

5 August 2020

Africa Health Australia “Community Health Diary”

A webinar series discussing COVID-19, health issues and African-Australian Community impacts

Forum # 2 in a series

Forum Summary

Date of the forum: Monday, 3 August 2020 from 4:00-5:30pm

Facilitated by: Candice Peroumal, Projects & Programs Team Leader, Africa Health Australia
Hosted by: Dr Vincent Ogu, Chair, Africa Health Australia

Guest speakers: Joseph La Posta, CEO Multicultural NSW

Dr Jan Fizzell, Senior Medical Advisor COVID-19 Response Team, Office of the Chief Medical Officer

Topics: The Forum offered an opportunity for NSW government officials and the African Australian community, faith leaders and key influencers to provide constructive dialogue on the effectiveness of outreach communications, and to find common ground between the government and the African community on how best to reach vulnerable and emerging communities.

Summary of the forum

Thirty-seven (37) attendees included doctors, academics, African community and faith leaders, influencers, Multicultural NSW (MNSW) and NSW Government health and community services professionals. In total 60 registered for the 1.5-hour webinar.

The purpose of the forum was to hear from NSW Government officials and to share dialogue across a range of topics related to:

- a. The challenges African Australian communities are experiencing regarding awareness of, and reasoning behind Covid-193 prevention measures.
- b. The difficulties of reaching vulnerable and emerging communities regarding mental health, and barriers to effective communication.
- c. Initiatives or solutions that could be considered that address the disconnect between NSW Government and grass roots community health.

What we heard from NSW Government officials

- The Covid-19 virus does not have a race or religion. It does not discriminate between gender or age. The virus likes to spread when we **talk, laugh, sing and engage with others**. The virus impacts on all of us and we must stand united.
- It's only by the community working together that Government can continue the standard of response. To do this, **we must filter people back to the facts**.
- MNSW role is to support big Government such as Health, Treasury, Transport and assist them to tailor funding, forms and processes to any interested community group.
- No matter how mild symptoms are, please come forward. **Testing and hospital care is provided free, and can be supported with treatment and isolation**. Care is not linked to your Medicare card. If you're going to a setting that you can't social distance, we are asking that you wear a face covering of 2 layers.
- Change is hard and people like a set of facts. Unfortunately, it's an emerging situation. **Communicating why rules are in place and why they are changing takes a lot of time**. And we're learning what works in other countries.
- It's not just a disease control problem; it's a society recovery problem.

Key African-Australian community concerns and suggestions

- When African communities are asked to isolate, it's very difficult and not well understood.
- There is need to **make community leaders champions – they are already trusted by the community**. Small payment and training could be provided, and they could knock on doors, make phone calls, engage, discuss distancing, hygiene and use various community specific e-groups, video messaging in local languages to engage with vulnerable and hard-to-reach community members. It has to be a grass roots movement, because mainstream media communications can be lost. **Interpersonal engagement is more effective**. Imagine a stronger community cohesion because of Covid-19!
- 'Covid Safe Warriors' could be a model to explore, similar to Neighbourhood Watch. Empowering community members to be equipped to support communities. If leaders 'own it' they will drive it. We should **try initiatives that complement the health values and traditions** of African communities.
- Community leaders know: **if a community member is lost, the grief spreads deeply** throughout. Right now, community and faith leaders are out there who are not in any way being connected by relevant agencies.

- Messages are out there, but some just don't believe in the virus. Ambassadors should be trained, and **people will go to a trusted community source** – but does the member have the tools? Are they in the right place?
- Direct messaging to community leaders and champions on changes and updates to fight against Covid-19 for quicker dissemination to the community in ways that will make effective impact
- How can we learn from community members who have gone through serious health emergencies, such as Ebola in the Congo? What can we learn from SE Asia outbreaks in the recent past?

There is a need for an organisation like Africa Health Australia to start building and nurturing these networks and to provide a greater wealth of resources and guidelines for the community to feel supported. The African Australian community and its leaders are often united despite distancing measures, however there has been a lack of targeted data, support and communication from the myriad government responses.

AHA recommends that the community and its leaders can be part of a co-design process that builds the community and health professional network, and the training and preventative care initiatives to support the African Australian community through the COVID-19 period. There is a specific need to coalesce key advocacy positions for community health and well-being, and to enable African Australians to take control of prevention and health decisions.

More information

For more information on Africa Health Australia, visit www.africahealthaustralia.com.au or the AHA [Facebook page](#).

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