



# MEETING COMMUNITY NEEDS IN DIFFICULT TIMES: EXPERIENCES OF AUSTRALIA'S COMMUNITY SECTOR

APRIL 2021



Acknowledgements

Thank you to the generous leaders from the community services and peak bodies who shared their knowledge, insights and experience for this project. This report is an output of the Australian Community Sector Study 2021 research project, commissioned by the Australian Council of Social Service and the Councils of Social Service in partnership with Bendigo Bank, Australia's better big bank.

ISSN: 1326 7124  
ISBN: 978 0 85871 034 4

This report was written by Dr Natasha Cortis and Dr Megan Blaxland from the Social Policy Research Centre at UNSW Sydney.

This report should be referenced or cited as follows: Cortis N and Blaxland, M (2021) *Meeting community needs in difficult times: experience of Australia's community sector*. Sydney: ACOSS

© Australian Council of Social Service 2021

Locked Bag 4777  
Strawberry Hills, NSW 2012  
Australia

Email: [info@acoss.org.au](mailto:info@acoss.org.au)  
Website: [www.acoss.org.au](http://www.acoss.org.au)

Front cover photo © istockphoto.com

This publication is copyright. Apart from fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Enquiries should be directed to the Publications Officer, Australian Council of Social Service. Copies are available from the address above.

Contents

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>5</b>
Key findings	6
<b>HIGH LEVELS OF DISADVANTAGE AND DEMAND IN 2021</b>	<b>9</b>
People are experiencing significant economic hardship, increasing demand for many community services	9
Mental health services are under strain	11
There has been inadequate investment in responding to domestic and family violence	12
Prioritising need for housing and homelessness services	12
CASE STUDY: Experiences of a regional emergency housing and homelessness service	14
<b>MEETING DEMAND IN THE RECOVERY PERIOD</b>	<b>15</b>
Working differently has come at a cost	15
CASE STUDY: Challenges and benefits of rapid transformation of services models in a large national multi-service agency	17
Challenges of service access	18
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>20</b>





Photo by Zhuo Cheng you on Unsplash

## Executive summary

Australian communities, and the community service organisations that support them, remain under pressure amidst expectations of increasing poverty and homelessness in 2021.

This report examines how Australia's community services sector is addressing high levels of need in the community during early 2021, a period in which Australian communities sought to recover from the crises of 2020. These crises began with severe bushfires followed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and are not yet resolved. They have exacerbated the very high levels of poverty and inequality which successive governments have allowed to accumulate over decades.<sup>1</sup>

As part of the Australian Community Sector Study,<sup>2</sup> the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) was contracted by the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), in partnership with the Councils of Social Service, to conduct research into the experiences of the community sector during early 2021.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on interviews and focus groups with 35 community sector leaders working in diverse contexts across Australia,<sup>4</sup> this report shows that the sector is confronting rising levels of need and increasingly complex experiences of hardship in the community. Exclusion of some populations from government support increased pressures on community services and supports.

In early 2021, many services were bracing for the withdrawal of the support measures which had temporarily alleviated some of the pressures on households and on community service systems during 2020, including the Coronavirus Supplement, moratoriums on evictions, and JobKeeper. Sector leaders wanted to see short-term measures translated into the more enduring strategies and investments needed to bolster capacity and to progress shared agendas of economic, social and community development for Australia's recovery. As a leader from a peak body explained:

**We really proved ourselves during the pandemic. But you can't just leave it to market forces, you need to invest in the industry. You need to support it and you need to strategically plan for the future.**

*State peak body*

<sup>1</sup> Davidson P, Bradbury B, Wong M & Hill T (2020) *Inequality in Australia, Part 1: Overview*. Australian Council of Social Service and UNSW (Sydney). Davidson P, Bradbury B, Wong M & B, Hill P (2020) *Inequality in Australia, 2020 Part 2: Who is affected and why* Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) and UNSW(Sydney)

<sup>2</sup> For previous outputs of the Australian Community Sector Study, see: Cortis, N & Blaxland, M (2020) *Australia's community sector and COVID-19: Supporting communities through the crisis*. Sydney: ACOSS; Cortis, N. & Blaxland, M (2020) *The profile and pulse of the sector: Findings from the 2019 Australian Community Sector Survey*. Sydney: ACOSS.

<sup>3</sup> Also see two companion reports, Blaxland, M and Cortis, N (forthcoming in 2021). *Valuing Australia's community sector: funding for capacity, sustainability and impact*. Sydney: UNSW Social Policy Research Centre. And Blaxland, M. and Cortis, N (forthcoming in 2021). *Better contracting: securing the contribution of Australia's community sector*. Sydney: UNSW Social Policy Research Centre.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix for a full description of the research methodology



## Key findings

### Leaders are observing very high levels of disadvantage and demand in 2021

For organisations delivering services, 2020 was marked by rapid growth of new groups in the community requiring support, coupled with increased need among existing clients and communities as many people faced job-loss and separation from support networks during the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> Limited ability to access appropriate services in a timely fashion meant that those eventually accessing them had more complex and intense needs.

### People are experiencing significant economic hardship

In 2021, leaders report that the sector is grappling with increased social disadvantage. People in the community have experienced significant economic loss, often for the first time, leading to increased need for services and supports including emergency relief and family support. New groups of clients, including some who had previously experienced reasonable levels of security, are seeking support. Exclusion of international students and people on temporary visas from accessing Centrelink payments is putting additional strain on services.

*We have had to increase our emergency relief and our financial assistance and also our emergency support services, almost three or fourfold.*

*Medium-sized migrant support service*

### Mental health services are under strain

The social isolation and loneliness experienced in 2020 has persisted into 2021, with unmet need for mental health supports evident among all social groups. Border closures and associated uncertainty about travel, have cut individuals and families off from their usual support networks of family interstate or overseas. Leaders have seen many people with significant mental health issues fall through the cracks of psychosocial services and the NDIS. At the same time as they have seen increased need and complexity of mental health challenges, services have had to make significant changes to continue operating during the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Reports from our services suggest that mental health is really an increasing issue for everyone... Our services have also reported increased domestic and family violence particularly during the lockdown phases of COVID.*

*Large multi-agency service provider*

### There has been inadequate investment in responding to domestic and family violence

Services are responding to escalation of domestic and family violence, which services described as an 'epidemic', with inadequate investment in preventative strategies. Increases in community need have persisted well beyond the lockdown periods of 2020, and many services are working with people with very complex needs.

<sup>5</sup> Cortis, N & Blaxland, M (2020) *Australia's community sector and COVID-19: Supporting communities through the crisis*. Sydney: ACOSS. [https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Australias-community-sector-and-Covid-19\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Australias-community-sector-and-Covid-19_FINAL.pdf)

### Meeting need for housing and homelessness services are key priorities

A key concern for the sector is to address the housing and homelessness crisis. Leaders reported that the sector is supporting large numbers of people experiencing shortages of affordable housing, rent rises, and housing insecurity. Housing pressures and inequalities have been exacerbated by increased population flows from cities to regional areas, as people sought affordable housing or to avoid lockdowns in response to the pandemic. Lack of pathways out of temporary housing was a particular issue, and tent cities were reported in some regional centres.

**There's actually, literally, no housing at all available at the moment and it's just going to get worse.**

*Medium-sized housing & homelessness service*

### Meeting demand in the recovery period

At the same time the sector has seen demand increase, services have faced costly needs to rapidly reconfigure models of delivery, to account for unexpected circumstances. Services have welcomed opportunities to innovate and develop new ways of engaging with communities, including via remote technologies. However, under-investment has constrained transition to new, more expansive service models. Communities have incurred unanticipated costs due to the rise in digital service delivery, and digital inequalities endure, with many populations needing or preferring face-to-face models of service delivery or hybrid options.

### Opportunities for change

The crises of 2020, which have persisted into 2021, provide a critical juncture, opening potential for change. Circumstances have drawn attention to poverty and inequality, and to the essential contributions made by Australian community service organisations and practitioners working to prevent and address disadvantage. This crisis highlights the opportunities governments have to act swiftly and boldly to raise and stabilise incomes and bring people out of poverty, and to overcome the long-term under-investment in the community services sector which holds back Australia's ability to make progress towards social justice. As this research has shown, in early 2021 sector leaders remained unsure how resources will stretch to maintain service levels and meet demand into the future, and they have called for greater universality in access to government support as a result.



© istock photos

**When the Coronavirus Supplement and Jobkeeper were introduced, particularly the Coronavirus Supplement, we saw an immediate decrease in the number of [people who have historically come] to us for emergency relief support. But we saw an increase in people on temporary protection visas...**

*Large national service providing emergency relief*

## High levels of disadvantage and demand in 2021

Leaders of community sector organisations interviewed for this research described how, in 2021, their services and networks were continuing to grapple with increased social disadvantage. Many noted that needs in the community had become increasingly complex, exacerbated by the pandemic. Financial difficulties, combined with reduced opportunity to access face-to-face support placed additional stress on people requiring support, impacting their mental and physical health. At the same time, limited ability to access appropriate services in a timely fashion meant that those eventually accessing them had more complex and intense needs. As a leader from a carer organisation explained:

The services are only available for a small pocket of people for a small amount of time with small money and small caseloads... there is a lack of a strategic approach that would actually lead to ongoing and effective, long term outcomes... Even in preventative models of services we are still running on emergency and crisis mode... Like the agencies, carers are so busy and they are so stressed out with work and daily tasks that they're only coming to services when they actually really, really need them and are in crisis already. And so, we are always a little bit on the back foot.

*Medium-sized service supporting carers*

Leaders commonly referred to high levels of unemployment and economic hardship in the community, along with challenges relating to mental health, domestic violence, rent rises and housing pressures affecting low income people, and homelessness. These issues were felt harshly in the capital cities and eastern states, but leaders from around the country described the impact of business shut-downs and closures, and the difficulties of rebuilding, including in areas with small populations.

### **People are experiencing significant economic hardship, increasing demand for many community services**

Community service organisations have seen very high levels of economic hardship in the community over the last year. Leaders interviewed for this research shared in-depth insights into the ways the pandemic and associated economic downturn caused people in the community to experience significant economic loss, often for the first time, leading to increases in need for community services and supports, including emergency relief and family support. Leaders discussed how financial and mental health difficulties were exacerbated, and that new groups of clients, including some who had previously experienced reasonable levels of security, sought support.

Services grappled with ways to support people excluded from accessing Government income support payments, such as international students and people on temporary visas. The exclusion of these groups from government support was straining services. Some described how their service networks experienced 'queues out the door', including of international students, and said they were expecting a 'tsunami' of demand in coming weeks and months,



due to the cessation of Jobkeeper and the Coronavirus Supplement which had provided assistance to some groups during 2020.

In the focus groups and interviews, leaders attested to increased disadvantage and need in 2021. Demand for emergency relief services provide a particularly instructive indicator of hardship in the community, as these services provide immediate financial and food support to people in urgent need. Leaders observed the way government policy made a difference to levels of demand for emergency relief, reflecting the positive impact of the Coronavirus Supplement and the negative impact of its removal:

When the Coronavirus Supplement and Jobkeeper were introduced, particularly the Coronavirus Supplement, we saw an immediate decrease in the number of [people who have historically come] to us for emergency relief support. But we saw an increase in people on temporary protection visas... As the Coronavirus Supplement payments tapered off we started to see an increase of people coming back into those services... *Large national service providing emergency relief*

Exclusion of some populations from the government's economic measures was a key concern, especially for people on temporary visas and refugee communities experiencing unemployment. As a leader from a health-focused peak body described, this amounted to "a magnification of disadvantage and struggle that has been experienced by communities that were already on the periphery." Leaders noted that exclusions of groups of the community from government payments was particularly unfair. It led to pressure on the community sector, including for smaller community service organisations supporting marginalised communities. A meaningful, permanent increase to income support payments, and wider coverage of the population, were seen as priorities. A leader from a migrant service explained:

A lot of our people are working in the regions with seasonal work. And when the season is not there, they haven't got any money. We are not just working with people who are eligible for Commonwealth funding, in other words with visas... but we are also working with international students, new communities that feel in danger. So anybody that needs any support resource or advice can still come in the door... We have had to increase our emergency relief and our financial assistance and also our emergency support services, almost three or fourfold... We've had to put a multi-lingual telephone service, particularly in the lockdowns. And also work out how to work with the small groups of women at risk. And if you can think about our service outlets in [regional and remote areas] and think about us in those places not having even as much as one worker, that has put a lot of pressure on our organisation. *Medium-sized migrant support service*

## Mental health services are under strain

Community service leaders observed in their interviews that the social isolation and loneliness experienced in 2020 has persisted into 2021. They described unmet need for mental health supports evident among all groups – including older people, young people, and families and children. Leaders described how people with significant mental health issues had fallen through the cracks of psychosocial services and the NDIS. Heightened levels of vulnerability and need, and rising demand, were also identified within culturally and linguistically diverse communities. A leader from a large service provider explained the increased need across their service network, during the same period that services had to make significant changes to ways of operating:

Reports from our services suggest that mental health is really an increasing issue for everyone.... Our services have also reported increased domestic and family violence particularly during the lockdown phases of COVID.... Our employment services had a lot of additional referrals flowing through because of course a lot of people were made unemployed ... We also of course had to institute a lot of processes and procedures to ensure COVID safety effectively in our services. *Large multi-agency service provider*

A leader from a child and family service described the ways demand had grown for the parenting supports their service offered, along with the complexity of circumstances affecting people needing to access services:

When we first went home for the lockdown, we were really feeling the effects of the bushfire and the smoke and everything with our clients. We had a 40% increase in demand and a very large increase in antenatal clients. We had a 57% increase in telephone counselling calls, and those calls were much longer and were much more intense. With that happening at the same time as our staff were trying to wrangle home schooling and having hobbies at home or partners at home, and also their elevated levels of anxiety themselves, was really difficult. Normally when you're counselling you're not experiencing the same thing as the people you're counselling. So that was really difficult... a couple of staff used the terminology that last year was 'brutal' and it really was, it was really hard. *Small child and family support service*

While impacts of the fires and pandemic were considered most pronounced in the eastern states, communities around the country were heavily affected. Border closures, and associated uncertainty about travel, cut individuals and families off from their usual support networks of family interstate or overseas. A leader from a child and family service in Western Australia explained:

People tend to think that [our state] hasn't had the same issues as other states, however, we're very aware of families who normally would have support from their extended family members who are in the east or overseas, and they haven't been getting that support so we've been finding an increase in the number of families that are looking for that additional support that they normally get from extended family... There's certainly reports on increases in the area of post-natal mental health issues, fathers around mental health and also infants and early childhood. *Large child and family support service*

Further, complexity of mental health need was expected to continue in 2021.

The complexity of carers' lives coming through here is increasing remarkably. I don't think that's going to change... our team is saying that has increased over the last few months... I expect we'll see, like everyone that's talking about it in the sector, that we're probably yet to see that second impact of mental health from coming out of COVID... there's still some big things to come. The complexity has definitely risen in its intensity.

*Medium-sized carer support service*

## **There has been inadequate investment in responding to domestic and family violence**

In the focus groups and interviews, community service sector leaders also point to the impacts of domestic and family violence arising from the escalation of violence in the last year and inadequate investment in prevention. Other research has attested to increased prevalence of violence and barriers to help-seeking.<sup>6</sup> Some leaders described how services were working with clients with very complex needs. Increases in service demand were noted as occurring during the lockdown phase, but also following lockdowns. As one leader, representing a health-focused service, explained:

Probably the biggest challenge at the moment is in family violence. There is an epidemic but there's also a failure of funding as well. So we have massive waitlists and we're telling people who have finally arrived at the moment where they want to get support for a situation that they may wait six to seven months to see anybody...Our funding models at the moment are block funded but they're just insufficient, we just simply don't have enough. We're probably about four or five EFT [equivalent full-time] staff members short.

*Large health service*

## **Prioritising need for housing and homelessness services**

Among sector leaders from community service providers and peaks, the crisis of housing and homelessness services is a major concern for the year ahead. In the focus groups and interviews, leaders described how low income people were experiencing rent rises during 2021, and services were grappling to respond to increases in some forms of homelessness, such as people living in cars, and "tent cities", which had emerged in some regional centres. For several services and peak bodies, meeting demand for stable, affordable housing was the top priority for the year ahead. While housing pressures and inequalities have been longstanding, leaders described how these were exacerbated by the population movements associated with the pandemic, with increased population flows from cities to regional areas as people sought affordable housing or to avoid lockdowns. In the process, housing has come under more severe pressure. Leaders described how, in some areas, property prices and rents were escalating rapidly, contributing to shortages of affordable housing, difficulties for local populations, and pressures on housing and homelessness services. Lack of local options meant people found themselves stuck in temporary or unsuitable housing for extended periods, making it difficult to pursue health, education and other goals.

<sup>6</sup> Boxall, H., Morgan, A. and Brown, R. (2020) *The prevalence of domestic violence among women during the COVID-19 pandemic*, Statistical Bulletin no. 28. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology.

Noting shortages of housing stock, community sector leaders described insufficient responses from governments, and said they were preparing for a looming crisis of homelessness. As one explained:

Obviously, we're all bracing ourselves for what's going to happen when the moratorium [on evictions] is finished... it is a fairly scary time for people and not just the people that we're usually working with, but an increase in people that are at risk in higher income brackets who are a big concern for us, and starting to see that trickle through. We've been given some additional resources to work with people that are in chronic homelessness but there's actually, literally, no housing at all available at the moment and it's just going to get worse. So unless social housing and different housing models can come onboard, there's not a lot a person can do if there's nowhere to put someone. *Medium-sized housing and homelessness service*

Another similarly described unmet need for housing:

We're a bit overcome with the need for housing, it sort of takes first place above everything, because you've got people who are homeless and there's really no option for them... They're angry, of course they are, and they have every right to be angry, they've been homeless and the Department of Housing is saying there's a three year wait, don't even bother about listing. So what can they do? *Small housing and homelessness service*

Lack of pathways out of temporary housing and into more suitable and secure options was a particular issue, which had persisted into 2021.

### Case study: Experiences of a regional emergency housing and homelessness service

We've had a couple of really rough years in [our area], which started – it would have to be nearly five years ago when [a prominent business person] decided to pull the pin on [a business in our area] which meant that about 3,000 people lost their jobs and there was a lot of money that left town and a lot of people were impacted by that. It's always been one of those hot spots around the state for social problems and homelessness and affordable housing and all of that lack of housing stuff, but [the business closing] kind of kicked off something to another degree. Then in 2019, we had the big floods, so that had a huge impact on the rental market. We have not recovered from that. We had properties that had significant water damage, I mean like four to six feet of water through them... We did get some funding to help people with the flood and we did that for about a year or so but that has had a huge impact on the rental market.

Then of course, last year, we started off the year feeling very positive... that we were going to get over the floods and get back on an even keel, and of course then COVID hit. That impact around COVID for us has been that people aren't moving out of our [temporary] housing because there are no [longer term housing] options. So they're not moving, and also the huge increases in terms of domestic violence and that kind of stuff that's happening, it's been a rough couple of years.

**...People are presenting as homeless, like doubling up with people, living in cars, staying in tents, all of that stuff. There's nowhere for them to go and the money is running out...**

We don't actually have any brokerage and we have to rely on [another organisation] to purchase accommodation which they're not very good at doing. So you're finding that they put people into a motel that's costing \$200 to \$300 a night and they're paying for a couple of nights and then what happens after that?

I think we are all struggling and we're all trying to do the best that we can, particularly around housing. It's very expensive to solve the problem... it's billions and billions of dollars...We need a huge investment...Now I think we've got to the point where most people in our sector and workers actually think it's intractable. They don't think it can be resolved which is a terrible thing and to say to people in a very wealthy country, that you will be homeless and we don't have an immediate resolution to your problem.

## Meeting demand in the recovery period

A recurring theme through the focus groups and interviews was that services had made massive changes to their models of engagement to meet demand through the crisis period. Many described trying to do things differently, and welcomed opportunities to innovate. Services took the opportunity to implement new ways of working utilising remote technology, or found they needed to work differently upon returning to face-to-face services in a different set of circumstances. The crisis prompted services to broaden the ways they seek to engage people, and led to new models of service delivery that they plan to continue into the future. Remote options were seen by many as a 'move forward' on the whole for their service and clients, but the process of transition was not necessarily smooth and could be difficult for some, requiring careful management.

I think in the early months there was - everybody kind of went, "Whoa" and sort of fragmented into isolation. Then gradually people got a little bit braver, organisations got a bit more confident that they could set up process for work health and safety that allowed workers to reconnect with people again. So there was a little bit of a move back. People preferred the online connections so that stayed... Particularly when you're dealing with personal issues, and it's difficult for people to make that transition to help-seeking behaviour, it's a little bit easier if you can just do it at home. And it's a little bit more informal if you've got the facility - the equipment and the place to do it at. It is a move forward. *National peak body*

### Working differently has come at a cost

Changes in service delivery models have placed additional demands on organisations, some of which had not anticipated the costs of rapidly adapting to new circumstances. Leaders talked about lack of support to meet costs for their organisation, including the costs of remote working and service delivery. As one explained:

Our organisations had to adapt... and there was no support, financial support. So again for smaller organisations, it's actually many thousands of dollars that come out of cash reserves to fund people to work from home because they don't have sufficient desk chairs and whatever else that they can work from home. *National peak body*

Those who returned to face-to-face service delivery also faced additional costs during 2021 at a time they were attempting to meet higher demand. One service described, for example, how after a short plateau in demand during mid-2020 found demand subsequently spiked and remained 35% over the previous year. Staff made changes to meet high levels of demand, with difficulties sustained upon returning to face-to-face service delivery models and taking hybrid approaches, which they felt were needed under new circumstances. The leader explained:



We went back to face-to-face groups as soon as we could. We can't fit in the group room, that's one issue...Even now that we don't have to maintain that level of physical distancing it's actually difficult, we've all got used to... not sitting in a cramped space. We've all got used to needing that space between one and another and so it's very difficult to run a group... That's the difficulty going forward. So we're looking at potentially even moving and there's great expense coming out of that. But we've just grown. We've been fortunate to get a bit of funding, which meant we've got an extra part time staff member. Again we've got nowhere to fit them. So there are a couple of things going forward that we're looking at. We're certainly looking at continuing and growing what we can offer in the online space rather than just face-to-face, but we also recognise how important that face-to-face contact is. *Small child and family service*

Another described that, for some organisations, the challenges of managing both remote and face-to-face working in the context of pandemic had highlighted the very limited infrastructure they were working with, due to insufficient funds. While some organisations were able to access COVID support funds to put in place the technological infrastructure required, others had not been able to update their IT and communications systems for many years, including their client management systems, and realised in the period that this constituted a risk for their organisation. A leader from a small service in South Australia explained:

We absolutely, for a long time, have prioritised people over systems and having staff on the ground to be out and delivering services to the community rather than spending money on data and infrastructure and things like that. I realised really quickly last year, that this probably was a risk... Moving forward, we are ensuring that the organisation has a focus on those things... So, if something happens again, we actually would be better equipped. *Small child, family and youth service*

### Case study: Challenges and benefits of rapid transformation of service models in a large national multi-service agency

Essentially our entire service model changed overnight and basically any non-accommodation services went online or distanced very, very quickly... Basically face-to-face contact was removed, everything went online or via phone, especially for clients who didn't have access to technology or weren't comfortable using it. [Our accommodation facilities] all had a COVID safe plan in place and there was a lot of planning at a centralised level. There was an immediate working group that was formed to deal with COVID and they rolled out a lot of material that was supportive, both of the staff working in [our] offices and also clients in our accommodation facilities, to make sure that everything that needed to be in place, was in place.

There were some unexpected benefits to that. We've actually done quite a lot of internal work on trying to understand [the changes to our service delivery] and what the benefits of that were and how that can be drawn into our service provision in future.

**Some of the benefits included that service workers found they were able to have shorter but more frequent contact with people. So just being able to pick up the phone or perhaps have a Teams call. It was easier just to touch base a little bit rather than having a meeting every couple of months.**

It helped in some ways to skill people up, so while our frontline workers were talking to people about how to use technology they could, for example, also help them to access Centrelink online or various other things. So it had a bit of a ripple effect in terms of people's technical abilities.

For some people who, particularly those who suffered from anxiety or who found it otherwise difficult to come to face-to-face appointments, all of a sudden those barriers were removed. So they didn't have to go to an office to meet, they could do it over the phone or do it online and that was a lot easier... However, of course, there were also downsides and some of those downsides, particularly, are around not being able to just see and check-in and do those visual welfare checks to make sure that people are okay. I guess here I'm thinking particularly about vulnerable women and children, and frontline workers just not being able to kind of eyeball them and see how they were going.

## Challenges of service access

With services shifting to quickly adopt remote models of delivery, digital access and the digital divide have been at the forefront of concerns for the community sector. Leaders pointed to the way governments' expansion of digital service delivery has been premised on problematic assumptions that everybody has access to digital technology, and failures to recognise inequalities in access. In the interviews and focus groups, leaders described how governmental shifts from traditional communication channels like mail, local papers and newsletters in favour of engagement via email, websites and apps were raising pressures on community service organisations, especially those supporting older people, migrant organisations, and rural and remote populations lacking easy access.

The rapid shift to online service delivery has also presented a major challenge for whether and how the community sector can meet demand. Leaders described how the unexpected need to expand online service delivery, combined with lack of access to technology in some communities, has placed pressures on them. This was apparent for services providing mental health support, for example:

Obviously with COVID there was less face-to-face and people going to services and more doing what we're doing now, online support. Of course we came up pretty quickly, though, with the digital divide and the lack of resources that people had. It's not just lack of a device and internet also it's a lack of a private space in some cases as well. *Peak body*

Similarly, the lack of access was evident in migrant populations and the services that support them. As another peak body leader explained:

We've got a lot of issues around actual access to the technology itself, so especially in lots of families, people are sharing the one device. You know, two people schooling and one person's job, or you know, two people's English language learning and three children's schooling needs. *National peak body*

Assumptions that digital services were 'free' were considered problematic, as these placed cost demands on community members. For example:

The government departments say the app is free. Yeah, the app is free. The data is not. And a lot of our clients have prepaid phones with not a lot of data... The government needs to look at when they're offering all these digital things to everyone, what is free and what is going to cost the person even more money than what they can afford at the moment. *Medium-sized housing and homelessness service*

A leader from a migrant organisation provided a reminder that while there are multiple changes to services to enable digital delivery and access, many people accessing services continue to need or prefer face-to-face delivery or lack the required technology or skills:

In our area, with our target group, we are actually working with particularly women and young people... on IT. The problem is if people are illiterate in their own language and they can barely speak English, and then we have to deal with the computer, it's not exactly their first priority. We have actually partnered with [an adult education organisation] – to provide extended services for women particularly... our job is try and get them to learn English,

particularly as they are isolated in regional areas, so that they can find work there. And obviously we are looking at digital technology as much as possible. But we are continually reminded that they want to see us face-to-face and they want to be able to interact face-to-face. *Medium-sized migrant support service*

## Conclusion

This report shows how community service organisations remain under pressure to meet demand in 2021. Sector leaders interviewed for this research described how pressures are coming from multiple fronts, including rising demand for services, housing pressures, and cessation of Jobkeeper and the Coronavirus Supplement for government income support payments. They described a greater complexity of need in the community.

Leaders from peak bodies and services described undertaking massive changes in program delivery across the sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. With those adaptations new challenges arose, particularly around inequity in access to technology and private spaces.

Ongoing challenges around access to community services were exacerbated by the pandemic and economic downturn. Sector leaders reported that community need for affordable housing, mental health services, domestic and family violence support all increased, and remain high. They anticipated new challenges and even higher levels of demand upon cessation of the Coronavirus Supplement and Jobkeeper.

Community sector leaders indicated that they were unsure how resources would stretch to maintain service levels and meet demand into the future, and called for greater universality in access to government support.



# Appendix: Methodology

The findings in this report are drawn from a qualitative study seeking to explore issues arising in two online surveys of the Australian community sector.<sup>7</sup> The research was approved by UNSW Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (HC200931).

With the assistance of the Australian Council of Social Service and the state and territory Councils of Social Service, the research team contacted organisational leaders from a range of community service providers and peak bodies with an invitation to participate in the research.

Data was collected in a series of small online video conferencing focus groups during February and March 2021. Each focus group included 2 to 4 participants. In addition, one-on-one interviews were conducted with some interviewees who were unable to join a focus group or preferred a one-on-one interview. Where needed, for clarification of details or further information in the case studies, participants who had given permission were contacted for follow-up interviews and an opportunity to review the case studies.

The focus groups lasted for around an hour, and the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to one hour. The discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. The transcripts were imported into NVIVO and coded thematically.

A total of 35 leaders from the community services sector contributed to the research. These included:

- 14 from peak bodies
- 11 from small service providers
- 4 from medium service
- 5 from large service providers
- 1 from a union
- 1 from practitioner association

One peak body is also a service provider. The peak bodies are a range of types and represented people with lived experience, other peaks and service providers.

Eight of the leaders came from organisations with a national reach. The others were based in every Australian state, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory.

The parts of the community services sector represented by participants included:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services
- Community education
- Community health
- Disability support
- Domestic violence and refugees
- Family, children and youth services
- Housing and homelessness
- Migrant and refugee support
- Neighbourhood centres

<sup>7</sup> Cortis, N & Blaxland, M (2020) *Australia's community sector and COVID-19: Supporting communities through the crisis*. Sydney: ACOSS; Cortis, N. & Blaxland, M (2020) *The profile and pulse of the sector: Findings from the 2019 Australian Community Sector Survey*. Sydney: ACOSS.





Photo by Nathana Rebouças on Unsplash