

# Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council of NSW

Improving crisis communications to culturally and linguistically diverse communities

*The AH&MRC Acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands on which the AH&MRC stands, the lands of the Bidjigal and Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. The AH&MRC pays respect to Elders past, present and emerging.*



**Aboriginal  
Health & Medical  
Research Council  
of NSW**

**Office address**  
35 Harvey Street  
Little Bay NSW 2036  
[www.ahmrc.org.au](http://www.ahmrc.org.au)

**Postal address**  
PO Box 193  
Matraville NSW 2036

**T** +61 2 9212 4777  
**F** +61 2 9212 7211  
**E** [ahmrc@ahmrc.org.au](mailto:ahmrc@ahmrc.org.au)

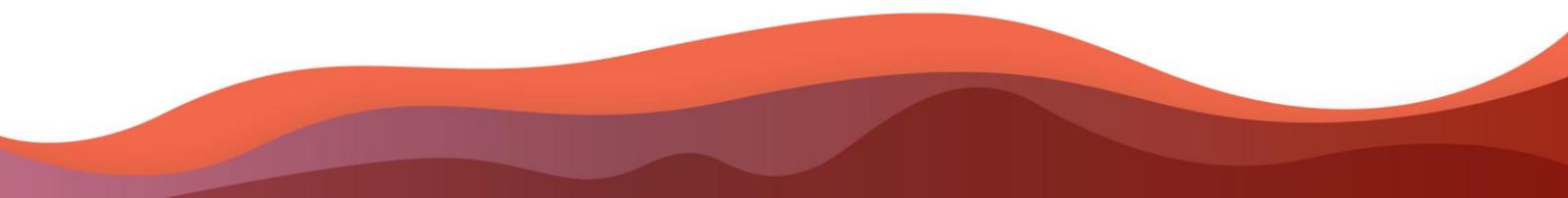
## About the AH&MRC

The AH&MRC is a membership-based organisation and the Peak Body for Aboriginal Health in New South Wales. We represent 49 Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) across the state.

The AH&MRC assists ACCHOs to ensure they have access to an adequately resourced and skilled workforce to provide high-quality health care services for Aboriginal communities. The AH&MRC is committed to the delivery of four key priorities:

- Aboriginal Community Control and Innovation
- Education and Workforce
- Research and Data
- Governance and Finance

The AH&MRC welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry on behalf of its members.



## AH&MRC Response

Effective crisis communications are critical in managing the impact of disasters on communities. Understanding cultural and social contexts is important when communicating with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities. This submission will focus on crisis communications as they relate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In particular, it will look at the critical role that Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations play in the distribution of communications and how government can better utilise such organisations to reach Aboriginal communities during times of crisis. This will draw on the lessons learned during the 2019 bushfires, COVID-19 pandemic and recent floods.

### Government communications in recent crises

Aboriginal communities are disproportionately impacted during times of crisis. During the COVID-19 Pandemic, Aboriginal people were found to be at greater risk of contracting COVID-19. Moreover, having a higher risk of serious disease and death as a result of COVID-19, they were identified as a priority population. At the peak of the pandemic in 2021, Aboriginal communities in Western New South Wales were ravaged by the pandemic, with LGAs such as Bourke, Walgett and Coonamble (among others), experiencing alarmingly high case numbers. A number of factors contributed to these outbreaks including the general vulnerability due to chronic health issues, poor housing, under resourced health services and low vaccine uptake.

The broad consensus across the ACCHO sector is that the government did not do enough to support Aboriginal communities. Among its failures was the unclear and inappropriately targeted communications that were rolled out across communities and its inability to disseminate clear, culturally safe information about the vaccine. The sector has long advocated for culturally appropriate public health messaging, particularly around vaccinations. The low vaccine uptake within Aboriginal communities was attributed to anxieties about the AstraZeneca vaccine. This anxiety was common across the state and could have been effectively dealt with through targeted communications. Notwithstanding, the messaging used for the general population was not appropriate for Aboriginal communities, whose hesitancy was compounded by widespread mistrust stemming from the ongoing impacts of colonization and institutional neglect.

Communication material that was targeted to Aboriginal communities during the pandemic was limited despite the demonstrated need. When government developed media releases, social media tiles and other resources for health services, they were often culturally inappropriate and required frequent review and redrafting by the ACCHOs. Indigenous organisations, particularly ACCHOs, took the initiative to develop their own communications during this time. The AH&MRC launched its 'Join us you mob campaign' and provided comms support to its member services. Our member services were proactive in getting messaging out to their communities. For example, Katungul launched the Southern NSW Aboriginal Community COVID-19 Resources Group, a one-stop-shop for information and resources; and Bullinah undertook an extensive community consultation process long before cases began to peak to seek community input on how the crisis should be managed and educate community members. Little to no supplementary funding was provided by government for services to develop communications which were primarily coordinated centrally within Health and other government agencies. As such, much of the communications work done by the ACCHOs was delivered within their existing resources, with significant strain.

During COVID-19, services also raised concerns regarding the flow of information from health and other government agencies, which was reported to have been fragmented and constantly changing. For example, at the peak of the Western New South Wales outbreak, community

members were told they could not use public transport or refused service at grocery stores, only to be told days later that this had changed. ACCHOs were often forced to act as 'information bottlenecks' for their communities. Local organisations such as ACCHOs continue to be largely excluded from critical conversations during emergency responses and often receive information when it is too late or no longer valid.

### **Improving crisis communications for Aboriginal communities**

Crisis communication for Aboriginal communities needs to take into account:

- the ongoing impacts of colonization and institutional neglect that Aboriginal people face;
- that Aboriginal people experience barriers in accessing western health systems;
- that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may not speak Standard English as their first language and therefore require translated and/or easily accessible communications materials (including visual aids);
- Aboriginal cultural customs and practices; and
- the role of governance, family kinships structures and relationships.

As the AH&MRC highlighted in its submission to the Select Committee on the response to major flooding across New South Wales in 2022, local organisations such as ACCHOs are an invaluable asset in times of crisis. The Aboriginal Community Controlled Sector is best positioned to deliver messaging and crisis communication. They have existing relationships and trust within their communities and access to information that mainstream agencies do not. At present, they are severely underutilized.

It should be noted that among the key objectives of the NSW State Emergency Management Plan are to facilitate the exchange of information regarding knowledge of risk or perceptions of risk and build community resilience in times of crisis underpinned by consistent and coordinated messaging when engaging with communities. The experience with COVID-19 and the recent floods suggests poor coordination within government when it comes to information sharing with local organisations. It is critical that government agencies make greater effort towards the sharing of information with local organisations such as ACCHOs to support efficient, coordinated communications in times of crises. More broadly, this should include the involvement of these organisations in crisis planning and management through participation in governance structures such as Local Emergency Management Committees where they can receive real time information to take back to their communities.

ACCHOs have the cultural competency and knowledge required for the development and dissemination of culturally appropriate communications. Government agencies should consult with the sector when developing communications in response to crises to avoid instances where ACCHOs are required to adapt or redraft government communications for cultural appropriateness. Moreover, government should seek to ensure that the sector has secure long-term funding to supplement government communications where needed.

## Recommendations

### The AH&MRC recommends:

1. That the NSW Government seek to improve its engagement with the ACCHO sector in the development of crisis communications, recognising the integral role that ACCHOs play within Aboriginal communities and their expertise with regard to culturally safe practices.
2. That the NSW Government provide dedicated communications funding for the sector to ensure that it is adequately resourced to respond to future crises.
3. More broadly, that the NSW Government explore the development of a targeted crisis communications strategy for Aboriginal communities. This is in parallel to the AH&MRC's recommendation to the *Select Committee on the response to major flooding across New South Wales in 2022*, for the development of a standalone disaster management framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.



**Mr Robert Skeen**  
Chief Executive Officer  
Aboriginal Health & Medical Research  
Council

### For further information please contact:

Ms Nyasha Mpofu, AH&MRC Policy Manager [nmpofu@ahmrc.org.au](mailto:nmpofu@ahmrc.org.au)