

# REPORT SUMMARY

CATERING TO A DIVERSE COMMUNITY:

A report on the situation and needs of deaf people from migrant backgrounds living in Victoria

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*Communication  
is the key*

VICTORIAN  
  
multicultural  
commission

*This text is a summary of the report “Catering to diverse communities: The situation and needs of deaf people from migrant backgrounds living in Victoria” published by the Victorian Deaf Society in 2008. Electronic versions of the full report can be downloaded from the Vicdeaf website ([www.vicdeaf.com.au](http://www.vicdeaf.com.au)); please contact the society if you wish to purchase a hard copy.*

## **Background**

In 2006 the Victorian Multicultural Commission (through the now-defunct Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs) funded Vicdeaf to conduct research and write a report on the size, composition and needs of the deaf migrant community. The project began in September 2006 and has investigated how many deaf people from migrant backgrounds there are in Victoria, what backgrounds they come from, what languages they speak and the sorts of problems they face in accessing services.

## **Project methodology**

As a group, deaf migrants can be very difficult to find and make contact with, so our project used a number of different sources to gather information about this group of clients. The project drew on data from a wide variety of sources:

- Information from deaf schools/ facilities about the languages their students’ families speak at home and the parents’ countries of birth
- Surveys of case managers and Auslan interpreters
- Interviews with professionals working with deaf migrant clients
- Interviews with deaf migrants themselves, and migrant parents of deaf children

Altogether the project interviewed 12 deaf migrants or their families (in the case of children) and around 50 professionals from both the deafness and migrant service sectors. Twenty five Auslan interpreters and case managers also completed the surveys.

## **Demographics of the deaf migrant community**

Since all state schools are required to collect information about the home languages and parents’ country of birth of their students it was reasonably easy to come up with accurate data about ethnic background of deaf children in Victoria. Of the 600 student enrolled in deaf facilities in Victoria in 2006, 28% had at least one parent born overseas and 19% come from families that speak a language other than English or Auslan at home. The families come from over 50 different countries and speak 40 different languages, including Arabic (27 families), Vietnamese (10 families), Turkish (8 families) and Cantonese (7) families. Because families come from so many different backgrounds it is difficult to provide culturally and linguistically-appropriate services to deaf migrant

clients, as there are not enough people in even the larger groups to justify the employment of specialist ethnic community professional to work with just one group. However, Vicdeaf strongly believe that with better training we can increase the capacity of all deafness sector professionals to work with clients from migrant backgrounds, and is currently applying for funding to deliver this training in 2009.

Collecting information about adult deaf migrants was much harder than collecting information about children. Through the 2006 Australian census we see that of Victoria's 2172 sign languages users, 204 (or 9.4%) were born overseas. However this information does not provide us with a breakdown of birthplaces, or indeed an estimate of what proportion of this population are adults versus children. More comprehensive data was collected by talking with Auslan interpreters and Vicdeaf case managers and reviewing data on the ethnic background of students at NMIT's Centre of Excellence for Students who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing, which together allowed us to identify over 100 deaf adults from migrant backgrounds currently known to these service providers. Again these adult were from highly diverse backgrounds, and we suspect that there are in fact many other adult deaf migrants living in the community, who for various reasons have not made contact with deafness service providers. Many of these reasons will now be explored in the following section.

## **Barriers to accessing services**

The project identified a number of barriers deaf migrants face in accessing deafness and generic community services, including lack of knowledge about services on offer, language difficulties, practical constraints (such as transport difficulties or lack of time to attend appointments) and concerns about the cultural sensitivity of the service provider.

Looking first at lack of knowledge it became clear early on in the project that many migrant families had lived in Australia for many years before they found out about support services available for deaf people. Migrants from developing countries (including refugees) were particularly at risk here, because they were not used to the large number of health and disability services provided free of charge in countries like Australia. They were thus very surprised to find out that they could get a hearing aid for free in Australia or help from an organisation like Senswide to find a job and in many cases reported that they never would have thought to ask for these services themselves. Even when migrants have had services explained to them, language difficulties often mean they do not fully understand the service they have been offered or lack the confidence and English skills to contact deafness organisation to make an appointment. These problems are also compounded by the fact that migrant settlement workers (who work with newly-arrived families to orientate them to Australia life) themselves often have a very poor knowledge of deafness services, so aren't able to advise their deaf clients about where to go for help. Vicdeaf feels that improving the knowledge of settlement workers is an important first step towards increase migrant families' access to deafness services, and is currently applying for funding to develop training and information resources to this end.

Even when migrants are aware of what services are offer, they often face a number of practical barriers in accessing services. Deafness professionals reported that migrant families were sometimes reluctant to get involved with services because of they were worried about the cultural appropriateness of the services on offer. Although service providers themselves were generally very good at catering to different cultural beliefs and practices (such as knowing not to shake hands with some clients, or providing case managers of the same gender to the client) families sometimes feel uncomfortable seeking help from a stranger for problems that in their culture would be solved in the family or village community. Tensions may also arise because of different cultural beliefs about how to manage deafness – for example if the family sees it as their duty to shelter and protect the deaf person while the deafness professional seeks to promote the deaf person’s independence. There are no easy answers to these sorts of conflicts, however it emerged from the project that the professionals who seem to have the greatest success working with migrant families were those who were able to slowly build relationships over a number of years. Long-term contact not only allowed the worker and clients to become familiar with each others’ beliefs and expectations, but increased the family’s willingness to trust the judgement of the worker, and the worker’s ability to suggest possible courses of action which are appropriate for the family’s particular circumstances.

For families new to Australia, making contact with deafness services can often be a low priority when compared to needs such as finding secure accommodation and employment or building social and support links with the ethnic community in Australia. Particularly if the hearing loss is stable, families may see little point in hurrying to access services, not least because they are often sceptical that deafness services will be able to offer them much useful assistance (an attitude which could be summed up as “yes, I’m deaf, but what can you do about it?”). While this mindset is understandable, it creates two main problems. The first is that families are generally eligible for the most intensive settlement support services in the first six months that they are in Australia, so if they do not do anything about the person’s deafness in this time they will not have a settlement worker to help them make contact with deafness organisations and generally negotiate the system. The second is that assistance from deafness organisations (such as fitting hearing aids or helping develop communication strategies) is generally most effective when it is started as soon as possible. Delays in accessing services can also make the deaf person feel resentful towards their family, as they might feel that their needs are not being catered for.

Finally, practical issues such as transport problem and (perceived or actual) cost of services can impede migrant families’ take-up of a number of deafness services. Here it is important to note that there are actually a number of schemes in place in Melbourne to help migrant families get to (and where applicable pay for) services such as hearing tests, however they tend to be run on an ad-hoc basis Thus professionals working in one area might not know about assistance available outside their area. This links back to the point made earlier about the need for greater training and communication between professionals in the deafness and migrant sectors and is something Vicdeaf is working to address.

## Language issues

Adult deaf migrants often arrive in Australia with very limited language skills. Many will have had little access to education in their country of origin and come to Australia with no prior knowledge of either English or Auslan. Depending on their education and level of hearing loss they may communicate using a recognised sign language (such as Malaysian Sign Language), speech and lip reading of their family's oral language, or an ad-hoc home sign system. Anecdotal evidence suggests that deaf migrants who already have strong skills in a fully-developed sign language are quick to acquire Auslan once they are exposed to it, and also progress well when learning written English. Those who use a home sign system however face the typical delays in acquiring Auslan that we expect of anyone who has not been able to develop full fluency in a language during childhood. These different abilities mean that some deaf migrants are able to cope quite well with existing courses to develop their Auslan and/or English skills, whereas others need more specialised and intensive support.

Migrants to Australia and normally eligible for 510 hours of free English classes, run by the AMEP (Adult Migrant English Program) on behalf of the Australian government. Deaf migrants are also eligible for these classes, however currently there are no special supports in place to make these classes more accessible for people who are deaf or hearing impaired. These classes are also not appropriate for deaf people who do not want to communicate orally, because there is no room for an Auslan component in the official curriculum. At the moment, Vicdeaf offers migrant clients some very basic Auslan classes through our Independent Living Skills program, but does not have other dedicated resources to teach language skills through a formal program. Many deaf migrants are instead referred to courses run by NMIT's Centre of Excellence for Students who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing to develop their language skills, however it is important to realise that these courses are not specifically designed to cater to the needs of migrant language learners either. Rather they are TAFE general education and literacy courses which the Centre of Excellence initially started running for Australian-born Deaf students who have had minimal high school education or are looking to improve their skills in Auslan and/or English. As such, they do not truly meet the needs of deaf migrants and teachers in the program report that even after attending for 2-3 years many deaf migrants have only acquired the most basic English literacy skills. Those who arrive in Australia with fluency in a sign language are generally able to make good progress learning Auslan, but as discussed earlier low language adults generally progress at a very slow rate.

Clearly, there is a need for specialist language classes to give deaf migrants access to similar skills taught through the AMEP. Currently Vicdeaf is working with teachers from NMIT's Centre of Excellence for Students who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing, academics from Latrobe and other interested parties to establish a working group to lobby for change in this area. It is hoped that we will shortly be able to establish a pilot program for this client group, which can then be pitched to the government as an alternative AMEP curriculum for migrants who wish to use Auslan rather than English as their primary language of communication. Vicdeaf has also received funding from the Department of

Human Services to run a pilot Auslan conversation class for Deaf migrants starting in July 2008, which will give students the opportunity to practice and develop their Auslan skills with others from similar backgrounds.

## **Social isolation**

Adult deaf migrants are potentially vulnerable to social isolation. Lacking (in the main) fluency in Auslan or English they face difficulties in accessing mainstream Deaf or hearing social networks, but generally do not have the necessary lip-reading and oral skills to successfully join in the activities and networks of their ethnic community. A large number of these migrants are also unemployed (or thought incapable of working by their families) and can be effectively house-bound if they lack the skills and confidence to find their way around Melbourne. Assisting adult migrants to improve their language skills is in many ways the key to overcoming this isolation, however another important step deafness organisations can take in this area is to organise and promote social events that give adult deaf migrants the chance to get to know members of the Australian Deaf community.

Within the Deaf community, there is strong interest in the needs of deaf migrants and much good-will towards supporting them to become part of the Deaf community. However, two groups rarely meet at social events and, for the moment at least, there is a need for organisations such as Vicdeaf to facilitate events which promote dialogue and cultural exchange between them. One such event held during the course of this project was the Deaf Multicultural Day, held to celebrate diversity within the Deaf community as part of *Celebrate our Cultural Diversity Week*. Funded by the Victorian Multicultural Commission, the event gave deaf people from migrant backgrounds a chance to tell their stories of migrating and adjusting to life in Australia and was well attended by Deaf people and their family and friends from a variety of backgrounds. Part of what made the day so successful was that it had a structured activities which encouraged Deaf people from all backgrounds to mix with each other and share their stories. Migrants often feel 'lost' at social events where most people know each other, and even if people do want to talk to them they can be unsure what sorts of things are appropriate 'small talk' within the Australian deaf community. Having events like the Deaf Multicultural Day, where deaf people from migrant backgrounds are the centre of attention, gives deaf migrants a nice icebreaker to start talking with members of the Australian Deaf community, and will hopefully lead to them developing friendships and social networks within the community over time.

## Report recommendations

On the basis of the discussion presented above, the report makes recommendations in a number of areas, including:

- Language classes for deaf migrants and their families
- Raising awareness of services on offer
- Support service provision
- Partnerships with ethno-specific organisations
- Further research

Through this summary we have already explored the need for better information about deafness services and more targeted language classes for deaf migrants, and the steps Vicdeaf is implementing to achieve these goals. We have also explored the need for more intensive case management and support services for deaf migrants, with an important side issue being the need for better training for support workers in working effectively with migrant clients. Although support workers showed strong cultural sensitivity, many still felt they did not fully understand the situation their clients were coming from, and were particularly uneasy about how to work effectively with different attitudes towards deafness and independence within the family. Here a combination of training and greater networking between professionals would clearly help improve competencies and strategies for working in this area.

As well as the areas discussed so far, the report makes recommendations in the areas of partnerships and further research. Because ethnic community organisations have a wealth of contact and knowledge about their communities, the report strongly recommends that deafness organisations work collaboratively with them to find the most effective solutions to the problems raised in this report. The report does however caution that deafness organisations should not over-stretch themselves and are likely to be most successful if they gradually build up links and programs with key organisations rather than establishing many small projects but losing community good will because it is felt that not enough energy or support is being invested in each project. Similarly, the report identifies a number of areas in need of further research – including issues to do with age-related hearing loss, the prevalence of hearing loss in different migrant groups, barriers to using Auslan and mental health issues within the deaf migrant community – but again cautions that research needs to be well-resourced and the relevant organisations need to be in a position to act on findings if research is to be truly effective. Here however the potential to collaborate effectively with other organisations (such as universities, ethnic and disability services, government and philanthropic organisations) is great indeed and there is clear potential for Vicdeaf to become involved in research that not only helps our local community but is of international importance.