



22 August 2014

Committee Secretariat
Senate Select Committee into the Abbott Government's Budget Cuts
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Via email: budgetcuts.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Members

Submission to the Senate Select Committee into the Abbott Government's Budget Cuts

The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Select Committee on the Abbott Government's Budget cuts.

FECCA is the national peak body representing Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. FECCA provides advocacy, develops policy, and promotes issues on behalf of its constituency to the Australian Government and the broader community. FECCA supports multiculturalism, community harmony, social justice and the rejection of all forms of discrimination and racism, so as to build a productive and culturally rich Australian society. FECCA's policies are designed around the concepts of empowerment and inclusion, and are formulated with the common good of all Australians in mind.

Any reductions in access to services provided by the Commonwealth

FECCA believes that the Commonwealth's provision of social services should be facilitated by effectiveness and efficiency through service delivery, which can best be achieved by ensuring that services respond to community needs, are community-based and are effectively targeted in their delivery. FECCA particularly highlights the need for services to be delivered as such to culturally and linguistically diverse communities, in order to ensure that they are responsive and effective in addressing the specific needs of such communities.

In this regard, FECCA strongly advocates the need for Government to continue, and advance, its support for services, programs and benefits offered to culturally and linguistically diverse Australians, to prevent a decline in social inclusion and facilitate the provision of core services to disadvantaged communities and individuals.

**Federation of Ethnic
Communities' Councils
of Australia**

FECCA House
Unit 1, 4 Phipps Close
Deakin ACT 2600

PO Box 344
Curtin ACT 2605

p 02 6282 5755
f 02 6282 5734
e admin@fecca.org.au
w www.fecca.org.au

FECCA specifically highlights the imperative need for the Australian Government to maintain its commitment to the principles of access and equity through the design and delivery of services, and the need to engage with communities and relevant organisations to receive regular feedback on the effectiveness of policy and programme design and delivery.

Regarding access to specific services, FECCA highlights that equitable access to health care is paramount for the wellbeing of migrants and refugees in Australia. In this context, FECCA highlights its concern with regard to specific budget measures related to reduction in health spending that will be likely to have an adverse impact on culturally and linguistically diverse Australians.

For instance, FECCA cites its concern regarding the introduction of a \$7 co-payment for General Practitioner visits and other health services, as well as the abolition of Medicare Locals. Regarding the former, FECCA believes that additional charges will further deter disadvantaged culturally and linguistically diverse Australians from seeking preventative medical advice and will only add to the already large range of barriers to accessing health services that culturally and linguistically diverse communities experience, such as language and cultural barriers, issues regarding lack of trust in utilising services, and/or poor health literacy. Broadly, FECCA believes that the intersectional issues of lower income, disadvantage and limited health services will have a disproportionate impact on culturally and linguistically diverse Australians, who constitute a large proportion of lower income households in Australia¹.

FECCA also highlights the important role played by Medicare Locals in providing grassroots services to culturally and linguistically diverse Australians, particularly in rural and regional locations. Feedback that FECCA has received from culturally and linguistically diverse communities throughout Australia has been very positive with regard to Medicare Locals and the extent to which they facilitate increased awareness of issues that impact on such communities². Their subsequent ability to tailor service delivery to accommodate diverse communities has been highly regarded³. The abolition of the service in relation to the recent budget cuts is therefore of deep concern to FECCA and its constituency.

¹ Australian Council of Social Services. 2014. *A Budget that Divides the Nation: ACOSS 2014-15 Budget Analysis*. Available at: http://acoss.org.au/images/uploads/ACOSS_2014-15_Budget_analysis_-_WEB.pdf

² Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia. 2013. *Multicultural Access and Equity: Strengthening Connections Between Communities and Services*. Available at: http://www.fecca.org.au/images/stories/documents/Submissions/2013/fecca_multicultural_access_equality_report_june2013.pdf

³ Centre for Ethnicity and Health. 2013. *Medicare Local After Hours Training: Improving the Cultural Competency of Medicare Local after Hours Service Providers*. Available at: <http://ceh.org.au/about/projects/medicare-local-ah-training.html>

The provision of other services, programmes or benefits provided by the Government, affected by the budget

FECCA reaffirms its concern regarding the Government's decision to cease funding to support the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples. FECCA regards the National Congress as essential in ensuring genuine participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in decision-making processes. The withdrawal of funding to support Congress activities is particularly problematic in the context of broader cuts to programmes aimed at benefitting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders peoples, which have reduced the capacity of organisations such as the Congress to represent the views of, and issues impacting on, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

FECCA also cites its concern regarding cuts of \$8 million over 4 years to SBS. FECCA believes that since its inception, SBS has grown into a world renowned leader in multicultural broadcasting, and the service that SBS provides ensures that millions of Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are actively engaged in Australian society. As such, and consistent with FECCA's belief that information is key to enabling a truly multicultural Australia, the reduction in funding for SBS is regarded as problematic, and may potentially be seen to undermine the Government's commitment to multiculturalism and a socially cohesive Australian society.

FECCA has also expressed caution regarding the decision to discontinue the Commonwealth Human Rights Education Programme. FECCA believes that the Programme has played an integral role in promoting community awareness and understanding of human rights and the responsibilities of individuals as members of a tolerant, inclusive society.

In addition, FECCA is also concerned by the cessation of funding for the Connection Interviews and Job Seeker Workshops offered by Job Services Australia (JSA). FECCA cites this as an important programme through which to enable access and equity, and facilitate job-readiness for culturally and linguistically diverse Australians. Further cuts to JSA, including the restricting of participation for volunteers and withdrawal of support for the Experience+ Career Advice program, are also likely to have a detrimental impact on employment prospects for culturally and linguistically diverse job-seekers.

Commonwealth–state relations and the impact of decreased Commonwealth investment on service delivery by the states

FECCA acknowledges that effective service delivery should be informed by, and often coordinated at, state and territory level, to ensure that services are based on knowledge of local needs and are therefore

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targeted more efficiently. FECCA believes, however, that the Commonwealth Government should assume responsibility to provide the infrastructure necessary to develop core policies.

FECCA believes that any efforts to centralise service delivery should ensure that the remoteness from the local situation will not affect the quality of the service provided and that policies will not overlook the situation on the ground by imposing a mainstream and standardised approach.

Public sector job cuts

FECCA advocates that the ability of the Government to develop and implement informed and targeted public policies relies on the ability of the public service to provide expert and accurate advice by having in place the infrastructure to receive feedback, identify issues and recommend measures for improved outcomes. In this sense, FECCA appreciates the Government's focus on reducing expenditure, however, cautions against extensive job cuts to the public sector, which it views as potentially having an adverse impact on the delivery of core programmes and services.

The impact of the budget on young people and students

FECCA expresses its concern that the proposed budget measures will result in young unemployed people up to the age of 29 years not receiving income support for six months after claiming unemployment payments and for half of each year of employment thereafter. FECCA cites the imperative need for support mechanisms to remain in place to facilitate young people's entry into the workforce. FECCA is concerned that the absence of support for young people for six months, in addition to provision for penalties being waived in instances where individuals experience cases of financial hardship with regard to not meeting certain requirements, will place significant stress and burden upon young job-seekers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, who already face disadvantage with regard to securing sustainable employment. FECCA cites the need for adequate supports to be in place to ensure that the inequalities of a competitive job market, in addition to restrictive support structures, do not perpetuate disadvantage and isolate young people from their communities and the ability to participate in society.

Conclusion

FECCA recommends against any resource cuts or changes that would compromise important programs and services that currently respond to the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse Australians, and by

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extension, foster social inclusion and harmony to the benefit of all Australians.

Specifically, FECCA highlights the need for consideration of the following:

- the extent to which multicultural services and programs support a large proportion of Australia's diverse population and provide a foundation upon which to foster greater social inclusion and community harmony;
- the extent to which cuts to programs and services currently supported by Government would result in future costs related to reintroducing such services again on the basis of popular demand, highlighting the efficiencies enabled by continuous and sustained service provision; and
- the need for continuous and sustained service provision to ensure consumer confidence and effective services targeted to the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse Australians.

FECCA hopes that the perspectives offered above will prompt consideration of particular issues impacting on culturally and linguistically diverse Australians with regard to proposed budget cuts.

FECCA is grateful for the opportunity to make a contribution to the consultation process, and invites the Committee Secretariat to contact the FECCA Office on (02) 6282 5755 or at admin@fecca.org.au for further information.

Yours sincerely

Joseph A. Caputo OAM JP
FECCA Chair

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