



## Acknowledgements

This report acknowledges the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation who are the traditional owners of the land from which this report was written. This report pays respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of the Kulin Nation who are the traditional owners of the land from which CISVic member agencies conduct their work. It is recognised that sovereignty was never ceded. *'Always was and always will be Aboriginal land'*.

This report acknowledges the tireless efforts of the CISVic peak body and the CISVic member agencies in responding to community need during the COVID-19 pandemic. This report also acknowledges the work of Dr Jennifer Borrell who assisted the author in researching and compiling this report.

# Contents

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>4</b>
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC .....	4
CISVIC MEMBER AGENCIES .....	4
OUTLINE OF REPORT .....	5
<b>METHODOLOGY</b> .....	<b>6</b>
AIM .....	6
METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH .....	6
<i>Data source: member meetings</i> .....	6
<i>Data analysis: thematic analysis</i> .....	7
<i>Process</i> .....	8
<b>FINDINGS</b> .....	<b>10</b>
ADAPTING SERVICE DELIVERY.....	11
COMMUNITIES AND MEETING COMMUNITY NEEDS .....	13
THE VOLUNTEER WORKFORCE.....	16
IMPACT OF GOVERNMENTS .....	18
COLLABORATION .....	21
AGENCY CONCERNS .....	22
COMMUNITY EXPERIENCES .....	24
SUMMARY OF INTERSECTING THEMES.....	25
<b>DISCUSSION</b> .....	<b>27</b>
EXPOSING SYSTEMIC INEQUALITIES .....	27
HIGHLIGHTING RESILIENCE TO OVERCOME ADVERSITY .....	28
PUTTING THE UNITY IN COMMUNITY.....	29
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>31</b>
<b>INTERIM RECOMMENDATIONS</b> .....	<b>33</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>34</b>

# Executive Summary

## Background

The identification of a novel coronavirus in the closing days of 2019, very quickly became a defining feature of 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact communities on a global scale, and it is predicted that the world will continue to feel the health, social and economic consequences of the pandemic for years to come.

In the Australian state of Victoria, two waves of COVID-19 resulted in 20,345 confirmed cases of the virus and 819 deaths. Protective health measures designed to suppress community transmission of the contagious respiratory illness, such as lockdowns, social distancing, and industry closures, resulted in social and economic consequences. Community agencies that provide Emergency Relief, information, referrals and support played a vital role in supporting communities through the pandemic. As essential services, Community Information and Support Victoria (CISVic) member agencies complemented the health response by supporting people materially through the provision of food, toiletries, and vouchers and by assisting with paying rent or utility bills. They also continued to provide holistic support and wrap-around services such as casework and referrals.

This research has been undertaken by the CISVic peak body to understand the experiences of CISVic member agencies and communities during the pandemic, including the challenges and agency responses.

## Aim

This research explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on CISVic member agencies and the communities they serve, and the responses of CISVic member agencies to COVID challenges as they arose.

## Methodology

A thematic analysis was conducted on CISVic membership meetings. These meetings were convened by the CISVic Executive Officer and attended by member agency managers. The meetings were held over Zoom, which is a cloud-based video conferencing platform. The common points of discussion in these meetings were identified as themes.

## Findings

This research found that although the experiences of agencies differed, these experiences were centred around some key themes. Agency managers revealed seven common themes that defined their experiences of the pandemic:

1. *Adapting service delivery*
2. *Communities and meeting community needs*
3. *Volunteer workforce*
4. *Impact of governments*
5. *Collaboration*
6. *Agency concerns*
7. *Community experiences*

The impact of COVID-19 on CISVic member agencies and communities, and how agencies responded to ensure that community need continued to be met during the pandemic, can be described through these themes.

In addition, there were three *underlying* themes that underpinned the experiences of CISVic member agencies during the pandemic. These themes were:

1. *Systemic inequalities* which were revealed through the different communities that agencies supported.
2. *Resilience* in overcoming adversity which was seen in the ability of agencies to be flexible to the changing circumstances in order to continue doing the work they have always done.
3. *Unity* which was seen in the collaborations that community agencies formed to support community members and connect with other community organisations, businesses and groups.

These three themes, while not immediately observable, were important to understand the impact of, and the response to, the pandemic in greater detail.

## Conclusion

Overall, there were many implications of COVID-19 for CISVic agencies and communities, and the pandemic posed many challenges. However, as essential services CISVic member agencies demonstrated resilience and flexibility in their commitment to serve their communities during this crisis. Agencies were able to continue meeting community need, while abiding by protective health measures and keeping workers and community members safe. Without community agencies during this time, many people would have been left without support. Community agencies were reliable and available, ensuring people has access to food and financial aid. This research demonstrates the importance of community in overcoming hardship.

# Introduction

## The COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted communities on a global scale. Cases of the virus have been reported in almost every country in the world, with those that have not had cases still experiencing the effects of the pandemic (Johns Hopkins University 2020 cited in Aljazeera 2020, McCarthy 2020). It is predicted that the world will continue to feel the health, social and economic consequences of the pandemic for years to come.

The identification of a novel coronavirus in the closing days of 2019, very quickly became a defining feature of 2020. The World Health Organisation (WHO) named this novel coronavirus 'COVID-19' and on 11 March 2020 declared COVID-19 a pandemic (WHO 2020). COVID-19 is a contagious respiratory illness spread primarily through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose (WHO 2020). People who become infected display symptoms such as a fever, dry cough and fatigue. While most people experience mild to moderate symptoms, older people and those with underlying medical conditions have a higher chance of experiencing serious symptoms such as breathing difficulties and chest pain. Preventing the spread of the droplets requires measures such as social distancing (staying at least 1.5 meters away from other people) and wearing masks. It is estimated that one per cent of people who contract COVID-19 will die and more research is needed into the ongoing health effects for those who recover from the virus (Cheng 2020). A vaccine has yet to be developed.

As of 6 November 2020, there was a total 48,580,403 reported COVID-19 cases and 1,238,812 deaths, globally.

## CISVic member agencies

Victoria experienced two waves of COVID-19 and as of 6 November 2020 had reported a total of 20,345 confirmed cases and 819 deaths over the course of the pandemic. Both waves required protective health measures that included lockdowns, social distancing and business and industry closures. The second wave required the wearing of masks, and further business and industry closures. These measures were to limit contact between people in order to suppress community transmission of the virus.

Community Information & Support Victoria (CISVic) member agencies were tasked with supporting communities through this health, social and economic crisis. As essential services ensuring people had access to food and financial support during this time, services had to quickly adapt to ever changing circumstances. CISVic member agencies are community-based agencies that provide Emergency Relief, information, referral and support services. They assist people experiencing both personal and financial difficulties and aim to be holistic and wrap-around services. As community agencies, CISVic members play a role in responding to emergencies, disasters and crises both on a personal and individual level, and on a large-scale level such as during bushfires and the current pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed existing inequalities in Australian society. The social services and community sector have long advocated to reduce inequality and injustice. They strive to uphold human rights and challenge oppressive systems. This advocacy work came to the fore during this time.

During the pandemic, many people lost their jobs and sources of income, and experienced social isolation. Income support systems excluded groups of the community, leaving some people with no income and no support. CISVic member agencies continued to operate throughout the pandemic ensuring that people's basic needs were met by providing food and financial aid, while continuing to offer casework and other services, all the while protecting the health of workers and the community. This report explores how CISVic agencies responded to the pandemic, adapted their services, overcame challenges and continued to meet community need.

## Outline of report

Following this introduction, the next section details the methodological process that was undertaken to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on CISVic member agencies and the communities they serve, and, the responses of CISVic member agencies to COVID challenges as they arose. The next section describes the findings, presented through seven key themes: *adapting service delivery, communities and meeting community needs, volunteer workforce, impact of governments, collaboration, agency concerns* and *community experiences*. The following section provides a discussion of the findings and describes three underlying themes: *systemic inequalities, resilience* and *unity*. The final section provides concluding remarks on the key themes and underlying ideas reflected in the CISVic membership meetings.

# Methodology

## Aim

The aim of this research is to explore:

- the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on CISVic member agencies and the communities they serve, and,
- the responses of CISVic member agencies to COVID challenges as they arose.

The findings from this research will be used to inform CISVic of the experiences of the member agencies during the two lockdowns. It may also be used to inform submissions about government responses and their effect on the Emergency Relief sector and communities. In addition, the report may be used to inform the design of future programs.

## Methodological approach

In order to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on CISVic member agencies and communities, and agency responses, a naturalistic inquiry was undertaken, augmented by a thematic analysis.

### Data source: member meetings

The data source used for this exploratory research was CISVic membership meetings which are convened by the CISVic Executive Officer and attended by the managers of CISVic member agencies. The appropriateness of using membership meetings in this research can be justified by understandings of naturalistic inquiry.

Naturalistic inquiry is:

... an approach to understanding the social world in which the researcher observes, describes and interprets the experiences and actions of specific people and groups in societal and cultural context (Armstrong 2010, p. 880).

Naturalistic inquiry is particularly 'valuable for exploratory research... when little is known' about the research topic (Armstrong 2010 p.880). This highlights its relevance as a methodology for understanding the COVID-19 pandemic, as the pandemic's capacity to impact CISVic member agencies and communities is little known by virtue of the novel nature of this virus, the resulting 'once in a lifetime' pandemic and the ongoing nature of the health crisis.

This form of inquiry is a 'nonexperimental and non-positivist' research approach (Lincoln 2007, p.1) which recognises that sense-making activities are meaningful forms of data in social and human research (Lincoln 2007). The membership meetings, similar to focus groups, are meaning making processes (Liamputtong 2001) because the information sharing undertaken in the meetings are dialectical interactions that construct collective understanding.



Within naturalistic inquiry, 'purposive rather than representative or random sampling methods' (Armstrong 2010 p.881) are used as participants are chosen based on the purpose of the research. This underpins part of the choice to use membership meetings as a data source. These meetings directly serve the purpose of this research because managers are interacting with both the operational structures of the agency and the community members who have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The functionality of the member meetings is to share information, resources and support across the membership, and this allowed for data to be gathered from first-hand and timely accounts.

The use of these meetings was both a methodological and ethical decision. Gathering data in this way, reflects naturalistic inquiry methods such as naturalistic observation. Naturalistic observation is when the 'activities of interest are those manifested in everyday situations' (Armstrong 2010, p. 885). As these meetings were a pre-existing arrangement, naturalistic observation could occur in which agency managers were aware that the meetings would be used for research purposes but because gathering data for research was not the sole purpose of the meeting, the flow of information was organic and natural. This almost invisibility of the researcher combated the affect that being the subject of research attention can have on those being observed (Armstrong 2010).

It also reflects the ethical considerations of conducting research during a public health crisis. Throughout the pandemic, agency managers have dealt with an increased workload and reduced capacity. These meetings to share information and resources with the peak body and other agencies was an existing commitment. It would be highly inconsiderate to arrange for separate interviews or focus groups to gather this same information when agency managers did not have the time or resources to do so.

In analysing data obtained from naturalistic inquiry methods or from naturalistic observation, researchers look for 'repeated patterns' (Armstrong 2010, p.881). Researchers then undertake a process of interpretation which 'refers to making sense of what patterns or themes might mean' (Armstrong 2010, p. 881).

Therefore, it is appropriate to undertake a thematic analysis as a method of interpreting and generating meaning from the membership meetings, in order fully explore the impact that COVID-19 had on CISVic member agencies and communities, and the associated experiences and responses.

### Data analysis: thematic analysis

A thematic analysis is a qualitative method employed to organise and interpret data in rich detail by identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (Braun & Clark 2006). Thematic analyses can be used across various epistemologies and it's flexibility to do so is one of its many benefits (Braun & Clark 2006).

This analysis is informed by an interpretationism epistemology. Interpretationism posits that the 'substance for description and analysis' (Borrell & Boulet 2005, p. 26) is people, the world they live in and the meaning they attribute to what happens in the world. It recognises that there is a reality but that humans deal with reality through inter-subjectivity (Borrell & Boulet 2005). Therefore, making sense of the world comes from engaging with the people who directly experience the phenomena the research is

exploring. Interpretationism acknowledges the subjectivity of the researcher in the research process as a 'meaning-giving social being' (Borrell & Boulet 2005, p. 26). It is a vital part of the thematic analysis to disclose the researcher's epistemological stance, so the way in which meaning is constructed is clear (Braun & Clarke 2006, Lincoln 2007).

Given this position on thematic analysis, it is important to note that themes do not emerge from data. Instead, themes are generated (Braun & Clarke 2006). This acknowledges the active role that a researcher plays in applying a theoretical and epistemological stance to the data (Braun & Clarke 2006). Disclosing these assumptions allows the research to be evaluated and for research on similar topics to be carried out in the future (Braun & Clarke 2006).

Braun and Clarke (2006) describe six steps to undertaking a thematic analysis. They define a theme as something that is 'important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set' (2006 p. 82, emphasis in original). In order to conduct a thematic analysis data is coded by identifying 'interesting features' (Braun & Clarke 2006, p 87) across the entire data set. This analysis is an inductive analysis which means that coding occurred without 'trying to fit into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher's analytic perceptions' (Braun & Clarke 2006, p 83). This means coding was driven by what stood out within the data source rather than looking for something specific within the data. Coding is an iterative process. Once coding is completed, codes are grouped into possible themes and then themes are reviewed, refined and defined. The final analysis uses extracts from the data to exemplify the themes and tell the story of the research (Braun & Clarke 2006).

In addition to being adaptable to a range of epistemologies and theoretical perspectives, an advantage of thematic analysis is that it is flexible in order to meet the needs of the study to produce a detailed account of the data (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules 2017). Thematic analyses are structured approaches to interpreting and describing data, and therefore, can be useful in 'summarising key features of a large data set' (Nowell *et al.* 2017, p.2). A disadvantage of thematic analysis is that its 'flexibility can lead to inconsistency' (Nowell *et al.* 2017, p.2), especially if one is unsure of how to conduct a rigorous analysis. However, this research attempts to offset this disadvantage by having two researchers cross-check the themes. This is discussed in more detail below.

## Process

During the COVID-19 pandemic, CISVic member meetings were held using the online platform Zoom. This thematic analysis was conducted on CISVic membership meetings from 24 March to 28 October.

**Table 1: Dates of Membership Meetings**

24 March 2020
1 April 2020
22 April 2020
28 April 2020
6 May 2020
27 May 2020
10 June 2020
24 June 2020
8 July 2020
22 July 2020
5 August 2020
2 September 2020
16 September 2020
30 September 2020
14 October 2020
28 October 2020

Membership meetings were convened by CISVic’s Executive Officer remotely (via Zoom) from the Stage 1 lockdown in March, when social distancing was first required. Between 10 and 20 agency managers attended each meeting. All meetings were recorded through video recording via the Zoom platform. Meetings were recorded for the purpose of being used for this research. Note-taking by the author and another researcher occurred during the meetings, and additionally, notes were taken upon revisiting the Zoom recordings by the author.

The notes were inductively coded using NVivo 12. Reoccurring points of discussion (themes) were grouped together. Emerging themes were cross-checked with a second researcher. Cross-checking is an important part of ensuring validity when undertaking a naturalistic inquiry and thematic analysis (Armstrong 2010). Cross-checking can look like a few different types of methods and this analysis utilises triangulation. Triangulation involves ‘confirming congruence among multiple sources of information’ (p. 882) and this is the process that was undertaken when emerging themes were cross-checked with a second researcher. Notes from both researchers were compared, highlighting similarities and discussing any differences.

Following triangulation processes the final report was written.

# Findings

This chapter discusses the findings of the thematic analysis. A thematic analysis was conducted on CISVic membership meetings in order to understand how COVID-19 impacted member agencies and communities, and how agencies were responding and adapting. There was a total of 16 membership meetings included in this thematic analysis. The meetings were convened by the CISVic Executive Officer via Zoom and attended by agency managers. These meetings occurred over a period of eight months. During these eight months, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to develop. The Victorian experience of the pandemic can be described as having four phases<sup>1</sup>, however, each phase is by no means distinct. These phases can be described generally as:

- Entering lockdown
- First wave
- Thinking about reopening
- Second wave<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, the findings from this thematic analysis encompass these four phases of the pandemic and reflect the experiences of agency managers across these points in time.

Two researchers took notes on each meeting. Each meeting was also recorded via the video recording function on Zoom in order for quotes from agency managers to be accurately transcribed. The notes taken captured the discussions within the membership meetings word for word. From these notes, reoccurring topics of discussion were coded and grouped into themes. The themes are the findings that are presented in this chapter. There were seven substantial themes that commonly formed the foundation of discussion during the CISVic membership meetings. These were: *adapting service delivery, communities and meeting community needs, volunteer workforce, impact of governments, collaboration, agency concerns and community experiences*.

Each of the seven themes are arranged under the subheadings below and discussed in turn. Each section begins with a description of the theme, and how the theme demonstrates the impacts of COVID-19 on community agencies and communities and/or the challenges that agencies and communities faced during the pandemic. The themes are illustrated by quotes from agency managers in order to describe the experiences of CISVic member agencies in greater detail.

---

<sup>1</sup> This report does not analyse the *Reopening* stage of the pandemic that took place beyond 28 October 2020. However, *Reopening* could be seen as the fifth stage of the Victorian experience of the COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>2</sup> Stage 4 restrictions lifted on 28 October 2020.

## Adapting service delivery

The *adapting service delivery* theme captures how agencies modified the way they delivered services in order to continue meeting community need. It describes the impact that COVID-19 had on delivering services and the challenges that agencies had to overcome in order to continue providing assistance during the pandemic. Discussions about adapting service delivery were most prevalent during March and April when agency managers were first navigating the pandemic. As essential services these agencies needed to quickly adapt in order to continue meeting community needs while ensuring the health and safety of community members, paid staff and volunteers. They also needed to operate within government guidelines around social distancing, COVID safe plans and lockdown restrictions. This was an ongoing process as agencies had to constantly adapt to the changing circumstances of the pandemic. As many people were plunged into crisis by this pandemic, it was essential that agencies were able to stay open and provide aid to the community.

CISVic member agencies provide a range of services such as Emergency Relief, information and advocacy. Prior to the pandemic, most services were delivered face-to-face and agencies came into contact with many community members, volunteers and paid staff daily. However, due to the human-to-human transmission of the virus, this type of contact had to be drastically reduced. Agencies had to make decisions about which services they could continue providing, how these services could be delivered safely, and which services would have to be put on hold. In other words, agencies chose to adapt in a variety of different ways. Most agencies 'went remote' indicating that they were still open for service delivery, however, only some staff were allowed on site and interactions with community members were modified. The quotes below describe how agencies began to modify service delivery, with one agency engaging in both remote and face-to-face service delivery while another went completely remote.

We're in a modified service lock-down where reception doors are closed, and we have a gated area with modifications so we can have some client facing work. We're doing e-vouchers as well and have found it's working quite well. But there has still been an overwhelming need for some client-facing services with paid staff members and assertive outreach. (24 March 2020)

Switched to phone-based services from last Monday. Everything is conducted over phone. We've been posting vouchers out and are trialling e-vouchers. The post is expensive. We're also still able to help people with other crisis stuff (car registration, etc.) Non-verbal clients can photo or message their needs. (24 March 2020)

Most agencies moved to '*doing telephone appointments*' (24 March 2020) for Emergency Relief and casework. Services such as financial counselling were also delivered over the phone in some agencies while other agencies chose to temporarily stop and instead refer people to agencies that were continuing to provide it. Home deliveries, pick-up, mail and email were all used to get people the help they needed during this time. Vouchers for Emergency Relief were posted or e-vouchers were sent via email. Many agencies arranged to do home deliveries of food parcels, although some agencies were able to allow community members to pick up food parcels from the agency in a COVID-safe manner. One agency described '*running a modified fresh food program*' (24 March 2020) where '*food [was] already bagged, rather than client's being able to access it themselves*' to reduce possible cross-contamination. Agencies adapted their services to maximise the help they could provide while still adhering to

guidelines. The quotes below describe systems that agencies implemented in order to maintain social distancing.

We are however in the fortunate position of having an interior lockable security door. We can talk to clients through the door, which is what we're doing. We've also created a physical barrier with a card table and a note to 'stand behind table'. They can put their Centrelink card on the table so we can read it, and then we put the voucher on the table. (24 March 2020)

We're working in a similar manner to [another agency], everything is closed down in terms of roller door and door. Clients are still coming. We're doing everything over phone and then leaving the food parcel or food voucher at the door for the client to pick up. There is no contact at all between the client and the Community Support Worker/staff member. (24 March 2020)

These quotes capture the creativity and innovation of many agencies to ensure that people still had access to food and financial relief during a time that many people had no income to purchase basic goods. These discussions dominated membership meetings held early in the pandemic as agencies shared the ways they were adapting their service delivery with other agencies. This sharing was emblematic of the unity that agencies displayed during this time to ensure that each community was given the best supports possible.

The volunteer workforce, which will be discussed as a separate theme below, also had an impact on service delivery. Many agencies lost a lot of their volunteer workforce during the pandemic which reduced the capacity agencies had to do their work. Some agencies closed completely for a period of time while others had to reduce service delivery hours. Many agencies adapted their delivery so volunteers could either work from home or do '*back of house operations such as filing [or] express posting vouchers to people*' (24 March 2020) from the agency, while the service remained closed to the public. The quotes below capture the voice of an agency manager trying to adapt their services with the reduced volunteer capacity.

At this point in time the service is closed, we have a number of older more at-risk volunteers and it was agreed upon by the Committee of Management that we would close the service for the time being. Whilst we would like to move to remote service delivery, our difficulty is that it would be very difficult for our volunteers and fall to only a small handful of people to do. (24 March 2020).

As the pandemic progressed, agencies continued to adapt to restrictions. Phone intake and assessments continued to be the most popular way to deliver services. Different agencies trialled home delivery services, e-vouchers and electronic funds transfer (EFT) than the ones who had initially set up their service delivery that way. In May, many agencies began planning to reopen, either with reduced hours or limited volunteers. The process to reopen once again involved ensuring that services were delivered in a COVID safe manner. For some agencies, venue size posed limitations. The implementation of rules such as one person per four square metres, was a barrier to bringing volunteers back to the site which affected service delivery. This is illustrated in the quote below.

With relaxing of restrictions volunteers want to come back but the problem is space, with social distancing we can't have many more people in (a) space than what we currently have. (It is) going to be a challenge to keep volunteers interested and involved but we can't fit them in the space. (27 May 2020)



In a true testament to the agencies, some began working on how the agency '*might benefit from the changes*' they had to make during the pandemic and what parts of the modified service delivery could be kept beyond the pandemic to improve service (10 June 2020). However, reopening was disrupted by the second wave of the pandemic and a second lockdown in metropolitan Melbourne and then rural and regional Victoria. The quote below captures the general sentiment from the agency managers, illustrating that although it was extremely disheartening to be going back into lockdown, the agencies already had all the measures in place to continue service delivery during the pandemic.

[We're] going back to where we started from, everything is in place now we've been there before and done it before, we know what to expect, [and] we know what we have to do, disappointing but it is what it is. (8 July 2020)

The *adapting service delivery* theme captured discussions that the agency managers had which focused on how service delivery was modified during the pandemic. The ability for agencies to adapt in response to changing circumstances demonstrates the incredible resilience and commitment that agencies had to continue meeting community need in whichever way they were able. The next theme discusses those community needs in more detail.

## Communities and meeting community needs

The theme *communities and meeting community needs* refers to the groups of people that agencies saw throughout the pandemic and the common requests for assistance that agencies received. This theme describes the impact that COVID-19 had on different parts of the community. The challenges that people faced as a result of the pandemic were reflected in their appeals for help to agencies, which also demonstrated the needs of the community. The challenges for the community during the pandemic were by no means homogeneous. Waves of demand ebbed and flowed with some agencies experiencing high demand during times that other agencies were quiet. While the location of each agency somewhat determined the demographics of community members seeking help, it was the JobSeeker and JobKeeper eligibility criteria, determining who could access income support, that had the greatest impact on which community members most often seen by agencies. As similar cohorts of people were presenting to agencies across the state, the membership utilised the joint platform and unity under CISVic to advocate for people excluded from income support.

This theme is divided into two parts: *communities*, and *community need*. The first part of this theme is the communities that were presenting to agencies over this period. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in temporary or permanent closures of workplaces, which led to unemployment. While there were income support systems in place, not everyone was able to benefit from these systems and those who could often found the support inadequate. CISVic membership agencies were able to help those excluded from other supports or needing more support. The intake of new clients was common during the pandemic. Agencies reported seeing three key groups of people. The first was people who were newly unemployed and had no experience with the income support system (Centrelink) or the Emergency Relief system. The second group was international students who were not eligible for JobSeeker or JobKeeper payments. The third group was migrants on visas that allowed them to live and work in Australia but not access income support. There were two groups of community members that agencies reported

seeing less of: existing community members of the service and people experiencing homelessness.<sup>3</sup>

Agencies saw ‘quite a few people who [were] newly unemployed and [were not] familiar with the [Emergency Relief] system’ (24 March 2020) or had no knowledge of help being available. This group of community members was common because many newly unemployed people could no longer meet their pre-COVID living expenses as income support like JobSeeker was far less than their usual income. This was reversed in the case of community members who were already receiving JobSeeker and had previously relied on agency assistance, because the increase in the rate helped to lift them out of poverty, albeit temporarily. This is captured by the quotes below.

[We’re] prioritising clients that don’t normally contact us and are newly unemployed who don’t know to come to us... (24 March 2020)

[We’ve had an] increase in numbers. The regular cohort has reduced because they’ve got the stimulus package and they’ve been getting more money and not needing us as much, but as soon as that package comes to an end, that’s going to be the crunch. [We’re seeing] larger numbers of those new to unemployment and people who have never used our services before. (20 May 2020)

During the pandemic there was a huge increase in international students requesting help from agencies. One agency reported: ‘[We have an] increase in international students... international students fall through the gaps’ (20 May 2020). Many of these students were in industries that were closed during the first and second lockdown such as hospitality. Left without an income, the eligibility criteria for JobSeeker and JobKeeper excluded international students from receiving income support. As a result of the shared experiences across the CISVic member agencies, the CISVic peak body decided to undertake advocacy work to raise awareness of the systemic factors that left international students without any form of support and were able to secure funding to help assist international students presenting at CISVic member agencies.

Agencies began seeing a ‘shift’ (8 April 2020) in types of people presenting to agencies. Many agencies started to see ‘Asylum Seekers or [people] on a Bridging Visa who [were] recently unemployed and not entitled to supports’ (8 April 2020). Community agencies stepped up to help asylum seekers, refugees and migrants who had been excluded from government support. The quotes below capture the voice of two agency managers trying to assist community members on various visas.

People with bridging visas without income are being helped at least once a month probably more. (27 May 2020)

We are really concerned about the group of people who have visas that allow them to work in Australia but if they can’t work, they are not eligible for any income support, we’re seeing quite a few, a lot of households and families... they don’t even get family tax benefit and they can’t get rent support, [we are] heavily supporting those households. (5 August 2020)

As the pandemic unfolded, the situation grew more dire for people without income or income support. The need continued to grow for community members made vulnerable by the lack of support provided to them from the government. The quote below

---

<sup>3</sup> Some agencies saw an increase in people experiencing homelessness but most agencies reported a decrease because the Victorian government as well as The Salvation Army and Launch Housing were housing people during this time.



illustrates the systemic factors which were oppressing people. It also demonstrates that despite this oppression being an ongoing issue since JobSeeker and JobKeeper were introduced to exclude certain communities, nothing was done to include or support them.

Emergency Relief is busy, yesterday was very busy, that might be the beginning of the JobSeeker reduction, still lots of people with no income on the visas that don't allow people to access income support but lets them work and live here. Housing service(s) won't help them with rent because it doesn't fit into the policy - rent can't be more than 30 per cent of income but because they have no income, they won't help them. (We are heavily helping those families with rent. (30 September 2020)

Other groups of people that agencies saw included senior community members and people who had tested positive to COVID or were waiting on test results and had to isolate. Senior community members began feeling very isolated and throughout the pandemic the impact on older generations became more apparent, as demonstrated by the quote below.

Volunteers are noticing more client issues are arising (because of isolation), older generation who are used to looking after their grandkids, people who have recently lost their partners, lots of grief. (2 September 2020)

The second part of this theme is community need. The need in the community was far reaching. Agencies assisted many with living expenses including food, rent and utility bills. Agencies reported that '*most people were looking for food support*' (24 March 2020) early in the pandemic, and this remained a consistent need in the community. Agencies were also providing food vouchers for supermarkets. Food relief became a huge part of agency responses because people had no income to afford day-to-day expenses. The below quote captures many of the supports that CISVic member agencies offered during this time, reflecting the need in the community.

[We're] seeing a lot of new clients and lots of returning clients after four, five, six, 10 years. Very few of our previous ongoing clients which will change once the \$550 (COVID supplement) is taken away. We've been getting a lot food donations, doing food vouchers, paying a lot of utilities, paid rent, paying registration and petrol for cars. [A] lot of our people are new to JobSeeker and Youth Allowance and a lot of people in housing crisis in a motel in the area. [We're] supporting them along with Launch <sup>4</sup>, helping them with food vouchers, chemist, payment of bills. (30 September 2020)

Family violence was also a concern during the pandemic, and some agencies saw an increase in community members experiencing this. Assisting family violence victim-survivors was made particularly difficult due to the use of technology which became a prominent part of remote service delivery, as well as social distancing. Technology is vulnerable to hacking and recording. This made it particularly difficult to ensure safety while conducting phone counselling with family violence victim-survivors. The below quotes are illustrative of these concerns and the work agencies have done to assist people in a COVID safe way.

---

<sup>4</sup> Housing service

We have had some feedback that Zoom is not a secure line as it can be hacked so perhaps not a good option for counselling/family violence support. (1 April 2020)

Discovering challenges with family counselling via phone including how workers can establish safety of clients, managing children and the one-hour long session and whether phones can be recorded/listened to. (8 April 2020)

Bit of an increase this week; a lot of people, we're getting new referrals from people with a history of family violence; sat outside with someone last week in full personal protective equipment (PPE) to help. (2 September 2020)

Technology needs were prevalent because of home and remote learning. Families without internet access found remote learning challenging. Many families requested iPads, laptops and data packs from agencies. This period was particularly difficult for families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds as illustrated below.

Have noticed an increase in anxiety of parents and school aged children, particularly with CALD families who may have more difficulty with regards to supporting children with schoolwork and internet safety, language barriers etc., which is creating new tensions in the home. (22 April 2020)

Technology also posed difficulties for people experiencing homelessness who did not have a phone to contact agencies, and older people and community members who had difficulties hearing, reading or speaking. Some agencies were able to provide people experiencing homeless with phones, write letters to elderly people and set up photo messaging systems for people with other difficulties.

This theme described the types of community members who were presenting to agencies during the pandemic and the most common requests for assistance. For the most part, the community groups that agencies were engaging with needed support because of inadequate income support or being left out of income support provisions altogether. Agencies did see a reduction in existing community groups but were gravely concerned about what will happen when income support returns to its pre-COVID rate. The quote below demonstrates the commitment of agencies to meet community need.

It's tough and we have to put ourselves into the shoes of clients, how can we make it easier for them. Everybody that comes to our door is in desperate need. [We're] making parcels bigger so they don't have to come out as often; snack bags make people happy. Families are all at home now; everybody is snacking at home and trying to keep kids happy. (5 August 2020)

## The volunteer workforce

CISVic member agencies are run predominately by volunteers. Some agencies are run solely by volunteers, others have a mixture of volunteers and paid staff. *The volunteer workforce* theme describes the impact that COVID-19 had on the volunteer workforce and therefore, the capacity of agencies to do their work.

The volunteer workforce was severely impacted by the pandemic with many volunteers being especially vulnerable to COVID-19 because of their age. Restrictions on how many people could fit in a space and having to undertake remote service delivery because of the pandemic also impacted volunteer capacity. The reduced capacity put pressure on paid staff and remaining volunteers, particularly meeting the levels of data

reporting required in funding arrangements. It also impacted the way services could be delivered and opening hours of the agency. The ongoing nature of the pandemic left many volunteers isolated for long periods of time and agencies ensured that they kept in contact with these volunteers to acknowledge the challenges that everyone was facing.

Similar to both service delivery and community needs, the volunteer workforce differed across agencies. However, the main similarity was that agencies lost a lot of their volunteer workforce and this impacted service delivery. Age was the biggest factor in losing volunteers but also general anxiety surrounding the pandemic contributed to volunteers deciding to either work remotely or not volunteer at all. Elderly volunteers were most at risk of contracting severe cases of COVID-19. Some agencies described losing *'half'* of their volunteers at the start of the pandemic (24 March 2020) or having to only open *'three half-days per week because [they] don't have enough volunteers to do anything other than that'* (24 March 2020). Other agencies had an abundance of volunteer support.

The service does not have any paid staff and is run entirely by volunteers. Half of our volunteers have said they won't be coming into agency, which is understandable. (24 March 2020)

We've got lots of volunteers, there is a strong art community in [local government area] and there have been lots of offers from people with vans and time to help with food deliveries. (24 March 2020)

(The) biggest struggle is with volunteers because of the age bracket and compromised health... (8 July 2020)

The loss of volunteers was compounded by the added workload, especially in regard to additional data requirements and by the inability to train new staff due to restrictions limiting how many people can be on a premise. Agencies found it difficult to complete the data entry being asked of them with a limited number of volunteers and increased demand for assistance from the community. Many agencies sought out *'experienced volunteers'* in order to overcome barriers to training new staff and to alleviate pressure, but this proved difficult. One agency *'purchased a headset so two people can listen to the interview for training'* as a way to overcome these barriers (8 July 2020).

Agencies acknowledged the reciprocal relationship of volunteers – volunteering assists agencies to meet community need within funding limitations and it also helps volunteers maintain community connections. Agencies ensured that they kept in contact with them by *'checking in with volunteers to see how they are'* (24 March 2020) and at one agency *'each of [their] committee of management members made contact with a couple of volunteers each, caught up with them, let them know [they] care, [and] a lot of the volunteers really appreciated that'* (16 September 2020).

Volunteer numbers continued to fluctuate well into the second lockdown as new volunteers came on board and previous volunteers either came back or left. Some agencies found that due to job losses, people had spare time and had *'lots of people offering help'* (2 September 2020) while others had *'volunteers who [had] been with [them] for eight or nine years say they won't be coming back, [and] some volunteers [are] not keen on telephone interviews'* (16 September 2020). Once again social distancing and venue size was a problem preventing volunteers from returning to work

on site, as shown in the quote below.

With our volunteers we've had a number working with us remotely because all our services are remote, as we plan to go back into site, we've got to figure out how volunteers fit in with that. Lots of volunteers (are) champing at the bit to get back into that; we don't anticipate a problem with volunteer workforce as we go back to site. (30 September 2020)

However, as the second lockdown progressed, agencies faced new challenges with the volunteer workforce. They found that community members were presenting with much more complex issues because of the social and economic effects of the pandemic and agency managers started to become concerned about the vicarious trauma that volunteers were experiencing, on top of the existing pandemic related anxieties that staff, volunteers and clients alike shared. This was an unforeseen impact of the pandemic on the volunteer workforce.

One of our concerns is that clients have more complex issues and they are more emotionally challenged, both sensitive and teary which takes a considerable amount from the volunteers to deal with this, vicarious trauma that volunteers are experiencing. We've got a vast majority of senior volunteers on hold at the moment because of health reasons and COVID, big concern that this is going to be too stressful for senior volunteers to return to. (We are) thinking about how we're going to manage, possibly needing to say that things have changed a lot. How (do) you handle that transition or lack of transition for volunteers that have been on hold for quite some time because a lot has changed? Realistically I don't think our senior volunteers will be coming back this side of Christmas. In an effort to keep them connected we are doing a virtual afternoon tea, we've been trying to get people digitally ready to participate on Zoom and not getting a huge take up. (We've) shared videos on what to do and offered one on one support, dropping off cups and cookies and a bingo game. That's one of the other challenges; some of our more senior volunteers don't have the capacity to work remotely for us. I'm keen to hear how to help senior volunteers transition or look at another type of volunteering. (16 September 2020)

The need for additional training and support for returning volunteers whose valuable experience cannot be underestimated, and the hiring of staff already equipped with training, such as social workers, will be vital in the COVID-19 recovery. One agency reported that they were getting a '*huge number of enquiries through services, both "can we get help?" and "can we help?"*' (2 September 2020) and this quote neatly captures the dynamic within agencies throughout the pandemic, describing that while there was a lot of community need, there were also a lot of people willing to help.

## Impact of governments

The theme *impact of governments* describes how governments at all levels influenced the work community agencies did during this pandemic. This theme demonstrates how the decisions that governments made to address COVID-19 impacted CISVic member agencies. All levels of government had a large influence on how agencies operated and what services they were able to provide. Federal Government had an impact on the income support that people received which in turn influenced the different communities that agencies saw. State government had an impact on restrictions and lockdowns which influenced how agencies were able to operate. Local government influenced the

direct support the agency received. This support included grants, advertising the service and redeploying council staff to agency sites. All governments had an impact on the funding the agencies were provided during this time. This theme is therefore divided into three parts: council, state government and Federal Government.

The relationships between agencies and councils differed greatly with some local governments being very supportive and others having almost no input. Local governments worked alongside agencies on a pragmatic level. One agency said council was helping them '*access another location that will meet more social distancing requirements*' (24 March 2020) in order to safely deliver service. Another agency described entering into a '*partnership with the [council] to [provide] more central support for local clients whereby staff from the [council] will be doing the food delivery to people in need*' (24 March 2020). Councils often worked in tandem with agencies, referring community members to agencies and contacting agencies to offer assistance. One council helped assist '*older people and register them for home delivery by supermarkets*' while council another did the food deliveries themselves to '*people who [couldn't] leave their home*' (2 September 2020). Councils also provided financial assistance through grants that allowed agencies to work efficiently and effectively during the pandemic. Grants ranged in value and agencies were able to purchase a range of items with these grants. One agency upgraded their phone and IT systems with a council grant to help them with remote service delivery. Some councils also redeployed staff to assist with Emergency Relief and food distribution.

Some councils formed groups or committees in order to approach the pandemic with a collective perspective and ensure that communities were being provided with the resources and support they needed. One of these committees brought together council representatives, Victoria police, Red Cross and a response and recovery consultant, as well as the CISVic member agency. The quote below illustrates the benefits of such collaborations.

Sitting on the Council's Pandemic Group ... has been really good and led to a few referrals to the agency, both from clients but also from local business and clubs who want to support the agency. (22 April 2020)

Unfortunately, not all agencies experienced the same level of support. Some councils were less responsive to the needs of the agencies. These agencies often described their relationship and engagement with council as an '*ongoing frustration*' (8 July 2020). One agency struggled to gain their local council's support to advertise in a council newsletter that the service was open during the pandemic and could help community members in need.

In terms of state government support, CISVic obtained funding from the Victorian Government Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions to employ 51 workers for six months, through the Working for Victoria scheme. This enabled CISVic to put caseworkers and support workers into agencies that had lost volunteers and alleviate pressure for existing paid staff that had worked throughout the pandemic without having a break. The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) included the CISVic Executive Officer in meetings regarding the hard lockdown of the public housing towers. Despite not having an agency in the area, it was important for CISVic to be part of the meetings to ensure the representation of community voice and for CISVic to be prepared in case other towers went into lockdown. DHHS also offered the opportunity



for agencies to apply for grants in the food relief space. This is demonstrated in the quote below.

In terms of DHHS money, we're currently providing 200 cooked meals a week from a variety of sources. People love them. (It's) been really good food; it's been a real bonus. (The) food is fantastic, so in terms of the money we might be thinking about trying to find some ongoing sources of cooked meals for our clients. (30 September 2020)

The state government also impacted agencies through the implementation of protective health measures such as the wearing of masks, social distancing, rules about how many people can occupy the same space at the one time, reasons to leave home, travel restrictions and lockdowns. This impacted how agencies operated, and in many cases added to their workload. One example of this was completing travel permits to allow staff to travel more than five kilometres to deliver food parcels to community members. Agency work was also directly impacted by state government because as businesses and industries were shut down, people employed in those industries required support from community agencies.

The Federal Government Department of Social Services (DSS) provided funding for services that had existing DSS funding. This was a great relief for many agencies who were in desperate need of funding. The money was able to go directly to the community and provide for the practical things that people needed. One agency put some of their DSS money toward '*monthly meat vouchers for clients*' (24 June 2020) to ensure that people had access to nutritional and quality food. While the extra funding helped community agencies keep up with the rising need, agencies continued to require more funding because the need in the community was so high.

In terms of stage 4 challenges, issuing \$20,000 of assistance a month, and if the numbers continue to rise, we'll have to give people less to spread the money further. We'll run out before the end of the financial year if we don't get more DSS funding. (5 August 2020)

Along with funding, the DSS required data reporting to document how agencies were using the money and what agencies were experiencing daily to inform future government decisions. While the reporting was an important communication and offered DSS an insight into what was occurring on a community level, it did put extra pressure on already understaffed agencies. DSS collected data on a weekly basis about DSS-funded aid. Some agency managers were also given the opportunity to speak directly to DSS on the phone and pass on valuable frontline accounts.

In responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, governments at all levels had to make critical decisions that would have long and lasting impacts on people. The consequences, both positive and negative, of these decisions greatly impacted community agencies and communities. It was through these decisions, that COVID-19 impacted agencies.

## Collaboration

*Collaboration* describes the partnerships that community agencies formed during the pandemic in order to meet community need. This theme describes the positive impact COVID-19 had on bringing communities and organisations together to address the negative impacts of the pandemic. Navigating the pandemic has been a community effort on a global scale. For agencies, partnerships became vital for service delivery. Partnerships between councils and agencies were discussed above but other collaborations included community donations, other community agencies and Emergency Relief providers, transport services, charitable foundations, medical professionals, food shares, cafes and restaurants, Rotary clubs, Centrelink, the RACV, and universities and TAFEs. Some of these collaborations involved other organisations offering agencies a service or a donation of goods, while others were about the agency reaching out to connect to other services in order to reach more community members. One agency worked with a foundation that provided '*clients with cheap mobile handsets so that they can still connect with the necessary service*' (1 April 2020) while a local Emergency Relief network provided another agency with '*\$5000 to fund PPE equipment and update the existing website to better refer people*' (22 April 2020). Restaurants partnered with agencies to deliver food to community members which helped people access food, helped chefs stay in work and also helped farmers because their produce was still being purchased. This was the same for local businesses where agencies purchased '*meat packs with the local butcher who allows clients to choose the meat they want*' (27 May 2020). This assisted both local businesses and local people. One agency was able to have food delivered to rooming houses by partnering with a '*local housing organisation*' (22 April 2020). Centrelink and medical facilities collaborated with agencies to advertise the services of the agency to the wider community and one local chemist helped fundraise toiletries for an agency.

Agencies received 'really good support' (8 July 2020) from their communities. Many agencies described the donations they received from individuals and businesses as generous. Food, money, and toiletries were all common donations. Agencies also had mask donations and one agency had a '*local lady [make] 100 reusable masks [for them]*' (2 September 2020). Below are two experiences that agency managers had:

Enquires are huge but community supports are huge. (There's a) steady stream of people dropping off groceries, (a) local high student who wanted to help did a letter box drop and mum and dad are going to drive around and pick-up donated food. Amazing the generosity and compassion that is out there; you'll be astounded at the amount of people who want to help. (2 September 2020)

We've been contacted by local businesses who are saying what do you need, is this something you could use, we got offered skin care products and oils and it was really nice to take that donation, palates worth of stuff, putting them into food parcels or making up pamper packs for Christmas, I don't know, still have an abundance of face masks, were able to deliver 100 masks to another service, if you need any masks let us know. (14 October 2020)

The membership meetings were another way to collaborate and share information and resources across the sector. The meetings provided connection and support for agency managers as well as a space for the CISVic peak body to communicate with member agencies. The meetings provided a way to engage with advocacy and also to feed

information up to DSS. This theme demonstrated that although the COVID-19 pandemic was a situation of crisis, there were still positive impacts and outcomes. The unity of the community enabled challenges to be met and overcome.

## Agency concerns

This theme captures an eclectic range of concerns that agency managers had throughout the pandemic. It describes a variety of concerning impacts that COVID-19 had or was expected to have on service delivery and community members. Throughout the pandemic, agencies had considerable concerns, however, none was more prominent than the possibility of the JobSeeker rate returning to its pre-pandemic level. This concern was pervasive throughout the membership meetings. From as early as May and June, agencies were worried about the possible influx that a drop in JobSeeker payments would cause. From a human rights perspective, managers were appalled that people who had just been brought out of poverty by the raised rate would be plunged back into it by the reduction. Other concerns centred on the initial lockdown process, difficulties in bulk buying food when Coles and Woolworths stopped accepting bulk orders during the stock shortages, ensuring technology was set up to protect confidential information, agency staff shortages, lack of space, and communicating to the community that services were still open.

Agencies were initially '*anxious*' (24 March 2020) about providing support while under lockdown and found it difficult to plan because '*things [were] changing by the hour*' (24 March 2020). During panic buying, agencies struggled to '*buy food in bulk for [the] pantry*' (24 March 2020) because supermarkets stopped allowing bulk buying of food. Another agency said that one of their '*biggest problems [was] accessing [their] database and making sure it meets Australian policies and law*' (24 March 2020). Agencies were concerned about ongoing funding because their '*deliverables*' (24 March 2020) were being affected by the pandemic. Social distancing, venue space and a lack of staff all continued to be concerns for agency managers, as has been discussed through this section.

Agencies had major concerns about the reduction of JobSeeker and JobKeeper payments that had been forecasted by the Federal Government. This was an ongoing concern because agencies were already busy assisting people who had been excluded from accessing income support and had no idea how they would manage when people who had previously been able to cope, had their payments cut. Agencies became increasingly worried about being able to meet the needs of community members who needed more than the agency could provide. They were also worried about the levels of need that would be in the community when the payments got reduced, especially given the loss of volunteers which agencies still expected to be affected by in the closing months of 2020. For some agencies the influx they were concerned about had already begun by the end of October.

[We're] expecting two points when we will get busy, first is when isolation finishes, and people can come out and get services. Second point is October to January because that's when there will be school fees and the government grants will end. Businesses might be able to keep people now, but will they cut people when the grants end? (28 April 2020)



[We're] wondering what it looks like going forward, bracing for September and October, trying to get things ready for that influx. (10 June 2020)

We are so busy; we're averaging 16 or 17 clients in those 3 hours so it's just... the demand is unbelievable. (28 October 2020)

Agencies had increasing anxiety about people without an income or income support such as international students and migrants. The ongoing nature of the pandemic coupled with continuing exclusion from income support systems left agencies unsure of how to meet the growing need. International students continued to be in need and agencies worked hard to raise awareness of their services for people who did not know they existed.

'interested in experience working with people without income because ours are not going to be getting an income any time soon. International students are living in share housing, The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre are paying rent; some people aren't paying rent. (8 July 2020)

International students are saying even their families in their countries can't help them any more, they can't afford to go home. If things don't turn around by the end of the year they'll have no choice but to be deported. (2 September 2020)

Melbourne entered stage 3 lockdown for the second time on 7 July 2020 and stage 4 lockdown on 2 August 2020. This once again changed the dynamic of the pandemic as agencies that had been planning to reopen, had to continue delivering services to the community in a modified way. Loss of revenue from Opportunity (OP) shops being closed for longer periods of time was beginning to affect agencies that had used their OP shop as a significant funding stream. Agency staff were beginning to feel the '*long term effects of stress*' (2 September 2020) and what has become known as COVID fatigue started to become more apparent. Agencies were concerned about the '*sustainability of the service delivery*' (8 July 2020) because of the high levels of pressure due to having so few workers. Caseworkers were '*concerned about the level of complexity coming in and managing that going forward*' (2 September 2020) and that '*levels of anxiety and mental health issues [were] going up*' (2 September 2020). The quote below captures many concerns from one agency manager.

(We are) low on frozen meals. Individual and family meals are not being replenished. Restrictions on travel have made it tricky for people to get frozen meals to them. (We are) running low on enviro bags, people (are) requesting rent, brokerage. We can pay for one month but people need funds ongoing. Jobs are not going to go back quick because they're in hospitality and people who are on visas are not getting government help. (22 July 2020)

By early September some agencies were starting to plan for the Christmas and the end of year period. Once again, agencies faced challenges, a reduced capacity to fundraise, businesses being unable to donate, and social distancing guidelines preventing gatherings like dinners or BBQs. In a pandemic, that has constantly required agencies to innovate. End of the year celebrations was just one more type of service that needed to be modified, as evident in the quotes below.

Starting to take people's names in registrations for Christmas, (but) not sure what Christmas will look like. Our capacity to fundraise has been reduced because businesses that donate usually cannot donate; hoping to offer toys but not sure. (2 September 2020)

In terms of Christmas we usually do a big sit down dinner and people can get toys... (We are) considering a Christmas dinner box, so we can't cook them but giving them a box of everything they'll need. In terms of toys, we're partnering with some of the local toy stores, and seeing if we can pre purchase some toys and do a drive through, which is unfortunate because clients can't pick the items themselves. Our volunteers are coming up (with) lots of ways to engage. We want it to be a celebration to congratulate people for making it through this year and also give people hope: 'I've made it this far and I can keep going and make it into 2021'. (14 October 2020)

## Community Experiences

*Community experiences* captures the stories that agency managers shared with the membership. It describes the impact of COVID-19 on families and individuals. The following quotes are stories that give voice to members of the community, rather than just agency managers. The quote below encapsulates the challenges that one family endured over the course of the pandemic. This would be one example of many families who were able to support themselves prior to the pandemic but were left without any income when the crisis hit.

A beautiful family came in with a (young child) and the wife is ... pregnant - no return to their occupations and they're selling furniture to pay bills. We're doing referrals to the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, Red Cross, Life without Barriers. The help is there but it's not enough. We can't sustain it. (We are) able to pay some bills for them and provide food twice weekly and petrol, (but we) can't pay rent every month. They said 'we're going to end up living in our car.' Really difficult. (8 July 2020)

The following quotes describe some positive stories. The first two quotes demonstrate how vital it is that the Federal Government improves Australia's income support system. People who are forced into poverty need adequate income support in order to provide them with the opportunities to move out poverty. The third quote describes the heartening experience of a community member at a local business that was facilitated by the help that the agency was able to provide.

A homeless client who received the stimulus funds \$750 was able to put this towards bond and move out of homelessness. (22 April 2020)

Family that is housed in a local motel has been supported with food. They're a couple with children. The husband got a job interview and the criteria to secure the job was to have a medical report so the agency paid for the medical report and the husband secured the job. (2 September 2020)

DSS funding went into monthly meat vouchers for clients. One client has a child who is autistic and only eats mincemeat and the local butcher allowed the client to purchase \$30 worth of mincemeat. (24 June 2020)

The feedback that agencies received from community members was positive. People who were new to accessing Emergency Relief were grateful that there was a place that they could go to for help. This theme highlighted some of impactful stories that agency managers shared. It demonstrates the variety of ways that COVID-19 impacted community members directly or indirectly, as well as shining a spotlight on how Australia's systems and structures help and hinder people.

## Summary of intersecting themes

This chapter discussed how COVID-19 impacted community agencies and communities, and, how community agencies responded to challenges as they arose in order to continue meeting community need. These findings demonstrate that agencies were able to help people throughout this crisis by changing the way they provided help. Agencies and community members displayed resilience, innovation, strength, teamwork and compassion. The different impacts that COVID-19 had on the community were described by each theme, using quotes from agency managers to provide richness and depth to the analysis. It is important to note that although the themes were presented separately, they were interconnected. For example, the ability of an agency to adapt their service delivery relies on the workforce capacity they had available to them. The concerns of the agencies, although presented as a distinct category to highlight these worries explicitly, were present in every theme. The needs of the community shaped what services the agency delivered. The amount of funding available, government restrictions, and local government support all influenced what services could be provided and how they could be provided. Therefore, despite the simplified presentation of these themes, in reality, agencies functioned flexibly to respond to many ever-changing factors in a dynamic and novel environment.



# Discussion

This research aimed to explore the impact of COVID-19 on CISVic member agencies and the communities they serve. It found that the pandemic impacted how agencies delivered services and left many people in personal and financial crisis. In this chapter, the findings are interpreted, and three further themes are discussed. While the findings chapter presented 'manifest' themes – themes which were directly observable (directly discussed in the membership meetings), this chapter explores the ideas which underpin these manifest themes, otherwise known as 'latent' themes.<sup>5</sup> These latent themes offer greater depth to this analysis, going beyond the directly observable impacts of the pandemic, to impacts that may be more hidden but are just as important to recognise and understand. Exploring the impacts of COVID-19 on CISVic member agencies and the communities they serve and understanding how agencies overcame the challenges that arose from the pandemic, exposed *systemic inequalities*, highlighted the *resilience* of CISVic member agencies to overcome adversity and illustrated that *unity* is a strength in times of hardship. These three latent themes are discussed in turn below.

## Exposing systemic inequalities

The pandemic exposed and highlighted existing systemic inequalities such as job insecurity, unstable income and inadequate income support. The casualisation of the workforce is one of the leading causes of precarious employment (Johnson 2015) resulting in both insecure jobs and unstable income. Without a sufficient income support system to mitigate these effects, many people are driven into poverty. Prior to the pandemic, Australia's JobSeeker wage (previously called Newstart) fell \$117 below the poverty line per week for singles and \$126 below the poverty line per week for couples (Davidson, Saunders, Bradbury and Wong 2020). During the pandemic the Federal Government implemented a temporary increase to JobSeeker payments, raising these payments above the poverty line, because of the rising levels of unemployment as whole industries were shut down. This increase applied to anyone eligible for JobSeeker, both existing and new recipients. In March, the Federal Government announced a \$550 fortnightly increase to JobSeeker payments and introduced the JobKeeper scheme to assist businesses in covering the wages of part time and full-time employees (DSS 2020). The scheme also covered casuals who had worked at the business for over a year (DSS 2020). The Federal Government provided two \$750 economic support payments for eligible Centrelink recipients who were not already getting the \$550 coronavirus supplement (DSS 2020). Despite these supports, many people were left without an income due to the restricted eligibility criteria of both payments. International students and migrants on Bridging visas and other visas which allowed them to live and work in Australia but did not allow them access to income support were not eligible for JobSeeker payments or JobKeeper payments. Casuals who had worked in the same workplace for less than a year, university staff and many of those who worked the Arts were not eligible for JobKeeper payments. As many people began to lose their jobs temporarily and permanently, people who had never

---

<sup>5</sup> Braun and Clarke (2006) describe latent themes as 'underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations - and ideologies - that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data' (p. 84).

relied on income support before found themselves in a position where JobSeeker payments did not match their pre-COVID income and they could not meet their existing living expenses. Many newly unemployed people were unaware of the supports offered by community agencies. On the other hand, those who had been surviving off the low JobSeeker rate had the opportunity to meet basic expenses and many no longer required the same level of support from community agencies. This shift in the people requiring assistance reflected the inadequacy of the income supports put in place for people in the most precarious employment positions such as international students, migrants and casuals, and demonstrated how raising the JobSeeker rate for eligible people positively improved their lives.

In September, the government reduced the JobSeeker coronavirus supplement to \$250 a fortnight (from the original \$550) and reassessed the eligibility criteria for JobKeeper by introducing two tiers of payments. For JobKeeper, businesses could only claim \$750 for employees who worked less than 20 hours in February and June and \$1200 for those of worked more than 20 hours in either February or June. The effects of the reductions to these payments was unknown at the time this report was written but agency managers expected that more people would be driven into poverty.

## Highlighting resilience to overcome adversity

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the way CISVic member agencies delivered services, the volunteer workforce and the community need they were able to meet. Communities continued to endure hardships but also showed incredible resilience, mirroring the resilience of agencies that were committed to meeting community need.

CISVic agencies were classified as essential services early in the pandemic, meaning they could stay open and deliver service in a 'COVID safe' way. Agencies were innovative when adapting service delivery to comply with protective health measures. Home deliveries, mailing out vouchers and e-vouchers became some of the most common ways to provide people with the material and financial assistance they required. Food parcels were delivered to homes by staff and volunteers to ensure people without income would have food without needing to expose themselves to health risks or face fines breaking travel limits or lockdown measures to get to an agency. Some agencies allowed community members to pick food parcels and vouchers in a 'COVID safe' manner. Intake and assessments as well as case work were conducted over the phone. This was not without its challenges. Not everyone had access to technology, and technology is vulnerable to hacking and recording making it difficult for victim-survivors of family violence to speak to agency staff about the assistance they required. Likewise, some agencies found it difficult to work remotely and ensure database and network privacy was protected. Nevertheless, agencies did an exceptional job in adapting to the various technologies that rose to prominence during the pandemic such as 'Zoom' for meetings and food delivery apps to assist the home delivery of food parcels.

Through modified service delivery, agencies continued to meet the diverse needs of communities, whether it be through food parcels or financial aid. Due to the high numbers of international students and migrants seeking help, these agencies were aiding with rent, car registration, and utility bills more often than usual. Modified service delivery was difficult for people who were isolated and enjoyed agency visits because of

the social connection it offered them. Newly unemployed people were unaware of what it was that community agencies could provide, and some agencies found it difficult to connect with the community to inform them that the agency was open and could provide Emergency Relief. Community agencies stepped up to provide masks, recognising that for community members who could not afford living expenses such as food, purchasing masks would not be a viable option. Some agencies did report a downward trend in community members experiencing homelessness, as well as those who had more disposable income due to the increase in JobSeeker payments. As highlighted above, agency managers continue to be concerned about what further reductions in payments could mean, particularly if the JobSeeker payment returns to pre-COVID levels. This is particularly worrisome due to the level of job loss and unemployment that continues even as Victoria begins to recover from two waves of the virus.

The vulnerability of the volunteer workforce due to the senior age of many volunteers had a huge impact on the services that agencies could deliver with many agencies losing the bulk of their volunteers. This added extra pressure to remaining workers during a time when community need fluctuated. People who volunteered in order to maintain social connections were suddenly isolated and agency managers did their best to reach out and ensure volunteers were supported at home. The loss of volunteers compounded additional data reporting requirements, with agencies having less staff to complete more work. Agencies are concerned about transitioning volunteers back into the workforce, given that that community members are presenting with much more complex issues than before the pandemic. However, volunteers remained crucial to agencies efforts to sustain their communities. Without the volunteer workforce, many agencies would not be able to do the work that they do. Some agencies are entirely volunteer run and continued to stay open throughout the pandemic reflecting the commitment of communities to sustain themselves and help their own members.

## Putting the unity in community

CISVic member agencies were on the frontlines of the community response to the coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic highlighted the fundamental role that community organisations play in their own communities. Agencies were attuned to the needs of their local community and were able to work quickly and effectively to implement new ways of delivering service. Through collaboration and support from all levels of government, agencies were able to respond to challenges that arose for the community, as well, as the challenges posed to service delivery.

Collaborations between businesses, councils, schools, community groups, governments, Victoria Police, other community agencies and individuals allowed CISVic member agencies to respond to communities efficiently and effectively. These collaborations and partnerships brought a whole range of support to both agencies and communities including donations, redeployed staff, vouchers, grants, hot meals and material goods. These networks also helped inform the community of the work that CISVic member agencies do and created awareness of the support systems in place such as Emergency Relief. Agencies were required to report directly to the Department of Social Services, and this enabled the Federal Government to understand what was happening at a community level. Despite the onerous nature of these reporting requirements, the CISVic peak body said that the insights that managers provided were invaluable to the department. It was the hope of many agencies that various



partnerships continue to ensure a more collaborative and collective response to community need in the future.

Community agencies, quite often were able to bypass bureaucratic processes (aside from reporting requirements) and therefore were able to respond quickly. Responses were tailored to the local community which means that communities with higher levels of international students and migrants received culturally appropriate food parcels, while communities with higher populations of people experiencing homelessness were able to keep shower and laundry services running. Community agencies were also beneficial during postcode and suburb lockdowns because they were already there and therefore, quick to mobilise. Community agencies were able to have flexible and innovative approaches to overcoming challenges that they could implement immediately because they knew their local community well. In doing so, these agencies were able to keep the community together, providing the support that people needed to survive.

The willingness and commitment of people to help, through paid work, volunteer services, and donations, demonstrated kindness, generosity and compassion. It reflected the desire of people to give back to their communities. Community agencies also provided much needed social connection for staff and community members alike, whether through offering a chat or utilising newfound technological skills to video chat with volunteers no longer coming into the service. This attempted to alleviate the isolation some volunteers felt. Agency managers played a huge role in developing and nurturing community connections and building relationships. The CISVic peak body also played a role, fostering their own community within the membership meetings. CISVic advocated on behalf of agencies and communities to governments and shared information, resources and support with member agencies. Not only are communities stronger when there is unity, but community agencies are also stronger together.



# Conclusion

The coronavirus pandemic changed the course of 2020. In Victoria, two waves of COVID-19 and the corresponding protective health measures, such as lockdowns, completely changed the way people lived and worked, if not permanently then at least temporarily. CISVic community agencies supported their local communities throughout.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to be both a health and economic crisis. Containing the highly contagious virus to limit the number of deaths caused by COVID-19 and prevent Victoria's health care system from being overrun with severe cases required health measures that had adverse effects on other areas of the community. Community agencies and organisations were critical in overcoming the economic challenges that arose from the protective health measures (such as location lockdowns, travel restrictions, the 'four reasons to leave home,' business closures, the wearing of masks and social distancing rules) that were put in place to mitigate the health risks and effects of the pandemic. Unfortunately, lockdowns and business closures left many people without an income, or with an income much lower than their existing cost of living. CISVic member agencies were integral to providing material and financial aid to the community, continuing the work they have always done, albeit, through a modified service delivery. CISVic member agencies overcame their own challenges in order to deliver services in a way that was safe for staff and community members while still meeting the needs of the community during the pandemic. Agencies complemented the health response by supporting people financially (providing food for people that could not afford food, or paying for rent or utilities), while protective health measures focused on reducing community transmission and suppressing the virus. In addition, CISVic member agencies continued to provide holistic wrap-around services during the pandemic, recognising that people still faced everyday challenges, unrelated to COVID-19.

Membership meetings with agency managers revealed common 'manifest' themes, that is, themes which were easily observable. These themes reflected the impacts and challenges that agencies and communities experienced during the pandemic. The themes were: *adapting service delivery, communities and meeting community needs, volunteer workforce, impact of governments, collaboration, agency concerns and community experiences*. Despite a range of differences between the experiences of agencies in the membership, these were the topics which dominated conversation. Through sharing triumphs and troubles agency managers were able to continually innovate their services and meet the crucial needs of their community members.

There were three underlying themes that were not immediately observable, but which underpinned the experiences of CISVic member agencies during the pandemic. These latent themes were: *systemic inequalities* which were revealed through the different communities that agencies supported, *resilience* in overcoming adversity which was seen in the ability of agencies to be flexible to the changing circumstances in order to continue doing the work they have always done, and *unity* which was seen in the collaborations that community agencies formed to support community members and connect with other community organisations, businesses and groups.

Community support organisations are fundamental during times of crisis because they foster unity and in unity there is strength. Incredible resilience and compassion were displayed throughout the pandemic from both communities and CISVic member agencies. The ability of agencies to adapt to the changing circumstances of the pandemic in order to continue meeting community need ensured that people always had somewhere go for information or support, providing certainty in a time characterised by uncertainty.

# Interim recommendations

## Government

It is recommended that the government does not reduce the JobSeeker rate back to pre-COVID levels. Instead, the government should introduce a permanent and adequate increase to the JobSeeker payment. This recommendation is supported by findings that systemic inequalities had a large impact on the groups of people that sought out assistance from agencies. Existing recipients did not need as much agency support when JobSeeker was increased while new recipients who saw a large drop in their income due the discrepancy between their wage and Job Seek payments needed assistance.

Testing centres need to be reachable by people without a car. One agency reported that a walk-in testing site was set up in their area because many community members needed a car to get tested and they did not have one.

## Agency responses in the future

One agency manager recommended implementing a phone mentor program, where the mentor would be at home available for new workers to call. This would keep volunteers connected the agency and ensure community members are receiving appropriate support.

# References

- Aljazeera 2020, *Which countries have not reported any coronavirus cases*, Aljazeera, viewed 6 November 2020, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/09/14/which-countries-have-not-reported-any-coronavirus-cases/>>.
- Armstrong, J 2010, 'Naturalistic Inquiry', in N.J Salk (ed.), *Encyclopedia of research design*, 1<sup>st</sup> edn, SAGE, pp. 880-885.
- Borrell, J & Boulet J 2005, 'A Critical Exploration of Objectivity and Bias in Gambling (and Other) Research', *International Journal of Mental Health & Addiction*, vol 2, no. 2, pp. 25-39.
- Braun, V & Clarke, V 2006, 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol.3, no. 2, Edward Arnold Ltd, pp. 77-101.
- Cheng, A 2020, *How does coronavirus kill?*, The Conversation Australia, viewed 12 November 2020, <<https://theconversation.com/how-does-coronavirus-kill-130864>>.
- Davidson, P, Saunders, P, Bradbury, B & Wong, M 2020, *Poverty in Australia 2020: Part 1, Overview*, ACOSS/UNSW Poverty and Inequality Partnership Report No. 3, Sydney: ACOSS.
- Department of Social Services (DSS) 2020, *Coronavirus (COVID-19) information and support*, viewed 5 November 2020, <<https://www.dss.gov.au/about-the-department/coronavirus-covid-19-information-and-support>>.
- Johnson, B 2015, 'Equally dressed-up, unequally casual: Different experiences of precarious work in designer fashion retail boutiques', *Labour & Industry: A Journal of the Social and Economic Relations of Work*, vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 1-13.
- Liamputpong, P 2011, 'Focus group methodology: theory and ethics', *Focus group methodology: principles and practice*, SAGE Publications Ltd, London, pp. 15-30.
- Lincoln, Y.S. 2007, 'Naturalistic Inquiry', in G. Ritzer (ed.), *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, p. 1-3.
- McCarthy, N 2020, *The Last Coronavirus-Free Countries On Earth*, Statista, viewed 6 November 2020, <<https://www.statista.com/chart/21279/countries-that-have-not-reported-coronavirus-cases/>>.
- Nowell, L, Norris, J, White, D, Moules, N 2017, 'Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, vol. 16, SAGE, pp. 1-13.
- World Health Organisation 2020, *Coronavirus*, World Health Organisation, viewed 6 November 2020, <[https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1)>.
- World Health Organisation 2020, *Timeline of WHO's response to COVID-19*, World Health Organisation, viewed 6 November 2020, <<https://www.who.int/news/item/29-06-2020-covidtimeline>>.