SUBMISSION TO THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES
A STRONGER, MORE DIVERSE AND INDEPENDENT COMMUNITY SECTOR

Thank you for the opportunity to put forward a submission, and contribute to a stronger, more diverse, and independent community sector.

We understand that the Department of Social Services (**Department**) is exploring opportunities to better support Australian communities. Specifically, we understand that the Department is seeking innovative approaches for the design and administration of grants to the community sector, both in the short-term and long-term. In its issues paper entitled *A Stronger, More Diverse and Independent Community* Sector (**Issues Paper**),[1] the Department has identified five focus areas for consideration as outlined below:

1. giving the sector the voice and respect it deserves through a meaningful working partnership;
2. providing grants that reflect the real cost of delivering quality services;
3. providing longer grant agreement terms;
4. ensuring grant funding flows to a greater diversity of CSOs; and
5. partnering with trusted community organisations with strong local links.

I   ABOUT THE SIR ZELMAN COWEN CENTRE

The Sir Zelman Cowen Centre is a research and impact centre at Victoria University, working in the intersection between law, justice and cultural diversity. Named for the former Governor-General, we continue his vision and legacy to enhance community understanding of the law, and deepen the legal profession's understanding of community issues. We deliver impact through three main focus areas:

- ***Building capacity within the legal sector to engage effectively with diverse communities***
  Since 2001, we have delivered Victoria's only accredited course for training public notaries, as well as expert masterclasses for the legal, justice and court sectors. We also deliver conferences on key topics relating to intersectionality and the law, including faith-based governance and dispute resolution, and trust in institutions.

- ***Support communities to engage in law and governance***
  We work with diverse communities to promote multiculturalism, social cohesion and equal opportunity. Our work in this space equips community leaders with resources, knowledge and education of law and governance.

- ***Providing a platform to explore cutting-edge issues affecting law, justice and community***
  We deliver an annual oration, as well as an annual *Lawyers as Changemakers* series exploring the contributions and impact of lawyers from diverse backgrounds. Through our events, we hope to inspire the community to participate in the ongoing task of shaping a fairer, more inclusive, Australia.

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[1] Department of Social Services, *A stronger, more diverse and independent community sector* (Issues Paper, 2023).

II   CONTEXT

In responding to this submission, we first wish to provide some context and learnings, shaped by our experiences as an organisation working closely with community.

A. A 'diversified' workforce in community organisations

The Department's Issues Paper includes the following acknowledgment:

> *The government….understands that supporting organisations to deliver specialised services and supports to specific cohorts, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with disability and people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, may require approaches that are different to traditional grant funding arrangements. This includes through **ensuring diversified workforces** (emphasis added), culturally competent, appropriate and safe practices, and targeting resources for priority groups.*[2]

Here at the Sir Zelman Cowen Centre, we are proud to have a culturally, religiously and linguistically diverse workforce. Our 10 staff represent nine different nationalities, four different religions, and 12 different languages. 9 out of our 10 staff are women. We bring multidisciplinary skill and expertise, but also lived and living experience of displacement, migration, discrimination and gender-based violence. We are not alone in this. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 18.6% of humanitarian stream permanent migrants work in the community and personal services sector.[3] For every man working in the sector, there are 2.2 women.[4]

As the Department has already recognised, having a diversified workforce with lived and living experience strengthens organisational capability to deliver services and supports to diverse communities. However, it does have challenges in our specific context.

Community work is inherently demanding. By definition, the people accessing community services are vulnerable, either due to societal issues such as mental health and crime, or in times of crisis such as war, pandemic or natural disaster. Community workers deal with the human consequences of these issues, while navigating funding restrictions and a constantly changing environment.[5] This work takes more than skill, experience and knowledge. It requires the ongoing emotional labour of showing up with sensitivity and tact, while managing our own emotional responses.

The burden of helping is even heavier for those of us who represent the communities we serve. When we share in the trauma of our clients, leaving a message unread, or leaving work to complete tomorrow, can feel like letting down our own community. Work-related achievements and disappointments may have implications for us

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[2] Ibid, 25.

[3] Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Australian Census and Migrants Integrated Dataset, Australia, 2016* (Catalogue No 3416.0, 31 January 2022).

[4] Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Jobs in Australia, 2015-16 to 2019-20* (Catalogue No 6160.0, 8 November 2022).

[5] Ilan Katz, 'The Challenges of Working with People and Systems' (2016) 69(13) *Australian Social Work*, 257. For specific application to the domestic and family violence sector, see Joanne Clarke et al, 'Resilience and Resistance in the Community Sector: Organisational Challenges and Responses by the Australian DFV Sector in the Time of COVID-19 Pandemic' (2023) 53(1) *The British Journal of Social Work* 349.

personally, or for our communities. In some instances – particularly when taking on an advocacy role - our work can even result in deeply personal backlash and abuse.[6]

Unfortunately, the current funding environment does not allow for adequate support and recognition for community workers. Indeed, the short-term, limited nature of community funding further exacerbates the problem. Many community workers experience significant job insecurity from fixed-term, part-time employment contracts; we are most likely to work multiple jobs to make ends meet.[7] While at work, we tend to work overtime, taking on high workloads or additional responsibilities to meet community needs. Many more of us are volunteers, juggling the weight of community expectations with careers and families. In 2023, a survey by the Australian Council of Social Services found that 12% of total working time in the community sector is unpaid;[8] the numbers are even higher in small organisations with fewer than 10 staff.

The combined effect of the challenges outlined above has physical and mental health consequences for community workers. This is well-documented in academic literature[9] and reflected in the statistics: around 50% of staff in the community sector say they feel emotionally drained from their work.[10] However, our experience is that for workers who are already from marginalised backgrounds, these challenges compound the negative impact of their personal experiences with poverty, discrimination, and violence.

Therefore, in order to harness the full capacity of a diversified workforce, community organisations must invest in supportive systems and structures so that diverse workers feel safe to bring their full selves to work. This may include, for example, allowing a migrant worker enough time to learn about Australian workplace practices, or investing in training, supervision and reflective practice for workers who contribute expertise from lived experience to their work.

B. *Community partnership: a genuine co-design and devolution approach*

The Sir Zelman Cowen Centre is lucky to be supported by the infrastructure of Victoria University as a large research institution, and to be connected to the legal, policy and justice sectors through our work. We see ourselves as a 'bridge' for the community to access these broader systems, structures and resources. As such, we actively build partnerships which support smaller community organisations to lead programs within their own communities.

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[6] See e.g. Cait Kelly and Mostafa Rachwani, 'What's behind the 'terrifying' backlash against Australia's queer community?', *The Guardian* (online at 25 March 2023) <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/mar/25/whats-behind-the-terrifying-backlash-against-australias-queer-community>; Nyadol Nyuon, ''Go back to your s-–hole country': the high cost of standing out, speaking up', *Sydney Morning Herald* (online at 26 March 2021) <https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/life-and-relationships/go-back-to-your-s-hole-country-the-high-cost-of-standing-out-speaking-up-20210325-p57e75.html>.

[7] Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Multiple Job Holders, June 2023* (Latest release, 8 September 2023).

[8] Australian Council of Social Services, *At the precipice: Australia's community sector through the cost-of-living crisis, findings from the Australian Community Sector Survey* (Report, April 2023), 45.

[9] Da-Yee Jeung, Changsoo Kim and Sei-Jin Chang, 'Emotional Labor and Burnout: A Review of the Literature' (2018) 59(2) *Yonsei Medical Journal* 187; Maureen Dollard et al, 'Job Stress in the Australian and International Health and Community Services Sector: A review of the literature' (2007) 14(4), *International Journal of Stress Management* 417.

[10] Above n 8, 9.

One example of our work in this space is our Good Beginnings program, which is funded by the Department and delivered in partnership with Benevolence Australia (**Benevolence**). Good Beginnings is a primary prevention program which aims to address the gendered drivers of violence against women using OurWatch's primary prevention framework, 'Change the Story'. It incorporates Islamic teachings with best-practice primary prevention models, scientific theory, counselling techniques, creating a world-first pre-marital mentoring program which is tailored to Muslim faith in the Australian context.

Good Beginnings uses our unique community partnership approach:

- **Multilayered engagement across community**: recognising that community members are experts in their own needs: the program's content and delivery, are both informed by Melbourne's diverse Muslim community. This was supplemented by expert research and consultation on Australian law, best practice primary prevention, faith-based pre-marriage counselling, and scientific theory approaches to marriage mentoring.

- **A 'train the trainer' approach**: the program supports Muslim community leaders as 'Marriage Mentors' to lead conversations with pre-marital and newly-wed Muslim couples about respectful relationships.

- **Devolution for ongoing sustainability**: the program is delivered in partnership with Benevolence, a faith-based organisation in Melbourne's eastern suburbs. Benevolence has been actively included in the development and delivery of the program from the beginning. Throughout the program, we have actively worked to 'hand over' the project to Benevolence, and at the conclusion of our funding, all of the resources developed through the program, and the train-the-trainer model, will be fully owned by Benevolence.

While the co-design and capacity-building approach outlined above takes time and resources, we have found that it useful for a number of reasons. Firstly, it delivers effective, culturally sensitive, place-based community development programs. To date, we have trained over 30 Marriage Mentors and reached over 1000 homes and families. Secondly, it draws on our academic expertise and resources to support community organisations in delivering sustainable impact to community. Thirdly, it allows for ownership and leadership by smaller community organisations – allowing them to take their place in a stronger, more independent and more diverse community sector.

C. The benefits of long-term funding

Good Beginnings has been funded by the Department since 2020. The multi-year funding has been beneficial for many reasons.

Firstly, we have seen that effective partnership with community requires more than 'traditional' resources such as equipment or staffing. It also requires us to invest in 'soft infrastructure'[11] by building relationships, creating safe spaces, and ultimately

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[11] Shane Kavanagh et al, 'Soft infrastructure: the critical community-level resources reportedly needed for program success' (2022) 22(420) *BMC Public Health*.

cultivating trust, confidence and hope. We have been lucky to be able to do this work consistently over multiple years, rather than attempting to 'rush' the process.

Secondly, multi-year funding has allowed us to iteratively fine-tune our program design and delivery based on feedback from community, and to effectively evaluate the program's impact over time.

III   RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS IN THE DEPARTMENT'S ISSUE PAPER

Having laid out the above context, we turn now to the following questions outlined in the Department's Issues Paper.

1.3 How can government ensure the community sector, including service users and those not able to access services, have an opportunity to contribute to program design without imposing significant burdens?

Without careful and intentional effort, community engagement processes can entrench the power imbalance between government and community. As the Department has rightly identified, it adds to the workload of a sector which is already overworked and under-resourced. Even those who are interested in participating can become fatigued from constantly responding to surveys and focus groups without follow-up. Further, efforts to involve community often focus on program design, and neglect program delivery. This can feel like ideas are being taken from community, and then implemented without community.

The government must first create an environment which is conducive to community engagement. This may include:

- incorporating community consultation or co-design phases within grant program design, and for funded programs;
- developing multiple avenues to engage communities on issues which are meaningful to them – e.g. social media, consultation committees, and community liaison officers;
- being clear on *who* is being consulted, *what* information is being sought, and *how the information will be used*;
- ensuring that community members are appropriate compensated for their time, effort and expertise – for example, by allocating funds to provide an honorarium; and
- allocating sufficient time to listen to community feedback, and follow up with information about how feedback has been incorporated.

Further, the government should also ensure that community engagement is embedded not only in program design, but also in program delivery. For example, community organisations who are involved in co-designing a grant program may then receive follow-up funding to deliver activities under that grant program.

2.1/2.2 What would adequate and flexible funding look like? What administrative and overhead costs are not being considered in current grant funding?

- **People**
  As Kavanagh et al have observed, people are the 'foundational resource' in community work.[12] Staff turnover and burnout undermines our ability to build

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[12] Ibid, 3.

the 'soft infrastructure' crucial for effective community engagement. Therefore, grant funding must cover the staffing needed to deliver safe and quality services, and provide support for the emotional labour inherent in community work. Adequate funding in this context would:

- o incorporate the cost of supervision, reflective practice, and professional development as required by individual workers involved in service delivery;
- o where possible, cover full-time positions rather than part-time positions;
- o account for salary increases as workers grow in their roles over time.

- **Planning**
  Grant funding must account for the cost of work to effectively plan and allocate resources, and to improve service delivery, including:
  - o evaluation
  - o iterative design and continuous improvement
  - o reporting and acquittal
  - o back-of-house support services such as human resources, contracts and finance

- **Investment in 'soft' infrastructure and iterative design**
  Grant funding must be flexible to cover the time taken to build relationships and earn community trust – for example, allocating specific time and resources for community engagement. Funding must also allow room for experimenting and iterative design – for example, by allowing program or deliverable changes during the course of the program.

2.5 *How can CSOs and the department work together to determine where funds are needed most to ensure equitable and responsive distribution of funds?*

Currently, there is limited publication of funding opportunities other than on the central grants website. Many grant opportunities use a 'closed' selection process, in which government entities directly approach specific organisations. Even where there is an open and competitive selection process, community organisations are not always equipped to write effective grant applications, particularly when there is a short application timeframe. There are limited opportunities for feedback following an unsuccessful grant application, so that the same organisations are consistently knocked back without fully understanding why or being able to improve for next time. Over the long term, this means that funding is often allocated to organisations with the resources to invest in grant databases/notifications, or to engage external grant writers. As a result, the distribution of funds may not be equitable or targeted towards local community need.

The Department can support community organisations by:

- building avenues to connect directly with community, so that the Department is directly attuned to community needs as they change over time;
- disseminating funding opportunities more broadly (e.g. on social media);
- allowing longer timeframes for grant applications;
- building capacity among community organisations to write effective grants
- where there are commonalities between proposals put forward by different organisations, connecting organisations and encouraging collaboration rather than competition for limited funding.

3.1 What length grant agreements are community service organisations seeking to provide certainty and stability for ongoing service delivery?

There is no one answer. Different community issues require different service delivery timeframes. For example, a grant which provides immediate aid to refugees arriving in Australia would have a significantly different delivery timeframe to a grant which responds to the long-term needs of refugees integrating into Australian community.

It may be more helpful to outline the factors which should be considered when determining the timeframe of funding.

- Firstly, service delivery should be targeted to the issue or community need being addressed by the grant program or activity. In some instances, this may require a staged funding approach, as further needs may become apparent after immediate needs are met.

- Secondly, the project term should allow for opportunities to review, reflect, and continuously improve service delivery.

- Thirdly, where necessary, the project term should allow realistic timeframes for respectful and meaningful engagement with the community and diverse workers.
  - Where the program requires co-design or expertise based on lived and living experience, this means allowing sufficient time to build trust and relationships, and to sufficiently explore issues and opportunities.

  - Where the program involves engaging people who are developing skills in the workforce, this means allowing adequate time to learn and grow in the role.

  Without sufficient investment, co-design and diverse employment programs can easily become a 'tickboxing' exercise which, at best, does not achieve its intended benefit, and at worst causes harm.

- Finally, the project should actively include planning for ongoing sustainability from the outset.

III   RECOMMENDATIONS

In line with our responses and context above, we make the following recommendations for consideration.

1. ***That the Department seek input from community organisations and/or leaders at all stages of grant program development and delivery.***
   Community input from the start will help the Department identify where the funds are most needed, and an estimated timeframe needed to deliver effective services in that area of need.

   Noting that grant funding may sometimes address specific and urgent community issues (e.g. COVID-19), consultation methods may vary from program to program. However, community input should be the default when developing grant programs, and grant documentation should clearly outline how the grant program is intended

to respond to issues raised by the community. It would behove the Department to maintain regular contact with community organisations or create avenues for them to raise issues as they occur instead of waiting for a call out from the Department.

2. ***That the Department implement an 'expression of interest' (EOI) process prior to formal grant applications***
The Department can develop EOI processes which are simpler and less onerous than a grant application. Through this process, the Department can:

- gain an idea of the different organisations applying for a particular grant round, and logistical issues such as expected timeframes for service delivery, before opening formal applications;
- connect organisations with similar ideas, encouraging partnerships and collaboration; and
- provide feedback and suggestions to strengthen the quality of submissions at the formal application stage, particularly for smaller organisations who may not have the resources to seek expert grant writing and program design services. In this way, the EOI process can be used as a form of capacity building, such

3. ***That the Department's grant application documentation specifically invites organisations to present realistic cost and timeframe for service delivery***
Program proposals should incorporate the real financial and time investment required for quality service delivery (see responses to questions 2.1, 2.2 and 3.1 above. Decisions about allocation of funding should also include consideration of how well the community organisation has addressed cost and timeframe issues.

To ensure that these issues are consistently applied, these issues can be explicitly outlined in grant application documents, e.g. a specific budget line for worker professional development and supervision. This is also an opportunity for the Department to provide guidance as to what can be included, and what the Department considers to be realistic and reasonable cost and timeframes.

4. ***That the Department expands opportunities for capacity building through partnership***
As outlined above, the current grant model can result in funding being disproportionately allocated to (often larger and more established) organisations with the financial resources to invest in business development and grant-writing. In a tight fiscal environment, smaller, new and emerging organisations are forced to compete with larger organisations for the same limited funding.

Our Good Beginnings program provides a new approach for capacity building and partnership, which intentionally works towards devolution of community impact to local community organisations. The Department can actively encourage this approach by:
- connecting organisations of different sizes;
- funding projects focusing on co-design and co-delivery, with a view to devolution for ongoing sustainability after the project.

By actively investing in capacity building, the Department can leverage the resources of larger organisations to help smaller, new and/or emerging

organisations to deliver localised impact to their communities. This creates a culture of collaboration over competition, because larger, more experienced organisations are incentivised to take on a mentoring, support and facilitation role within their sector. Over time, this will in turn build a stronger and more diverse community sector led by community experience and expertise.

5. ***That the Department creates avenues for community organisations to raise new areas of community need, and to put forward funding proposals for ideas to raise those needs***

   Community needs may arise out of funding cycles, and particularly for smaller, or new and emerging organisations, this allows an opportunity to put forward proposals without being restricted by grant application timeframes. The Department may choose to provide feedback, connect the organisation to others already working in the space, or be informed in terms of shaping future grant opportunities.

IV   CONCLUSION

Thank you for the opportunity to put forward a submission. If you require further information, please do not hesitate to contact us at ████████████████

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