatives and to the number of telephone enquires received. The key point learned from the crisis from an industry perspective in relation to CALD communities was:

- the backpacker community uses email services prolifically and information was sent, unofficially, around Australia and overseas using this media. An official use of this media by the tourism industry may enable more effective communication. During this event, the recovery sector, specifically Lifeline, used the Web to facilitate communication.[10]

Since the fire, a number of other strategies have been implemented by different agencies, including a Backpacker Fire Safety brochure[11], which has been produced in a number of languages.[12]

Fire Preparedness in the Broadmeadows Community Metropolitan Fire Brigade, Broadmeadows, Victoria

A number of years ago, the firefighters at Broadmeadows Fire Station in Victoria, used to being perceived by the community as "the good guys" and being accepted with openness, were shocked not to feel this from the migrant community. This lack of open acceptance seemed to be based on a fear of uniform and it was a culture shock for the firefighters. In order to solve the challenge of how to change this, they looked at the demographics of the area and found a significant Turkish population.[13]

The firefighters developed a number of strategies with the aim of breaking down the relationship barriers:

- 5 firefighters began learning the Turkish language and culture (3 are continuing);
- Partnerships were fostered with the local Migrant Resource Centre, local Islam schools and Turkish media (firefighters have spoken on local Turkish radio and SBS radio);

8 Ashby, J, 2001
9 http://old.smh.com.au/news/specials/natl/backpack downloaded 22 Aug 02 3.00pm
10 Lifeline Bundaberg, Childers Palace Backpackers Fire Report.
11 http://www.fire.qld.gov.au/backpackers/bakpackmain.htm downloaded 22 Aug 02 2.00pm
12 Mitchell, L, August 2001 presentation from Koopman, D, Queensland Tourism.
13 Verbal comm Paul Scott, MFBB, Victoria.

- Information sessions and open days were conducted for Turkish elderly citizens groups at the fire station and this has been expanded to include other migrant groups such as the Arabic Community. These sessions included displays, lectures on fire safety with interpreters and fire safety demonstrations.
- The firefighters attended local festivals whenever possible with displays.

These initiatives (which are continuing) have resulted in greater trust and enhanced communication with local ethnic groups as evidenced by the following:

- During an emergency such as a kitchen fire, which is fairly routine for the firefighters, but a distressing experience for a resident, the firefighters have used the Turkish language to help to calm the situation. When the resident realised the firefighter could speak enough Turkish to communicate, the panic began to dissipate and communication was enabled[14];
- the purchase of smoke detectors by several families[15]; and,
- Less fires of a cultural nature (e.g. burning off in backyards) because of an enhanced understanding of other options.

Sydney Water Crisis

The water crisis occurred in the period July to mid-September 1998. The supplies of water to Sydney were possibly unsafe to drink at certain times in this period. Sydney has a significant multicultural community base, many of whom do not speak English. The ability to communicate with the whole population, including ethnic communities, was considered possibly a matter of life and death, and therefore critical in responding to this crisis.

Prior to the crisis, Sydney Water had worked with the Ethnic Affairs Commission as one of their key stakeholders to inform the communications for their education campaign. Some of these campaigns targeted the multicultural community. As part of their corporate communications plan, all education campaigns were and still are completed in the major community languages.

Given the previous work Sydney Water had undertaken in communicating with the multicultural community, it was considered essential to reach this group during the Crisis. Sydney Water set up a telephone hotline, staffed with bilingual people who spoke the more common languages in NSW. During the six-week period, Sydney Water constantly updated hotline information. The NSW Ethnic Affairs Commission[16] played a crucial

advisory role regarding the hotline, and also in organising translations of press releases and their delivery to the ethnic press.

"The key points learned from this crisis in relation to CALD communities were:

- maintain ongoing communication lines with the Ethnic Affairs Commission who can provide links with networks in ethnic communities; and,
- organisations must respond to the whole community, including people of CALD backgrounds, through processes built into existing structures.

The NSW Premier commended Sydney Water for the way it communicated with ethnic communities during the water crisis."[17]

East Timorese Evacuation to Darwin, Tent City 1999

In September 1999, over 1800 evacuees from East Timor arrived in Darwin to be housed for an unknown time. Before they arrived, the co-ordinator of the Reception centre was appointed. He called upon the members of the East Timorese/Portuguese community on the Police Ethnic Advisory Group (PEAG) in Darwin to assist with forming a management committee to assist with the running of the Reception Centre. Through PEAG meetings on a monthly basis, partnerships, friendships and trust had developed over a two-year period with the local East Timorese/Portuguese community[18]. The Northern Territory Police Fire and Emergency Services (NT PFES), as the co-ordinating agency, wanted the Darwin East Timorese community to have a meaningful role in assisting with the reception and care of the Timorese evacuees because of their knowledge, skills and understanding of the requirements of the Timorese evacuees. Each member of the management team (elected by the Timorese/Portuguese community) accepted specific areas of responsibility in relation to the management of the centre. Areas of responsibility included: Co-manager, Accommodation, Health, Meals, Interpreters, Logistics, and Recreation/Sports activities.[19]

In order to meet the cultural and linguistic needs of the evacuees from East Timor, consideration was given to factors such as food preparation, sleeping arrangements, religious observances, gender specific roles etc. In practical terms, this meant that upon arrival in Australia East Timorese evacuees were:

- greeted by members of the local East Timorese community

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14 Verbal comm Paul Scott, MFBB, Victoria.
15 Ashby, J, February 2001.
16 A member of Sydney Water's Customer Council.
17 Ashby, J, February 2001.
18 Verbal comm Supt. Mick Van Heythuysen, NT Police
19 Verbal comm Supt. Mick Van Heythuysen, NT Police

- addressed in their native language, Tetum
- counselled by sisters from the Catholic church; and
- were spoken to by fellow countrymen during explanation sessions for accommodation arrangements, facilities and other aspects of the reception centre.

A result of the approach taken was the establishment of relationships between evacuees, the local church representatives and the local East Timorese/Portuguese community members. These provided much-needed multiple, personal and social meanings, where relationships were identified and practices and values taken into account, thus providing much-needed human interaction and cohesion.

The experience enabled the cultural and social diversity of the Northern Territory community to be embraced, and used in partnerships, to minimise the impact of the evacuation on the already affected East Timorese.[20]

SwissAir Flight 111

This disaster occurred in 1998 when the SwissAir Flight 111 plunged into the sea off Nova Scotia, Canada. 229 people lost their lives and only 69 bodies were recovered. The operation was centred around recovery rather than emergency response. The passengers on the aircraft came from 14 countries and from 4 religious backgrounds, so during the days that followed, emergency managers strove to involve all relatives and had strategies to provide information to them on a structured and regular basis.

Swissair, Air Canada, Air Nova and Delta Airlines provided trained volunteers to protect and assist the families of the crash victims. Air Nova's Care Partners program ensured that families of Swissair passengers had an advocate to provide assistance during their journey and their stay in Nova Scotia and in particular to provide emotional support. Care Partners were appropriately matched with families. Bilingual Care Partners and clergy representing all faiths were available for the families and the Swiss-German community of Nova Scotia assisted with communications.[21]

Great emphasis was placed on the importance of recognising religion, language and culture in the management of this disaster. J Whitmore from the Australian Federal Police, who studied the response to the disaster, has emphasised the importance of preparation and planning for the possibility of a disaster like this occurring in Australia: "They were confronted by many delicate problems, none more exacting than negotiating the various cultural and religious requirements of the passengers who were Christians, Jews, Muslims and Hindus"[22]. The guidelines stress the importance of emergency managers developing ongoing relationships and partnerships with all cultures and faiths in the community. This may enable community assistance to be accessed in the event a disaster like this occurred in Australia.

These few examples illustrate the importance for the emergency manager of knowing your community and fostering relationships where possible with all cultural groups in that community. In the recovery operations conducted after the Childers Backpacker Hostel Fire and SwissAir Flight 111, the cultural, linguistic and religious diversity added to the communication and logistical challenges. Building in these diversity considerations well before the recovery process, in the planning and preparation stages[23], illustrated in the Fire Preparedness in Broadmeadows, Sydney Water Crisis and East Timorese Evacuation examples appears to reduce aspects of community vulnerability as well as enabling the community to assist emergency managers, where appropriate.

For the emergency managers wanting to connect with their CALD communities, the guidelines also have a contact directory, listing agencies catering for CALD communities' needs. These agencies may be able to source local contacts. Also listed in the guidelines are a number of readily available resources for managing and understanding cultural diversity. Practical references to faith communities and religious diversity, recruitment from ethnic communities, multilingual communication guides, cultural diversity for health professionals and to death, dying and grieving can all be sourced.

Conclusion

The many diverse CALD communities and groups within communities in Australia are potentially vulnerable in the context of emergencies. Many variables may contribute to this vulnerability, including language, culture and familiarity with the environment in which they live. A set of guidelines for emergency managers, who are working with CALD communities, has been developed collaboratively as a result of a national workshop held at the Emergency Management Australia Institute in May 2001. The guidelines speak of the importance of including all groups in the community in the planning and preparation for emergencies as well as response and recovery phases. Examples from Australia and involving overseas countries illustrate the importance of knowing who is in your community and building trust and understanding through the

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20 Supt. Mick Van Heythuysen, NT Police

21 Reaney, J, 1999.

22 Mayhead, G, 2000

23 in EM terminology: prevention (through education in examples) and preparedness phases

development of relationships, particularly prior to emergency events. To enable emergency managers the time to work proactively and with appropriate strategies with their diverse communities, organisations need to support and adopt key principles such as those articulated in the Guidelines around inclusiveness.

Acknowledgments

Importantly, the Guidelines were developed collaboratively and with extensive consultation and the development and production is a result of many people's efforts. They began with a three-day workshop that was held as part of the National Studies Program in May 2001 sponsored by Emergency Management Australia, in partnership with the National Police Ethnic Advisory Bureau and Kangan Batman TAFE. A steering committee set up the workshop, and participants in the workshop were invited from across Australia. They included representatives from local councils, the Red Cross, the Police, Emergency Services, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Migrant Resource Centres, Ethnic Communities, and Tourism Authorities. During this workshop a research paper written by Jenny Ashby was presented,[24] and this identified some of the questions and challenges facing emergency managers when dealing with culturally and linguistically diverse communities. The workshop participants went on to develop draft guidelines. Following the workshop a writing team was identified and they continued with the development of this document. The draft document was distributed and comments were gratefully received from participants and wider afield. The writing team completed the first version of the Guidelines in July 2002.

The expertise, time, willingness to work toward a common goal and goodwill exhibited by all participants from the beginning of the project made the production of the guidelines possible.

As well as the National Police Ethnic Advisory Bureau and Kangan Batman TAFE , the Australian Multicultural Foundation was also actively involved in the development of the guidelines. They have been endorsed by the Council for Multicultural Australia.

Addendum to the guidelines: The reference to Jenny Ashby's research paper (no.4 in references) was omitted in error from the guidelines. It was sourced for the example on page 10 – Sydney Water Crisis, NSW, 1998, and on page 13 – Metropolitan Fire Brigade, Broadmeadows, Victoria. In addition the authorship of this paper, listed on page 28 of the guidelines should read: Ashby, J & Associates, with assistance from L Mitchell. ,

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24 Ashby, J & Associates, 2001.